We are All Postmodernists Now!
African Philosophy and the Postmodern Agenda

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to critically understand the utility of the concept of postmodernism in African philosophy, and by extension the analysis of the postcolonial African predicament. Its urgency derives from the growing literature on the interpretation of the postmodern in African studies. For those I will call the "detractors", there is a certain conceptual absurdity in the idea of postmodernism in a continent that is just grappling with the exigencies of modernity. Thus, Africa cannot be postmodern before being modern. For the "champions" of the necessity of postmodern theorizing in Africa, postmodernism offer an avenue to escape out of the cul de sac of intellectual nativism that has precluded Africa from the benefits of global open space of ideas. The essay argues that these critical interpretations emanate from an attempt to read too much into what I will call the postmodern minima. This strategy has the advantage, I contend, of giving African philosophers a leeway— beyond the mere critique of Eurocentrism—for confronting the twin problem of African identity and African development.

Keywords: *postmodern, enlightenment, African culture, cultural development, Europeanism.*

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What will no longer do is either to eulogize or to ridicule postmodernism *en bloc*. The postmodern must be salvaged from its champions and from its detractors.

Andreas Huyssen

As long as social institutions or

historical events are "taken for granted", we understand them to some degree. The moment we put them under scrutiny we start to understand what they are really all about.

Agnes Heller

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Introduction: Postmodern Ambivalence and Africa

The concept of postmodernism has an ambivalent career in African studies similar to what Elisio Macamo (2005) refers to as the ambivalence of modernity. This postmodern ambivalence is aptly captured by Abiola Irele who argues, on the one hand, that postmodernism together with its antirational posturing is the "most insidious threat to the contemporary African mind," but, on the other hand, he sees the postmodern radical questioning of the historical and philosophical legacy of the Enlightenment as "one that our historical experience predisposes us to understand and to rally to" (Irele 2007, pp5-35).

This essay is a modest intervention in the critical debate on the propriety of ascribing the concepts of modernity and postmodernity to Africa. My arguments in this essay are largely conciliatory; I attempt to define what I see as the *postmodern minima* that will underscore the theoretical understanding of the intellectual landscape especially in African philosophy. Thus, from my critique of the existing scholarship on the career of the postmodern in Africa, I will eventually submit that an understanding of such postmodern minima not only suggests a pathway for the emergence of an African modernity, but it also delineates how contemporary African philosophy can begin to respond to that challenge.

The essay will attempt to mediate in the controversy, especially within the framework of African philosophical thought, by examining two extreme positions. On the one hand are those like Sanya Osha and Achille Mbembe who suggest an unabashed postmodern and poststructural theorizing as the appropriate theoretical lens for confronting postcolonial Africa in text and context. On the other hand

are also those like Olusegun Oladipo and Kwasi Wiredu who argue that since Africa is just in the middle of a transition from a traditional to a modern milieu, any talk of postmodernism is at best wrongheaded, and at worst nonsensical. I will be arguing, on the contrary, that both sides of the debate took the concept of postmodernism too seriously, especially given their adoption of its prevalent reading as a *period* term rather than from its primary motivation as a *critique* of modernism's Enlightenment and foundationalist excesses.

In the next section, I contrast the two extreme answers to this question in African philosophical thought. I then later give a reevaluation of the concept of postmodernism that allows me to read most of African philosophical theorizing from within such a postmodern critical agenda.

For Signs and Wonders: The Idea of Africa

In what has come to be referred to as the "Mbembe/Zeleza debate" in the *Codesria Bulletin*, several authors, especially Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, took issue with Mbembe's mode of African-writing which for them is guilty of an uncritical "intellectual postmodernism." This debate was sparked off by Mbembe's essay, "African Modes of Self-Writing" (*Codesria Bulletin*, 2000, No. 1, pp. 4-19). This article supposedly marked the height of Mbembe's frustration with his attempt to initiate a new form of scholarship characterized by an antagonistic attitude towards what he calls "nationalist narratives" with their focus on the "cult of victimization." There is therefore the need to get African, and hence Codesria's, scholarship "out of the ghetto" of such racist theorizing into the light of a "better, more focused, internationally linked, and philosophically grounded scholarship" (Murunga, 2004, p. 27).

As an alternative to this constrictive theoretical framework, Mbembe proposes that Africa should be defined as an

> open space, and its traditions and intellectual communities as multiple ones, and African identity be defined not as a close[d] identity, but as an identity in formation; …that Africa itself be considered not as closed geographical space, but as an open space, a place of departure and arrival of multiple diasporas, a vector and an active receiver of cultural and economic flows relentlessly reworked by social actors. Better still, it would have required that there be a cultural setting conducive to experimentation, open to curiosity, concerned with argumentation and responsive to

philosophy, literature, history, cultural studies and the arts. (Mbembe, 2000, p. 78; 1999, p. 3)

This program was further developed in *On the Postcolony* where he specifically gives himself the objective of, on the one hand, theorizing the place of Africa in the Western imaginary, and on the other hand, enunciating the historicity of Africa as a "postcolony"; that is, the nature of African subjectivity and experience as a site of the intersections and entanglements of multiple temporalities, "a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualized outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized" (2001, p.9).

To achieve this objective, Quayson argues that Mbembe uses an "itinerary of discursive forms" that is basically "decentring and deconstructive" (Quayson, 2001). In other words, Mbembe adopts an interdisciplinary model that is essentially poststructural or postmodern. The African postcolony, for Mbembe, therefore becomes a "specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes" (Mbembe, 2000, p.102). In Quayson's reading of *On the Postcolony*, he remarks that

> The influence of poststructuralist theories of the implicit links between images, stereotypes and power is very much in evidence. This would place Mbembe squarely among those who conflate the power-laden effects of real life events with the devices and import of textuality, thus rendering the real world graspable in essentially textual terms. (Quayson, 2001)

Osha picks up Mbembe's methodological agenda as the theoretical tool with which to achieve a transcendence of the African philosophical project of Kwasi Wiredu, the Ghanaian philosopher. In *Kwasi Wiredu and Beyond*, he states categorically that Wiredu's original sin is his *disciplinary* adoption of the Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition of philosophy which, for Osha, makes him guilty of the "worst excesses of Anglo-Saxon empiricist small-mindedness" (Osha, 2005, p.vi). This disciplinary limitation, for instance, does not allow Wiredu to grasp the significance of certain insights provided by the "deconstruction of ethnocentric Western epistemology" and the necessity of a *multi*disciplinary approach needed by his African philosophical project. Thus, for Osha, because "the logic of disciplinarity rather than the compulsions of raciology are

more powerful for the formulation of an African philosophy in Wiredu's thought" (ibid, p.xvi), there is the need to transcend his philosophical oeuvre for a more global theoretical framework with an enabling "interdisciplinary linkages."

The disciplinary malaise afflicting Wiredu's opus, according to Osha, is just an example of a deficiency of a critical (postmodern) sophistication in much of African scholarship and the consequence of an inadequate "understanding of contemporary African realities." For him, "Third world theorists need to evolve more befitting theories for our present [postcolonial] condition, 'since the philosophies we have do not seem to describe our reality very well'" (ibid, p.119).[1]

For African philosophical theorizing to get on the right track discerned by African theorists like Appiah, Hountondji, Mbembe, Ngugi, as well as other kindred scholars (Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and so on), African intellectuals must be willing to appropriate the current and relevant terminologies of the postmodernists and postcolonial theorists: mimicry, ambivalence, hybridity, syncretism, deconstruction, subjectivities, multifocality, transnationality, liminality, logo-phono-phallo-centrism.

In response to Mbembe's allegation that researchers in African studies have lost the requisite sense of wonder and curiosity necessary for profound scholarship, Zeleza argues that while these are admirable qualities for any scholar to have,

> …some of the best scholarship in Africa, indeed, elsewhere in the world, has often been inspired by more than that, by a burning desire to change the world, to address the pressing issues of the time…that is why African scholars, surrounded by material poverty and political tyranny, by underdevelopment, to use a once popular term, are [more] preoccupied with questions of development and democracy than about gazing at sexuality that seems to titillate the intellectual imaginations of some of our colleagues in 'postmodern' societies.(Zeleza, 2001, p.392)

This response captures the essence of the reaction of Wiredu and Oladipo to the direction of knowledge production in Africa. Wiredu's programmatic statement of the direction of his African philosophical project comes very early in *Philosophy and an African Culture*:

> Contemporary Africa is in the middle of a transition from a *traditional* to a *modern* society. This process of modernization entails changes not only in the physical environment but also in the mental outlook of our peoples, manifested both in their explicit beliefs and in their customs, and their ordinary daily habits and pursuits. (Wiredu, 1980, p.x; Afolayan, 2008)

Though Wiredu does not explicitly rail against the "postmodern imperative," the above statement revealed the direction that a postcolonial philosophical theorizing in Africa ought to take. A "good African philosopher" therefore would be concerned with the politico-existential condition of Africa rather than with "gazing at sexuality." In other words, the task for the contemporary African philosopher is to determine how to bring the rich heritage of African traditional system into a beneficial relation with the conditions for a "modern pattern of living."

Thus, within the context of such a "modernizing imperative," any and every talk of postmodernism is at best superfluous since the continent has not even achieved modernity. For one, any argument for a postmodern rendering of "Africa" presupposes not only that Africa is modern, but also that such a colonial modernity is all that can be said for an emergent African modernity. Wiredu's statement gives us an insight into the violent acceleration of a traditional society into an epoch it is not ready for and could not attain within the dynamics of its own cultural framework. It points, that is, at the agonizing but necessary vagary of the African postcolony; a traditional society in ambivalent hiatus.

Olusegun Oladipo's reading of the African philosophical situation as well as the African existential condition intersects Wiredu's in so many ways. For example, his syncretistic approach to the debate between the traditionalist and the modernist on the issue of African self-definition and development is that between the goal of modernization and cultural identity, Africans would achieve an existential balance if they develop "the kind of self-consciousness that would make our choices in the process of change deliberate and self-initiated." The agenda for African philosophy should therefore go beyond the traditionalist or modernist to encapsulate four related points of action:

The first one should be [the] critical and reconstructive evaluation of our traditional cultural heritage so that we can build on it. The second one involves a domestication of the intellectual resources of other cultures, which although beneficial, have not been 'exploited in our

culture'. Furthermore, there is the need for unceasing critical engagements with our daily life with a view to revealing those beliefs, values and attitudes which have made us less productive and less prosperous. Finally, there is need to provide rigorous and sustained idealizations of a better form of life whose attainment should be the goal of socio-political action (Oladipo, 2006, pp.17-18).

The urgency of the challenge of African socio-cultural condition therefore demands, for Oladipo, that African philosophers must confront, among other existential imperatives, the necessity of Wiredu's strategy of conceptual decolonization. This strategy requires that "African philosophers pay serious attention to linguistic phenomena in their philosophical investigation. This is inevitable… [and] unavoidable in Africa today because a lot of the problems of self-understanding on the continent has to do with 'intellectual anomaly,'…occasioned by the efforts to achieve self-understanding through the medium of non-indigenous languages" (ibid, pp.143-144).

He then proceeds to take up this challenge through the linguistic interrogation of the concept of modernity "whose misunderstanding is largely responsible for the ambivalence that bedeviled the African quest for growth and development in the 20th century" (ibid, p.145). Such an analysis necessarily also subsumes the concept of *post*modernism. The lexical definition of the adjective "modern" in the Yoruba language translates as "ti igba isisiyi" (or: relating to the present or recent time). In Oladipo's reckoning, such a definition is problematic for the African project of modernity. This is because it equates modernity essentially only with contemporary institutions, ideas, practices and processes. It takes little reflection to conclude that since the western culture is the dominant contemporary culture, therefore modernity equals westernization (*ibid*). For Oladipo, the unfortunate consequence of such a pernicious reasoning is the spurious, seemingly incommensurable, dichotomy between the traditionalists championing the goal of cultural identity and the modernists advocating the pursuit of western power identified with science and technology.

To really make any meaningful headway, Oladipo suggests a critical conceptual analysis of the ramifications of "modern," "modernity," and "modernization" especially in the Yoruba language. In the latter, these terms are translated respectively into *olaju, oju lila* and *ona olaju*. Given the significance of the idea of the eyes in this analysis, we are therefore shown the connection between modernity and enlightenment (seeing things in a better light). Within this context, modernization, for instance,

is rendered as "the opening the opening up of the eyes to see." From this connection between modernity and enlightenment, we are drawn to another important idea of education in Yoruba popular wisdom. Modernization, for the Yoruba therefore, would not translate as westernization. Rather, it would simply mean "having a deeper knowledge of things (through illumination) and doing things in better ways" (ibid, p.146). Certain significant implications follow from this linguistic analysis that seemingly vindicates the agenda of conceptual decolonization:

> The first one is that modernization is not a contemporary phenomenon; rather, it is a historical process without a proprietor and with no predetermined end. The second implication is that, in a sense, every society is modernizing. Indeed, the modernization process is an unending one. Finally, *this analysis renders the idea of postmodernism incoherent and unintelligible.* After all, the process of enlightenment (seeing things in a better light) is a continuous one, as human experience and the history of science generally show. (ibid, pp.146-147)

We therefore arrived at a definitive statement on the propriety of ascribing the concept of postmodernity to the African continent. For Oladipo, from the idea that modernity and modernization are continuous processes, it becomes unintelligible to argue for an epoch *after* the modern period. The Yoruba rendering of the concept better reveal its conceptual and historical awkwardness. If modernity translates as *olaju*, then postmodernity would turn out as *eyin igba olaju* (an epoch after the modern period)! This explicitly contradicts the continuous nature of modernity and modernization. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that within the continuous nature of modernity human society have usually witnessed revolutionary changes and even reversals "which should and sometimes serve as sources of further illumination, the process [of modernity and modernization] has not stopped and would not stop until the end of the world as we know it, to warrant the claim that something after it…has come" (ibid, p.147).

What then do we make of these positions on the nativity or otherwise of modernity and postmodernism in Africa? I will next proceed to chart an argument that follows Huyssen's remark about salvaging the idea of postmodernism from its champions and detractors (Huyssen, 2000, p.ix).

The Signification of the Postmodern:
Re-Reading the Grammar of the "Post"

The strategy I will adopt in relation to the positions of the "champions" and "detractors" of postmodernism sketched above is to outline their weak points in order to be able to justify the argument that both camps misunderstood the real impulse of the postmodern. My hypothesis would be that both positions on the nativity of the modern and the postmodern in the African context collapse because both read too much into the original impulse of postmodernism.

Earlier on, we pointed attention to Zeleza's critical take on Mbembe's postmodern cosmopolitanism. Zeleza further contributes a historical reading of the "post" discourses that, for him, provides the theoretical foundation for critiquing the adaptation of postmodernism to the African condition. According to him, the Western grammar of the "post" is predominantly accented in such a way as to lack a third world ideological and intellectual resonation. The development and predominance of the "posts" in the Northern academies, Zeleza argues, is conditioned by certain intellectual, institutional and ideological contexts and struggles that eventually led to the chasm between "academy and civics", especially the waning attention in "transformative theories of society—what postmodernism calls grand narratives…" Academic preoccupation shifted however to "syllabi rather than society, canons rather than class, discursive communities rather than democratic claims, and conditions of campus life rather than the context of community life" (Zeleza, 2005, p.2).

The logical consequence of this loss of interest in social transformation was a fetishization of theory that heralded the emergence of the *text* in its "most auspicious home," English Studies. This, in Zeleza's historicist reading, is the arrival of the postmodern. Thus, we have "[b]y the late 1960s intellectual boredom, critical pluralism and eclectic borrowing" that effectively ensured the erosion of the "foundational ideas" of English Studies (ibid, p.10). This loss of disciplinary boundary, we should not forget, is the ultimate signature of the poststructural and the postmodern for Osha. It also serves as the basis for Mbembe's "postmodern cosmopolitanism" which constructed Africa as "a conflicted sign, text, archive, or library" whose redemption lies only in its absorption into the universal. In this context, postmodernism becomes

for the cultural disciplines, with their increasingly convoluted,

difficult vocabulary and textualization of social life, what rational choice is for political science and mathematical language is for economics: a declaration of disinterested rigor befitting a professionalized and self-referential intelligentsia. (ibid, p.3)

Within this reading, it becomes convenient to characterize Osha and Mbembe as postmodern textualists. In this sense, postmodernism becomes adapted to the structuralist tendency that posits what is real as "purely a construct of intra-linguistic processes which confine one forever to the prisonhouse of language" (Waugh, 1992, p.67). Osha celebrates this textual representation of Africa in the work of Mbembe and Mudimbe. To further emphasize this textual moment in the reading of Africa, Mbembe and Osha's "postmodernism" seems to assume the adequacy of Toynbee's characterization of the postmodern age as the fourth and final epoch in the history of the world. Such an age is contrasted with or ruptured from an earlier "modern" epoch defined by a stable, centered self with an access to inner states and the outer world (ibid, p.61). The interesting feature of Toynbee's portrayal of this fourth epoch is that of anarchy and helplessness characterized by a seamless deterritorialization. In such a world,

> not only self but also consciousness is discovered to be adrift, increasingly unable to anchor itself to any universal ground of justice, truth or reason, and is thus itself "decentered" (to use a term favored by post-structuralists): no longer agent, origin, author, but a function through which impersonal forces pass and intersect. (ibid, p.8)

The arguments of both the "detractors" and the "champions" of the postmodern in African studies turn on the conception of postmodernism as a periodising concept. In other words, for them, the "post" in the postmodern is the "post" of replacement. This is where its utility in the African postcolonial space hits its fatal snag for the "detractors." For instance, they can object, how can we be *post*modern before ever achieving modernity? The postmodern idea of a cosmopolitan seamlessness and playful textualization mocks the postcolonial predicament of the African societies. On the other hand, for the "champions," Africa, in the words of Appiah, would not be able to overcome this predicament unless it jettisons its Afro-nativistic posturing

and lose itself in a cosmopolitan networking. In fact, in Grant Farred's reckoning, "Africa, in truth, entered postmodernity a long time ago." This postmodernity is not only visible in the "polyglot architectural styles that mark the skylines of cities like Lagos, Johannesburg, Cairo, and Nairobi," it is also manifested in the character of postindustrial capitalism through "which the economies of Nigeria, South Africa, and Botswana trade daily with American, European and Asian markets" (Farred, 2002, 71).[2]

However, as a period term, postmodernism invokes a limiting boundary that breaks down any discussion about the appropriateness or otherwise of the concept for African studies. This is because such a reading, according to Matei Calinescu, plays into the precarious conceptual fuzziness that attends the initial use of the concept. Thus, at this initial stage of its development,

> Postmodernism was…not only "unfalsifiable" in Popperian terms…but also plainly unfit to deal with questions of historical detail and nuance. A fuzzy all-purpose classifying concept, soon to be bandied around as a battle cry, postmodernism had little discriminating power or heuristic value and stayed that way until the later 1960s. (Calinescu, 1987, pp.279-280)

In other words, the postmodern as a concept lacks a definitional precision especially in the attempt to appropriate its utility into the African predicament. From the next section, I will attempt to outline what I have called the postmodern minima, and the implication of this for African philosophy.

Another Face of Modernity:
The Postmodern as a Crisis Moment

Let us begin with a pertinent question: Is postmodernism a phenomenon in the world or a theoretical construction projected on the world for whatever pragmatic, psychological or institutional reasons?[30] This question is necessitated by the myriad paths the idea of the postmodern has taken in literary theory, philosophy, architecture, advertizing, and so on. To begin to untangle this question, it becomes pertinent to highlight the emergence of the concept of the postmodern, and especially its description as a cultural epoch and as a philosophical

critique of foundationalist thought.

The many appearances of postmodernism express the sense of some fundamental shift in our ways and modes of thinking. However, just like most of the "post"-discourses, the "post" in postmodernism has been read as that of a radical and qualitative break with the *modern* period instituted about the 16th century, and the inauguration of a new cultural epoch on the ruin of the former. As noted earlier, Toynbee's historical demarcation of world history into four phases and the representation of the last phase as a "postmodern" one prompted this interpretation of the break with the Enlightenment idea of the self, consciousness, progress, representation and knowledge. In Toynbee's thinking, this epoch is anarchic, irrational and marked by a decentring helplessness. The postmodern epoch, that is, instituted a destruction of the universal ground of truth, justice, reason and all the other modernist ideas and values. As a result, these values and ideas are left without a universal foundation.

In this epochal sense, postmodernism functions as a negative term which is everything contrary to the modern. According to Therborn, "Modernity ends when words like progress, advance, development, emancipation, liberation, growth, accumulation, enlightenment, embitterment, avant-garde, lose their attraction and their function as guides to social action."[31] This rejection of modernist values is then accompanied by "a grand flourish of negativized rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentring, indeterminacy, and antitotalization" (Hutcheon, 1998, p.3).

The historical origin of the postmodern, on the contrary, gives us a different signal about the essence of the *post*modern. I will re-read this history and attempt to draw two different hypotheses from it. The paradox I want to highlight in my historical analysis is that the history of the modern is inextricably tied in with the history of the postmodern in such a way as to disintegrate an epochal definition of the concept in favour of a set of theses that defines the *postmodern minima*. Thus, if it is correct to argue that "an adequate sense of postmodernity can only emerge in relation to historical definitions of the modern" (Waugh, 1992, p.39), what interpretation of the modern or modernity justifies the "post" in postmodernism as basically a skeptical construct that implicates the postmodern in the modern?

What does it mean to be modern? To unpack this question requires an understanding of the cognates of the "modern": modernity, modernize, modernization and modernism. Modernity describes the quality of being

modern; "the way of life and state of mind of those experiencing the modern period." Modernization refers to the processes that ensure a transition to the modern period while the term "modernize" implies the gradual adaptation to the processes that lead to the modern period. Modernism, on its own, according to Gibbins and Reimer, refers to the attempts—cultural, political, economic or social—at *making sense* of modernity (Gibbins and Reimer, 1998, p.9).

Modernity, according to Frank Kirkland,

> refers to the emergence and formation of a new awareness of temporality whereby one's own present is construed as constantly oriented toward the future…, as constantly representing a transition to things and events novel and innovative, and as constantly breaking with a sense of the past or tradition, since (a) one's own present cannot rely for its orientation on the past and (b) the past no longer carries any exemplary status by which the present can model itself…. In effect, modern experience stands in opposition or in no relation to tradition. (Kirkland, 2003, p.68)

This conception of the modern represents the intent behind Kant's vision of the Enlightenment as marking the emergence of a distinct epoch that has nothing to benefit from an obscure past. The fundamental motif of the Enlightenment is, for Kant, the bold audacity to disconnect reason from any deferential involvement with a magisterial past or tradition. Thus, he argued:

> Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude*! "Have courage to use your own reason!"—that is the motto of enlightenment. (Kant, 1784, p.54)

This specifically European slant to the conception of the modern can be critically interrogated by another provincial interpretation. As noted earlier, the Yoruba language renders the modern as *olaju*. In contrast to the Kantian Enlightenment, the Yoruba idea of being enlightened is not modeled on any rejection of the past or tradition. Rather, the occasion for illumination can be obtained from any source. The crucial point is

that these ideas must lead to "seeing things in a better light; displaying better understanding; being well-informed, and so on" (Oladipo, 2001, p.146).

To mediate between these two conceptions, we can ask: Can modernity end? An adequate answer will depend on the interpretation we give the entirety of events, ideas and institutions that go into the making of modern societies, or of modernity. The orthodox interpretation is *temporal*: It is an attempt to name or describe an entire epoch in world history in contradistinction to earlier ages or epochs. In this sense, the modern age is different from the ancient or classical age. Kant's reply to the question of what the Enlightenment is therefore becomes a theoretical effort to chart the temporal boundary of such an epoch. However, according to Bjorn Wittrock, for such an interpretation of modernity to carry any analytical weight, it must attempt to delimit those substantive institutions and processes which are definitive of the modern epoch. A society can therefore be considered modern

> only if some key defining institutions and types of behavior can be said to be modern. To the extent that there is a strong, and growing, coherence and correspondence between such defining institutional structures and behavioral patterns across different countries, hypotheses about the convergence of modern societies may be said to have received increased empirical support. Whatever other differences may or may not exist between different countries is irrelevant when we decide whether any two countries are modern to the same extent or not. (Wittrock, 2000, p.1)

For advocate of this temporal interpretation of modernity, there is a growing convergence of institutional and behavioral patterns signaled by the evolution and development of certain "broad trends" like the "industrial revolution" and the "democratic revolution."

This convergence hypothesis not only underestimates the serious substantial differences that would seem to suggest that modernity could not be a linear, monolithic development, its ethnocentric intent immediately becomes obvious. The age of modernity refers only to one specific and specifying epoch to which every other society must adapt in spite of the bewildering variations in values, beliefs and cultures. This age took shape in Europe beginning from around the 14th century and presently has the United States of America as the sole measuring

standard of the modern. More fundamentally, however, the hypothesis makes a conceptual mockery of what it means to be modern in its suggestion of the absurd conclusion that modernity is only a very recent phenomenon!

Modernity is suddenly reduced to a phenomenon that can be found in some parts of Western Europe during some periods of the twentieth century. Indeed, for modernity as a general phenomenon of Western Europe, the relevant time period would be that after World War II, and even shorter if all of Europe is considered. Modernity would barely have arrived in time to witness its own demise as heralded by the prophets of postmodernism (ibid, p.4).

This interpretation of the Enlightenment's "single-project modernity" constructed around the theme of progress under the shadow of the omnipresent universal reason however neglects the fact that modernity itself is a two-project phenomenon admitting of a counter culture to the Enlightenment. Romanticism defines not only an ideological confrontation with the Enlightenment ideals of modernity, but also a visionary construction of what the modern should entail. While the Enlightenment was motivated by the urge to rationalize, Romanticism championed the urge to poeticise (Czobor-Lupp, 1999). According to John Kreis, Romanticism

> appeared in conflict with the Enlightenment. You could go as far as to say that Romanticism reflected a crisis in Enlightenment thought itself, a crisis which shook the comfortable 18th century *philosophe* out of his intellectual single-mindedness…. The *philosophes* were too objective -- they chose to see human nature as something uniform. The *philosophes* had also attacked the Church because it blocked human reason. The Romantics attacked the Enlightenment because it blocked the free play of the emotions and creativity. (Kreis, 1999)

What the Romantic counter-enlightenment ideology challenged is the attempt at interpreting modernity as a single project phenomenon, and the Enlightenment as the essential core of what it means to be modern. To press home this challenge, Romanticism evolved as a two-fold framework that becomes useful for us in defining two hypotheses about the nature of the postmodern. The first is that the nature of romantic thought was essentially aesthetical. The second is that Romanticism crystallized at a historical period when the Enlightenment ideals where in deep crisis.

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The sin of the Enlightenment-inspired idea of modernity consists in its totalizing universalism. The modern ideals promoted by the Enlightenment scholars attempted to account for all features of human societies and experience. The logical consequence of such a strategy is the exclusion of alternative explanatory categories or programs. It is such a totalizing paradigm that the Romantic scholars attempted to subvert aesthetically through the invocation of the imaginative and the intuitive as the counterpoint to the ratiocinative and the logical as a mode of knowing and being. The subject-predicate philosophy of the Enlightenment *philosophes* ensures a Cartesian separation between the subject of consciousness and the object so as to make it possible for a "rationalizing consciousness [to shape] an inert material object." On the contrary, Romantic aesthetics attempts an articulation of a mode of being in which mind and body, subject and object may be seen as been inextricably intertwined in a non-conceptual framework (Waugh, 1992, p.15).

Given this perspective, it seems possible to read the postmodern as a late flowering, or late modern, Romanticism; in Waugh's words, "the latest version in a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticized view of the world…" (Ibid, p.9). This is the first hypothesis: The postmodern does not constitute a radical break but a theoretical skeptical mood *within* a much later modern epoch than that which the Romantic scholars encountered.

The second nature of romantic thought is that it not only fermented at a period of acute crisis in Europe, it was also an indication of that crisis. The French Revolution was already in its radical phase about three years after the epochal event. This phase was signaled by widespread killing, the Reign of Terror, and the activities of the Napoleonic armies all over Europe. The Industrial Revolution already in full swing in England was already causing social and critical concerns. In other words, modernism was facing serious political, economic and moral challenges which, for the Romantic scholars, are only indicative of its wrong-headed Enlightenment ontology and epistemology. Romanticism shares this crisis mentality with postmodernism, given our earlier hypothesis of the postmodern as a skeptical moment within the construction of the modern. The Romantic, as well as the postmodern, actually critically signals and replicates the crisis of modernity's categories, ideals and problems. The incredulity towards the grand narratives of modernity is really indicative of the crisis of those narratives. What picture of the modern does this reading of the postmodern gives us?

If modernity is essentially a reference to the new, then we are faced

with the idea of the modern as a conflict space, a constantly self-transforming phenomenon that respond self-reflexively to its own being. According to Marshall Berman,

> To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world-and, at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are…it pours us into the maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air. (Berman, 1982, p.15)

Modernity therefore becomes an *unfinished* project, and in Albrecht Wellmer's words, "an unsurpassable horizon in cognitive, aesthetic and moral-political sense" (Wellmer, 1991, p.vii). This is our second hypothesis. Thus, contrary to the earlier temporal approach to the characterization of modernity, it becomes difficult to speculate on when the modern began or when it will end. Postmodernism as the epochal indication of the demise of modernity thus becomes an analytically inane construct. How does this conception of postmodernism, as different from its politics, contribute to the practice of African philosophy?

The Unfinished Project:
African Philosophy as a Postmodern Discourse

The closest approximation of this reading of the (post)modern in the African context is found in Kwame Gyekye's *Tradition and Modernity*. In this book, he argues firstly that what we call modernity in its Western form derived its theoretical and conceptual framework from earlier, premodern periods in European history, especially the medieval epoch. Most of these conceptual elements significant in the emergence of modernity, that is, were unique to the period between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. It is therefore reasonable to conclude, according to Gyekye, that

> …in many instances modernity is either a logical fleshing out, or a representation of advanced forms, of conceptual elements of the thought systems of preceding European cultures. Conceptual elements such as representative democracy and the nation-state and phenomena such as industrial technology,

however, can be said to have made their debut after the seventeenth century. Even so, modernity can in many ways be regarded as a stage--an advanced or sophisticated or enlightened stage--of European (or Western) civilization, *some features of which will continue to become more sophisticated in response to new ideas about human progress.* (Guekye, 1997, p.265)

In other words, this gives us the leeway to reaffirm the earlier conclusion, implicit in the Yoruba concept of *olaju*, that what we call modernity is just an incremental illumination or enlightenment that a culture derived from alien or traditional conceptual or practical frameworks for its temporal needs.

Secondly, Gyekye argues that from this conclusion about the continuous nature of modernity it becomes extremely difficult to sustain an idea about its end in postmodernity. That is, for him, postmodernity becomes meaningful only if there is evidence to show beyond doubt that "some new conceptual systems, social practices, institutions, habits, and outlooks make a complete break with their modern moorings, that they represent completely new paradigms radically different from those maintained in the modern times, and that they, thus, eclipse the modern scheme of things" (*ibid*). This therefore leaves us with the inescapable argument that the postmodern is not epochal but a skeptical and critical reaction to the "crises of modernity." The idea of the postmodern therefore becomes an insistent demand for the revisions and amendments of the modern life forms and institutions (ibid, p.266). Both conclusions become a critical perspective, which we can use as Gyekye does, for interrogating the tradition-modernity dichotomy and the ideological framework that motivates it.

It however remains to see how a reading of the African philosophical tradition can interrogate this view of *post*modernity as a constant and continual reevaluation of modern values, and of modernity as an unfinished project in which a marginal and marginalized continent can participate. In other words, how can Africa and African philosophy be "postmodern" before being modern? If modernity is a continuous maelstrom of ideas, experiences and narratives, then, according to Malpas,

> the task facing the modern criticism is to discern rules, systems and values that underpin development…. In other words, the task…is to discern beneath the chaos of day-to-day existence a

'plan', what Lyotard calls a 'grand narrative', that drives and
determines the path of history and chart a rational future in
which people will be free to determine their own destinies.
(Malpas, 2005, p.50)

Here, we are presented with a seeming paradox. On the one hand, the
postmodern in Lyotard's conception is taken to be the incredulity to all
grand narratives of modernity. On the other hand, we need those
narratives to be able to make sense out of the flux of ideas and
experiences that define modernity.

Zeleza also recognizes that the relationship between postmodernism
and African studies is both familiar and strange. Postmodern claims are
familiar because they are essentially an attempt at delegitimating and
deconstructing the Western and modernist claim to truth and the
universal. They are however strange because the attempt at
delegitimation obviates the *solidity* of that universal category necessary for
emancipation and progress around the concept of a political subject that
is able to take its own destiny into its own hands. Zeleza finds the way
out of this paradox in Appiah's contention that

> the basis for that project of delegitimation is very much not the
> postmodernist one: rather, it is grounded in an appeal to an
> ethical universal; indeed, it is based, as an intellectual response
> to oppression in Africa largely are based, in an appeal to a
> certain simple respect for human suffering, a fundamental
> revolt against the endless misery of the last thirty years. (Zeleza,
> 2005, p.5)

This criticism of the postmodern succeeds only on two assumptions:
one, that the postmodern is a radical break from modernity; and two,
that the postmodern is a rejection of a concrete universal or an
abandonment of historical agency. In other words, for the detractors of
postmodernism, because the postmodern achieved a radical break from
modernity, it also took with it the foundational certainty of the modern,
especially around the concepts of the self. We have argued however that
the postmodern is implicated in the constitution of the modern. As such,
it interrogates only the boundary of the modern self; it does not dissolve
this self. The array of modernist categories—autonomy, transcendence,
certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center,
continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness,

origin—are categories that postmodernism attempt to question critically in order to divest them of their ideological "alliance with power...[or their] identification with the productive logic of the industrial system" (Hutcheon, 1998, p.26). But this is not to deny these concepts. Rather, the postmodern interrogates their utility (Who sets them? When? Where? Why?) in relation to experience but without their foreclosing assurance that eventually leads to binaries and hierarchies.

The postmodern asks the question: Does the universal need to totalize? In the attempt to oppose the totalizing tendency of the modern categories, the postmodern rejects their tyrannical and paternalistic connotations that lead to a center-margin dichotomy at the base of the Eurocentric worldview. In this crucial sense, the postmodern becomes *ex-centric* rather than been *eccentric*. In other words, it becomes an intellectual strategy for those who have been marginalized out of the modern center—the ex-centric identities: blacks, ethnic, gay, feminists, Africa, etc.—by a dominant ideology (ibid, p.35). Thus, for Hutcheon,

> One of the things we must be open to listening to is what I have called the ex-centric, the off-center. Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems: questions, but does not destroy…. It acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given orders. (ibid, pp.41-42)

My contention is that African philosophy is postmodern in such an ex-centric sense. Such a characterization becomes necessary within the context of the theoretical dissensus that exists in contemporary African philosophy on the question of what ought to be the condition for the possibility of such a *philosophy*. Every discipline, as far as it is a theoretical paradigm, is demarcated from other theoretical paradigms by its pretheoretical commitments which serve as the conditions of engagement with new paradigms. These pretheoretical commitments "are the unquestioned assumptions that establish pragmatic and programmatic foundations for any discipline, establish discursive limits on the range of theoretical propositions that characterize a discourse, and specify the range new or external insights and critiques that can be appropriated without dismantling the field entirely" (Zeleza, 2005, p.19).

The situation in contemporary African philosophy is, according to Barry Hallen, seemingly that of a divided house in which various

traditions of philosophizing are in deep contention over what should constitute the practice of philosophy in Africa. Thus, within this theoretical confusion, we are left with nothing but the picture of African philosophy as

> a name for a multiplicity of 'positions' and perhaps a multiple of multiples. From which position should one characterize African philosophy?... While the questions "Is there African philosophy?" and "What is African philosophy?" have dominated African philosophizing, very little, as far as I know, has been devoted to the search and explicitation of the conditions for an African philosophy. (Wanba dia Wamba, 2003)

This difficulty of arriving at a set of theoretical *presuppositions* that could account for the possibility of an African philosophical practice is as a result of the continuous disagreement on the nature, for instance, of "the cultural data-base in Africa from which such philosophy might be expected to arise, or with reference to which it might orient itself."

The original motivation of the African philosophical discourse is the postcolonial response to the Eurocentric philosophical ideology. Thus, Serequeberhan aptly regard African philosophy as basically a "critique of Eurocentrism." Eurocentrism, a bias located in modernity's self-consciousness of itself, operates with the metaphysical assumption that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms of human life. For him, therefore, this critique is aimed at "exposing and de-structuring this basic speculative core in the texts of philosophy. This then is the critical-negative aspect of the discourse of contemporary African philosophy" (Serequeberhan, 1997, p.142).

The logic of the Enlightenment Eurocentric program is the attempt to manage and produce the Other. It is in this sense that it becomes a violent and terroristic instrument for excluding or subordinating these Others to the category of universal (European) reason and history. The discourse of African philosophy evolved in reaction to this violent management and production of the Africans. However, the critique of Eurocentrism also crucially intersects the need to create a unique modern framework that is genuinely African. This is because the colonial logic produced ambivalence for the Africans with regards to the problem of being modern. The ambivalence is this: "Colonialism was the historical form through which modernity became a real social project on

the African continent. Colonialism, however, was premised on the denial of that same modernity to Africans" (Macamo, 2005, p.8). There is therefore the existential necessity for Africans to negotiate their way into a modernity of their own making in dialogue with the European modern framework.

This is exactly where we recognize the crucial significance of Wiredu's African philosophical project. I have chosen him because his work is representative of the discursive shape contemporary African philosophy is taking. The first reason why this is so manifests in his recognition that African philosophy, beyond the critique of Eurocentrism, stands at the critical juncture between the colonial and the postcolonial. This is the critical intent behind his assertion that "Contemporary Africa is in the middle of a transition from a *traditional* to a *modern* society." Such a transition is however tortured, uneasy and uncategorized. It is a historical hiatus between the colonial and the postcolonial which represents, in Gramsci's words, a serious dilemma: "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in the interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci, qtd. Olaniyan). It is within such a social interregnum that African philosophy must assist in the forging of a unique African modernity in constant dialogue with its traditional past in an agonistic attempt to birth a new reality.

The implicit assumption here is that there is a connection between philosophy and the process of history. In other words, for Oladipo, what becomes relevant in a philosophy is not its origin:

> Rather, it should be the extent to which it is able to generate theories that can illuminate the problems of the day, thereby providing the context of ideas within which particular choices and preferences in the realm of action—whether economic, political, cultural or scientific—can be made. (Oladipo, 1996, p.17)

Such an understanding of the temporal orientation of African philosophy speaks to the necessity of fashioning a critical and constructive philosophy able to mediate the task of building an African modernity. For instance, in Wiredu's view, a critical African philosophy should point out the limitation of an authoritarian outlook for Africa's modern development. It should also constructively annex what is useful and significant in our traditional culture as well as other non-African cultures.

The foregoing gives us the positive dimension of what Wiredu calls conceptual decolonization in African philosophy. The negative dimension of this conceptual strategy opens up the second reason why Wiredu's philosophical project is representative of philosophizing in Africa. This is that it gives us a strong insight into the postmodern nature and orientation of African philosophy especially given his concern for Africans appropriating the modern pattern of living as well as insights from other cultures that have not been domesticated before in the African reality. In what sense is Wiredu's philosophy postmodern?

Wiredu himself gives us a hint of an answer. In a recent personal illustration of the imperative of conceptual decolonization in African philosophy, he argues that while we can conceive of the program of conceptual decolonization as a remedy for a temporary disorder occasioned by the hangover of colonialism, it does possesses some permanent aspects with an African and trans-African significance:

> To take the African angle first: recall the fact that much in the situation in African philosophy that calls for a decolonizing reversal is due to the superimposition of Western intellectual categories on African thought elements. To remove the colonial encrustation is to bring oneself a vantage point for viewing the African thought materials in their true light…. Again, this need not necessarily reveal the given bit of thought as a beam of light. *It may reveal, on the contrary, the necessity of emendation, reconstruction or, to adapt a contemporary cliché, de-construction.* It does not matter which way it goes. What matters is that the exercise would be apt to inculcate or reinforce the habit of conceptual self-examination. (Wiredu, 2002, p.204)

This remark suggests a link between Wiredu and Derridean deconstruction as a kind of conceptual caution in the way we use certain concepts within a context circumscribed by Eurocentrism. The deconstructive idea entails, in its barest essence, a ruthless exposure from within a text. That is, as a textual strategy, it seeks to expose and subvert the "unarticulated presuppositions" of metaphysical thought which in its unarticulated form maintain dominance in Western culture. One of the favorites techniques of the deconstructivist is the attempt to reverse binary oppositions which appear equal but presume the secondary relation of the second to the first.

It seems to me that deconstruction and postmodernism intersects not

only as a kind of a skeptical philosophical mood that interrogates a dominant, dogmatic paradigm, but also as ex-centric discourses. While much of theorizing about the African condition in African philosophy may not yet be attuned to this Wiredean programmatic framework, the essence of this essay is that it suggests the best alternative to philosophizing in Africa that captures the most significant element in postmodernism.

Endnotes

[1]. We should note the similarity here between Osha's diagnosis of the malady of Africa intellectual activities and Mbembe's attempt, as the Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, to undermine the "fake philosophies" of Afro-radicalism and nativist theories, and their "lazy" and "dubious" advocates, and thereby to redirect the theoretical focus of decades of scholarship and research in Africa.

[2]. Farred is responding to Thabo Mbeki's programme for an African Renaissance which is supposed to pave the way for the emergence of an African modernity.

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