

# INTERROGATING WIREDU'S CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD, HUMANISM AND IMPARTIALITY TOWARDS REINVENTING A PHILOSOPHY FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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## **Abstract**

Kwasi Wiredu as a foremost African philosopher argues that for a nation to develop, the central role of humanism and impartiality as well as respect of the personhood which is the bedrock on which African societies can develop must be aligned with. This study therefore interrogates the possibility of rethinking for reinventing social issues in African development using Wiredu's concept of humanity and impartiality and the concept of personhood as integers of discourse.

## **Introduction**

Kwasi Wiredu was a prominent African philosopher of Ghanaian descent and one of the African scholars' whose essays pass as excellent academic treatises as he attempted to philosophically reflect and possibly provide leadership for the thrust of African philosophical search and relevance. Discourses of African philosophy have been centred on the roles and functions philosophy play in African culture in articulating the question of the very possibility and intelligibility of the African philosophy notion. Wiredu offers some useful insights on Marxism, mysticism, metaphysics, and the general nature of the philosophical enterprise itself, as well as a vigorous critique of Marxism, reflections on the phenomenon of ideology, analyses of truth and the philosophy of language, among other preoccupations (Akor, 2023). It is interesting to see how Wiredu weaves together these different preoccupations and also to observe how some of them have endured while others have not (Manobo, 2018).

Kwasi Wiredu wrote many essays in scholarly journals and textbooks with his ***Philosophy and an African Culture*** being his most prominent treatise. This book was a search for the correct conception of African philosophy as part of the post-colonial African quest for identity. This was necessitated by the fact that African philosophers came to the realization that political quest for self-determination is inseparable from the broader philosophical and intellectual quest for self-determination; wherein political liberation and philosophical liberation presuppose one another. Some African scholars have also agreed that the failure of

Africans to think African, recognize the exquisiteness in the thinking or works of Africans and the constant dependence on the colonial masters, and mentality of seeing everything foreign as superior has flourished in hampering the nation from mapping out strategic ways to develop (Wiredu, 1980). This therefore makes germane, the need to interrogate the philosophy of Kwasi Wiredu, as a primary African philosopher cum scholar or intellectual, in order to ascertain the relevance of his thoughts to national development. He is also regarded as one of the most influential figures in the field of African philosophy, whose works have had significant impacts on many contemporary African philosophers. This is because of his participation in the field of philosophy and education; his ability to demonstrate how certain aspects of African thought may be applied to the practical resolution of some of Africa's most pressing problems and some of his most touching ideas on different areas like: the concept of personhood, conceptual decolonization of African mind from colonial mentality, concept of truth, human rights democracy and many others. For this work however, we shall focus on his concept of *personhood* alongside the concept of *humanism and impartiality* in our bid to make inroads into development in Africa vide, rethinking social issues for global best practices in Africa societies.

### **On Development**

Development, both in theory and in practice is as inconsistent as it is complex. It is a multi-dimensional concept which has different meanings, depending on the context in which it is employed. Because of the conceptual and process-related inconsistency and complexity associated with development, we will limit the use of the term to its contemporary sense as defined by scholars engaged in revamping the concept to meet the needs of the people in the developing world.

Development is critical and essential to the sustenance and growth of any nation, as any country is classified as developed when is able to provide qualitative life for her citizenry, and the pride of any government is the attainment of higher value level of development in such a way that its citizens would derive natural attachment to governance (Tolu, Lawal & Oluwatoyin, 2011). Development implies such idea which embodies all attempts to improve the conditions of human existence in all ramifications with implications for improvement in material well-being of all citizens, not the most powerful and rich alone, in a sustainable way such that today's consumption does not imperil the future. It also demands that, poverty and inequality of access to the good things of life be removed or drastically reduced while seeking to improve personal physical security and livelihoods and expansion of life chances (Gboyega, 2003). While development is perceived as a sustainable improvement in the living standards that encompasses material consumption, education, health and environment protection (Ojo, Janowski & Awotwi, 2013), it is also viewed as involving the increase in the quantity and quality of life of a people which includes gradual removal of poverty, unemployment, social inequality, bad leadership, monopolization of opinion by the government and the negative practice which have unfortunately become the major characteristics for our country today (Babarinde & Farayola, 2005). This view presents development as being both quantitative and qualitative. Practically therefore, development

can be seen as a progressive improvement or transformation of a society from a primitive to a less primitive or more sophisticated state which entails the provision of essential amenities and services usually through good governance such that life is made easier and less cumbersome to citizens.

### **On National Development**

The notion of national development may be seen as the accumulation of capital under national control, the capacity for self-sustained growth, the expansion of productive employment and higher levels of income, consumption and social welfare (Akinpelu, 2005). In tandem with this, national development can be taken to refer to the qualitative realization of a state of affairs, characterized by adequate and equitable distribution of social and material services and well-being (Harry & Onyinyechika, 2020). It may further be described as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. This is best achieved through development planning, which can be described as the country's collection of strategies mapped out by the government (Lawal & Oluwatoyin, 2011). National development, therefore, would mean the progresses made by a nation in the battle for successful existence in all aspects of life without exception, as it implies the ability of a nation to exercise concerted efforts in dealing with its problems as well as making meaningful strides or progress in pursuit of values, goals and objectives in enhancing its successful existence.

Wiredu as a prominent African social theorist therefore puts forward his philosophical thoughts with the view of engendering African development, nay national development. His postulations which span different aspects of philosophical inclinations bear contemporary relevance to Africa and her quest for development. What comes out as implication from his exegesis is the prescription of the undergirding central role of humanism and impartiality as well as respect of personhood as the bedrock on which African societies can develop. This has a systemic historical import in the pristine culture of the African livelihood, and on these concepts therefore we now turn.

### **Wiredu's Humanism and Impartiality**

Wiredu's thoughts concept of humanism and impartiality is an offshoot of his moral theory. Wiredu postulates a two-prong notion of morality viz: (a.) meta-ethical question regarding the nature of moral properties, specifically, whether they are physical (natural) or spiritual (supernatural), where he rejects the spiritual (supernaturalist) foundation of African ethics. (b.) normative theory which questions whether morality is best captured by partiality or impartiality in the African tradition (Wiredu, 1992).

For him, to claim that moral properties are 'spiritual' amounts to the claim that they are supernatural and as such one has to rely on methods that are beyond science, such as intuitions. He argues that, the best way to understand morality in the African tradition is in terms of some physical property and morality can be grounded on any spiritual foundation and therefore argues that, the will of God, not to talk of that of any other extra-human being, is logically incapable of defining the good (Wiredu, 1992). Wiredu earlier denies that the

African (Akan) moral thought is supernaturalistic to any extent, meaning that, morality cannot be grounded in any supernaturalistic considerations or properties, and to say that morality cannot be grounded in spiritual considerations does not mean that God and ancestors play no role at all; it is rather to deny that this role may be foundational, but extra-human entities can be considered to play a supportive role (Wiredu, 2008). Wiredu further explains that this supportive role is generally exemplified in taboos that appeal to some extra-human authority of which these taboos can be explained purely in rational terms (Wiredu, 2008). Wiredu makes reference to his naturalistic ethics in terms of 'humanism' when he contends the physical property that grounds or informs morality is some aspect of human nature. His humanism is however articulated in his native (Akan) language – '*Onipana ohia*'. He translates this sentence to mean "*that it is a humanbeing that has value*" and observes that the original language is more illuminating than English language (Wiredu, 2008). Elsewhere he observes that, the first axiom of all Akan axiological thinking is that man or woman is the measure of all value (Wiredu, 2008). Arguing that the first meaning is crucial in terms of capturing Wiredu's meta-ethics, Motsamai Molefe observed in this regard that, all moral value, according to him, is a function of human nature, specifically, human interests and we can only derive morality from some facts connected with human beings or their interests. Simply put, 'humanism' is the doctrine that some aspect of human nature is the source and foundation of all moral value; and by implication without humanity there would be no morality (Molefe, 2016). It therefore becomes very germane that Wiredu's meta-ethical position is captured as humanistic rather than supernaturalistic (Molefe, 2016).

Wiredu makes sense of humanism as he considers what the ultimate good to be as *welfarism qua human needs fulfilment*. Wiredu calls this principle *sympathetic impartiality*, which he understands to be tantamount to the golden rule (Wiredu, 1992). This principle therefore functions, it appears, to harmonise or adjust human interests to the effect of securing human well-being (Molefe, 2016). Harmonization of interest here according to Wiredu is the means while the goal is the securing of well-beings hence, 'harmonisation of human interests' is operationalised by appeal to the golden rule and it is meant to ultimately lead to well-being (Wiredu, 1992). Wiredu articulates his understanding of the golden rule in both positive and negative sense of expressions. Positively, he writes:

*"Let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interests of others ... a person may be said to manifest a due concern for the interests of others if in contemplating the impact of his actions on their interests, she puts herself imaginatively in their position"*(Wiredu, 1996: 31)

And negatively, he writes:

*"Do not do unto others what you would not that they do to you"* (Wiredu, 1992, 1996)

It is also important to note that Wiredu equates the golden rule to what he refers to as sympathetic impartiality. Wiredu explains that the principle of sympathetic impartiality requires us to be willing to put oneself as the saying goes, in the shoes of others when contemplating an action (Wiredu, 1992, 1999). He further states that pure morality requires

the individual to be impartial regarding the interests of others of which motivation to act by a certain minimum level of altruism should be indispensable (Wiredu, 1992, 1999). This principle, he argues, is a test of what might be permissible or impermissible action as it requires one to impartially imagine oneself in another's position and 'see' whether they would welcome the action, or its outcome in question.

### **Wiredu on Personhood**

Wiredu who construes the African moral thought in terms of partiality sees African morality as that of *personhood*. The notion of personhood is a claim about what constitutes a good person or a moral exemplar i.e. a human being characterised by moral virtue (Molefe, 2020), and it is in this instance purely normative (Menkiti, 1984). Personhood here is concerned with how one conducts oneself relative to the relevant moral norms and standards, wherein they are being evaluated as moral agent. This sense of personhood appears to characterise African moral thought and is generally considered to be a fundamental or defining feature of African moral thought (Masolo, 2010). Interestingly however, personhood which implies a perfectionist or self-realization ethics is reportedly a dominant interpretation of ethics (Metz, 2017). In this regard, Wiredu and Gyeke (1992) contend that, much is expected of a person in terms of the display of moral virtue as the pursuit or practice of moral virtue is held intrinsic to the conception of a person. The position here may thus be schematized as: for my P, if P is a person, then P ought to display in their conduct, the norms and ideals of personhood. Thus, when a person fails to exhibit the expected moral virtues in their conduct, they are said not to be a person.

The African moral perspective acknowledges a human being of a goodly character as someone who naturally has the ability to form a good character as it is not just enough in Africa to be a human being without enduring social virtues. It is in agreement with this view that Metz and Gaie (2010) argue that, the concept of *personhood*, *selfhood*, and *humanness* in characteristic sub-Saharan worldviews are value-laden concepts wherein an individual can be more or less of a person, self, or human being, where the more one is, the better. Therefore, the ultimate goal of a person, self, or human in the biological sense should be to become a full person, a real self, or a genuine human being, i.e., to exhibit virtue in a way that not everyone ends up doing.

From the foregoing therefore, it is obvious that, as much as everyone is believed to have the moral capacity to exhibit some virtues, not everyone ends up doing so. In other words, some people fail to reach the status of being moral exemplars (Metz & Gaie, 2010). Menkiti (2004), in arguing along this framework avers that, a conclusion which appears inevitable from the foregoing is that, the effect of personhood is the sort of thing which has to be achieved, though it is the sort of thing at which individuals could fail. Therefore, a society will be composed of those who have failed to live a truly human life and those who have succeeded. And those who have failed will be blamed and those who have succeeded will be praised (Darwall, 1977). What then becomes the social bearing in the African ideal of personhood is the conception of an individual who through mature reflection and steady motivation is able to carve out a reasonably ample livelihood for self, family, and a potentially wide group of kin

dependents, besides making substantial contributions to the well-being of society at large (Wiredu, 1992). The communalistic orientation of the society in question means that an individual's image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which their actions benefit others than themselves; not of course, by accident or coincidence, but by design. The implied counsel, though, is not one of unrelieved self-denial, for the Africans are well aware that charity further afield must start at home (Wiredu, 1992).

### **Kwasi Wiredu's Philosophy and National Development**

Philosophy generally has the primary task of dealing with pressing intellectual problems (education, morality, aesthetics, politics, religion, economy and so on), which are relevant to every human situation. Put differently, the words of a philosopher by which no human ills are cured become vain (Akinpelu, 2005). A view which Wiredu seems to agree to when he asserts that the function of philosophy everywhere is to examine the intellectual foundations of our life, using the best available modes of knowledge and reflection for human well-being. Philosophy therefore, is the intellectual means by which Africans can effect or achieve the tremendous changes involved in the transition from their traditional past such as the need to rethink social issues in African development.

It is difficult for any African nation to develop without the recognition of the effects of African thought (cultural heritage and values). Our cultural heritage and values is the defining point of the values we attach to our country and the way we react to issues around us. This must have been one of the reasons why Wiredu seemed to be advocating for or emphasized the need for the reconstruction of our African thought towards overall national development. This is even more expedient for any people who desire to develop mentally, ethically, socially, politically and otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

From the above, it can be deduced that Wiredu's philosophy has burgeoning implications for national development in Africa. Wiredu's philosophy is of great relevance because it elicits the clarion call for philosophers especially those of African descent to inquire into the nature of the African and their perception of the world in order to find enduring solutions to the problems of development akin to their experience and milieu. At any critical stage and in times like this, there is need for Africans to re-examine their collective thought systems in order to properly align important aspects of their thought system with relevant epistemic nuances for development. Once relevant aspects of the thought system are identified, they can be modified and better ways of understanding them proposed. They have the task of re-evaluating critical issues concerning reality, truth and value. Admittedly, the main obstacles to national development may have been rooted in colonization but it behooves the African to utilize philosophical tools to provide enduring solutions to problems of development in Africa as this will result in sustainable national development across the continent. Another implication of Wiredu's philosophy for national development can be seen in his emphasis or call for the reconstruction of African thought to correct the distortions of the African culture and value (thought). Such reconstruction of the African culture and values would strive to promote the revival of African culture and values. By so doing, we will be able to tackle some

of the obstacles to national development because the African personality that has been eclipsed for a long time by imported and imposed foreign culture and the presence of national discipline and civil conduct in public and private affairs will be restored especially when a person acts under pure morality with impartiality regarding the interests of others of which motivation to act is by a certain minimum level of altruism.

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