

# AN APPRAISAL OF KWASI WIREDU'S PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

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## **Abstract**

This study critically analyzed Wiredu's philosophy of culture, for its uniqueness in dealing with the interplay between tradition and modernization. Wiredu stresses that it is important to critically analyze traditional African cultural practices in terms of problems brought about by globalization and modernization. . In a sense, Wiredu's work was to refute western anthropologists' ethnocentric assertions that assume that Africans do not have logical contemplations couched in language, intelligence, and lack clear sense of self except that which can be characterized as primitive. This study utilizes the qualitative method of critical analysis of Wiredu's perspective and opinions regarding what informs African Philosophy and culture in the truest sense of the word. The study concludes that African cultures can develop and improve without losing their basic values and thus, opening a possibility for a rich and prosperous future despite the presence of other complementary cultures.

**Keywords:** Culture, cultural universals, cultural particular, philosophy of culture, African culture, ethnocentrism

## **Introduction**

This study has been necessitated by controversy about how to do African philosophy., Kwasi Wiredu was one of those pioneering orientationists in African philosophy. To begin with, he has succeeded in appropriating major signposts in Western philosophy . Wiredu, a renowned Ghanaian philosopher, has made significant contribution to African philosophy, and more so to study of culture and its philosophical aspect. Wiredu emerged at a time when African philosophy was undergoing a renaissance, attempting to regain identity and to resist Western philosophical hegemony. In examining Wiredu's philosophy of culture, it would be impossible not to refer to his seminal work, "Cultural Universals and Particulars." Through his work, Wiredu endeavors to dismantle the universality-particularity divide and advocates a more expansive and contextualized view of culture. Wiredu's philosophy revolves around conceptual decolonization, and he invites Africans to redefine and define their cultural practices in terms of philosophical paradigms. Wiredu's focus on acknowledging some conceptual issues and humanistic elements provide a ground for interplay between cultures resonating with one of the philosophers' fascination with comparative philosophy.

Wiredu's philosophical principles in practical application in intercultural interactions gives a rich insight into what happens in intercultural interactions. On a broader platform in African philosophy, Wiredu's philosophy has raised problems in cultural identity conflict, authenticity, and tradition in a changing situation. Academics and intellectuals, both in and out of Africa, have reacted to Wiredu's work, making philosophy in Africa. Western and

African thought have been in collision with each other for a long period. Kwasi Wiredu and many African intellectuals believe that African thought system has been shaped a lot by Western epistemology, and in the process, conceptual distortions and misconceptions have emerged. African tradition and culture have thus been explained sometimes in terms of Western philosophical categories, and in the process, may lose part of what they originally meant. This study attempts to consider Wiredu's call for African thought to be decolonized and how applicable his method can be in contemporary African philosophy. According to Wiredu, such a method involves explaining African thought in terms of indigenous terms and not in terms of Western categories. But would it be effective in solving African problems? This is the most important question that this study sets out to attempt an answer in the light of Wiredu's theorizing on culture.

### **Wiredu's Idea of an African Culture**

Wiredu's understanding of an African culture is premised on the idea that African philosophical traditions are rich and worthwhile and that they can offer new insights into universal human issues when subjected to critical examination and elaboration. One of the most dominant themes of Wiredu's work is the idea of "conceptual decolonization." This is the process of critically examining Western philosophical ideas that have been imposed on African philosophy and evaluating their relevance to African contexts. Wiredu argues that most of these ideas are not only alien but also inappropriate for the comprehension of African realities. Instead, he advocates the recovery and revitalization of native African concepts and frameworks (Wiredu, 1996).

Wiredu maintains that decolonization must not be understood as a rejection of Western philosophy but as a selective appropriation. He advocates that African philosophers should appropriate Western thought in a critically reflective and grounded manner in their own cultural contexts. This is intended to bring about a more authentic and autonomous African philosophy (Wiredu, 1995). In his book *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Wiredu explores the complex relationship between cultural universals and cultural particulars. He argues that while there are some universal aspects of human experience, the way in which these experiences are articulated and comprehended is heavily influenced by culture. This perspective rejects the idea that Western philosophical ideas are applicable universally without modification (Wiredu, 1996). Wiredu uses the Akan concept of truth as an illustration to make his argument. For the Akan, truth is conceived as a question of coherence and practical success, and not as an objective fact. This is the reverse of the Western conception of truth as correspondence to an objective fact. Wiredu thinks that it is necessary to appreciate such differences in order to construct a philosophy that is locally rooted but cosmopolitan in application (Wiredu, 1996).

Language is at the center of Wiredu's conception of culture. Wiredu believes that language is not only a medium of communication but also a repository of the worldview and philosophy of a people. The understanding and utilization of African languages are therefore at the center of gaining access to and constructing African philosophical thought. Wiredu is also critical of the dominance of colonial languages in African philosophical thought and encourages greater attention to indigenous languages (Wiredu, 1998). Wiredu's linguistic approach is also reflected in his study of the Akan language. He explores how the grammar and utilization of Akan words and sentences convey a particular philosophical view. For instance, the Akan word "onipa," meaning "person," is imbued with connotations of moral and social responsibility inherent in Akan conceptions of identity and community. This

linguistic analysis is used to uncover the philosophical foundations of African cultures that otherwise lie hidden (Wiredu, 1998). Wiredu's investigation of African culture goes as far as the level of ethics and morality.

Wiredu argues that African morality systems are communal and prioritize the good of the group over the individual. This contrasts with many Western systems of ethics, which prioritize individual rights and autonomy. Wiredu's analysis of African ethics showcases the importance of social harmony, respect for one another, and communal responsibility (Wiredu, 1992). While Wiredu is a strong believer in the value of traditional African thought, he is also critical of some of the elements that he believes need to be rethought. For example, he is critical of the wholesale adoption of some traditional practices and beliefs that are toxic or outmoded. Wiredu is in favor of a critical reconstruction of African traditions, where the useful aspects are retained and the toxic ones discarded (Wiredu, 1980).

### **Wiredu's Theory of Cultural Universals**

Kwasi Wiredu's theory of cultural universals is a prevailing genre in his philosophical work, particularly in his influential book, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (1996). Wiredu's argument in this book is the possibility that while the beliefs and practices of individual human cultures are varied, there are some universal aspects of human experience shared by all cultures. Wiredu (1996) contends that there are "aspects of human experience and social practices that are common across different cultures". These are basic human needs and responses, e.g., the need for communication, social organization, and moral values. Wiredu's contention is that these universals rest on the shared biological and psychological nature of human beings. The particular expressions these universals take and are conceived, however, are mediated through culture.

One of the cultural universals Wiredu writes about is communication. All human societies have developed systems of communication, primarily through language. But the structure, use, and meaning of language can be quite different from culture to culture. Wiredu emphasizes that recognition of these differences is essential to an appreciation of the richness of human linguistic diversity and to making intercultural communication meaningful (Wiredu, 1996). Wiredu also writes about the use of language in the construction of thought and perception. He employs the writings of philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Benjamin Lee Whorf to argue that the linguistic patterns of various cultures can condition the way people think about and accommodate the world. This view emphasizes the importance of an appreciation of and respect for linguistic diversity in philosophy (Wiredu, 1996).

Another cultural universal Wiredu identifies is social organization. Human beings everywhere organize themselves into social groups, either families, communities, or larger political organizations. The specific forms of social organization, however, can be quite different from culture to culture. Wiredu argues that these differences are conditioned by historical, environmental, and cultural factors. Recognition of these factors is essential to an appreciation of the richness of human social diversity and to solving social and political issues in a culturally sensitive manner (Wiredu, 1996). Wiredu also writes about the concept of political power and authority, noting that the exercise of power is a universal feature of human societies but the legitimacy and form of political systems can be quite different. He calls for a critical examination of traditional and modern African systems of government and

proposes systems that are democratic and consonant with African cultural values (Wiredu, 1996).

Moral values and ethical principles are another area where Wiredu discovers cultural universals. All human societies have systems of morality that govern behavior and maintain social harmony. But the content of such moral systems can be variable. Wiredu argues that while some ethical principles can be universally accepted, such as the prohibition on murder, their application and interpretation can be variable in accordance with cultural contexts (Wiredu, 1996). Wiredu's argument on African ethics, such as the Akan concept of "ubuntu," demonstrates the communal orientation of African moral systems. Ubuntu, which emphasizes the interdependence of people and the good of the community, provides a contrast to more individualistic ethical systems of Western societies. Wiredu argues that such communal values can be applied to solve modern ethical issues, both within and outside African societies (Wiredu, 1996).

One of the problems that run through Wiredu's work is the conflict between cultural universals and particulars. He argues that while there can be some universal features of human experience, the expression and interpretation of such experiences are always culturally mediated. This argument denies both cultural relativism, which denies any universals, and ethnocentrism, which imposes one culture's particularities as universals (Wiredu, 1996). Wiredu uses the example of the concept of truth to demonstrate this conflict. He contrasts the Western concept of truth as correspondence to an objective reality with the Akan concept of truth as coherence and practical success. This contrast demonstrates how different cultures can have different but equally valid conceptions of basic concepts. Wiredu argues that recognition and respect for such differences are necessary for effective intercultural dialogue and cooperation (Wiredu, 1996).

Wiredu's method of dealing with cultural universals has not been controversy-free. He admits that some of the conventional beliefs and practices have to be re-examined in the light of modern realities. He advocates for a process of critical reconstruction where good things in traditional culture are kept and things that are old or bad are abandoned. This method is directed towards the development of a dynamic and progressive system of culture that is responsive to universal human needs and to specific cultural contexts (Wiredu, 1995). Wiredu's criticism of traditional African philosophy is one of the ways through which he criticizes gender inequality and the maintenance of some superstitious beliefs. He believes that though these aspects have cultural and historical importance, they have to be critically re-examined and reformed so that they will be compatible with modern standards of ethics and human rights norms. This process of criticism is directed towards the strengthening of African cultures so that they will be effective and relevant in the solution of modern problems (Wiredu, 1995).

### **Wiredu's Concept of Cultural Particulars**

Cultural universals are the universal aspects of human existence that are common to all cultures, and cultural particulars are the specific practices and expressions that differentiate one culture from another. Wiredu's method of dealing with cultural particulars is at the center of the enjoyment of the richness and diversity of human cultures and of intercultural understanding and cooperation. Cultural particulars, Wiredu (1996) argues, are "the specific practices, beliefs, and values that are unique to a given culture". These particulars are the result of the historical, environmental, and social conditions under which a culture develops. They are a manifestation of the specific way in which a community responds to universal

human problems and needs. Wiredu explains that while cultural particulars may be very different, they are all authentic expressions of human creativity and adaptation. One of the places where cultural particulars are most clearly visible is in language.

Wiredu argues that language is not just a means of communication but also a repository of a people's philosophy and worldview. Different languages have different ways of knowing and understanding the world. For instance, the vocabulary and grammar of the Akan language, which Wiredu frequently analyzes, reflect particular ways of thinking that are different from those reflected in Western languages (Wiredu, 1996). Wiredu explains how the Akan conception of "truth" differs from the Western conception. In Akan philosophy, truth is typically conceived of as coherence and practical success rather than correspondence to an objective reality. This specific concept of truth influences how Akan individuals understand knowledge and reality, referring to how cognitive processes are conditioned by cultural specifics (Wiredu, 1996).

Cultural specifics also manifest in moral and ethical systems. Wiredu highlights how African ethical thought, particularly the philosophy of "ubuntu" or communal harmony, is distinct from more individualistic Western ethical systems. Ubuntu emphasizes interdependence among people and the requirement of communal well-being. This ethical system shapes social practice and moral judgment in distinctive African societies (Wiredu, 1992). Wiredu argues that understanding these specific ethical systems is crucial to addressing moral challenges in their distinctive cultural contexts. For example, African approaches to conflict resolution and justice, emphasizing reconciliation and communal harmony, are distinct from Western legalistic and punitive practices. Understanding and respect for these cultural specifics can lead to more effective and culturally sensitive solutions (Wiredu, 1996). Social practice and institutions are another setting where cultural specifics are evident.

Wiredu explains how traditional African social arrangements, such as extended families and communal land tenure, are distinct from Western models. These social arrangements are shaped by cultural values and historical experiences distinctive to African societies. Understanding these specifics is critical to designing policies and interventions that are culturally responsive and effective (Wiredu, 1996). Wiredu also outlines traditional African political systems, which are based on consensus-building and collective decision-making. These systems are guided by cultural values of participation and inclusivity, which are distinct from the adversarial and majoritarian models dominant in Western democracies. Wiredu feels that these African political traditions must be incorporated into contemporary models of governance to create systems that are more responsive to the cultural contexts in which they operate (Wiredu, 1996). Religious beliefs and practices are a critical aspect of cultural specifics. Wiredu discusses how the ancestral spirit-based, interdependent material and spiritual world African traditional religions are different from the prevailing monotheistic Western religions. These religious details affect rituals, moral values, and worldviews in uniquely African fashions (Wiredu, 1998). Wiredu argues that these religious details need to be appreciated and understood in any intercultural interaction or comparative religious studies. Wiredu cautions against imposing Western religious models on African societies and instead advocates a more advanced and appreciative understanding of African religious traditions. This is essential to building mutual respect and understanding in a globalized world (Wiredu, 1996).

Wiredu observes that cultural specifics are heavily influenced by history and environment. The colonial history of colonization, resistance, and independence has

influenced African cultures in a distinctive way. Similarly, the environmental context within which African societies have developed - climate, geography, and natural resources have influenced their social practices, economic activities, and technological innovations (Wiredu, 1996). For example, traditional African farming practices, which are responsive to local environmental conditions, reflect a deep understanding of and respect for nature. These practices are part of the cultural specifics that need to be preserved and integrated into contemporary development planning.

Wiredu argues that ignoring these historical and environmental contexts leads to ineffective and often harmful interventions (Wiredu, 1996). While Wiredu values the richness of cultural specifics, he also insists on their critical examination. Wiredu argues that not all cultural practices are useful or relevant in contemporary contexts. Some traditional beliefs and practices may need to be re-examined and re-formulated to respond to contemporary challenges and ethical imperatives. Wiredu calls for a process of critical reconstruction, whereby cultural specifics are examined, and those that are harmful or outdated are discarded, while those that are useful are preserved and adapted (Wiredu, 1995). For example, Wiredu criticizes some gender norms and roles in traditional African societies that may perpetuate inequality and discrimination. He calls for the reformulation of these norms to promote gender equity and justice. This critical process is meant to lead to a dynamic and evolving cultural framework that is responsive to contemporary realities while rooted in cultural heritage (Wiredu, 1995).

### **The Relevance of Wiredu's Philosophy of Culture Towards African Development**

Wiredu's philosophy is founded on the appreciation of the worth of African cultures for themselves, with a call for a process of "conceptual decolonization" through critical examination of and adaptation of Western concepts to African realities. He calls for a cultural orientation that is respectful of and inclusive of African values and practices in philosophical and development discourses. His models of governance founded on consensus emphasize dialogue and collective decision-making, providing a contrast to adversarial and winner-takes-all political systems (Presbey, 1997). These concepts can be used in the mitigation of political tensions and promotion of social harmony, resulting in the stability and development in African nations. For instance, the consensus format can be used in local governance, where community based decision making mechanisms can enhance participation and ensure that developmental efforts are responsive to the needs and aspirations of the local people (Oladipo, 2000).

This can create a sense of identity and pride and empower students with the knowledge and skills to help develop their communities. Incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems into education can also stimulate innovation and creativity by drawing on Africa's rich cultural heritage and diversity of outlooks (Hallen, 2009). Wiredu's philosophy appreciates cultural identity and social solidarity in development. Respecting diversity and intercultural communication, development policies can promote a sense of belonging and solidarity between groups (Hountondji, 2002). This can reduce conflict and increase social stability and developments. Wiredu's focus on cultural pluralism and intercultural communication also offers a framework for solving identity and integration issues in multicultural societies.

### **Evaluation**

Although Wiredu's philosophy can be applied in African development, development policies must balance innovations of the modern and traditional practice to be relevant and effective

in the modern world (Oladipo, 2000). Consensus-based models of governance are hard to apply, particularly in cases where political power is centralized or politics is polarized (Presbey, 1997). Kwasi Wiredu's philosophy of culture is applicable in the understanding and development of African development. It offers a paradigm for the development of inclusive, sustainable, and culturally responsive approaches. His focus on consensus and cultural diversity offers practical solutions towards governance, education, economical development, and social cohesion. In a more globalized world, Wiredu's ideas are needed in ensuring African development respectful of cultural identities and making the global society more inclusive and equitable.

Kwasi Wiredu's philosophical exploration of cultural universals and particulars is a significant contribution to contemporary philosophy, particularly in the context of African philosophical thought and its engagement with global issues. Wiredu posits that recognizing cultural universals can help foster mutual understanding and cooperation among diverse cultures. By identifying and building on shared values and principles, it is possible to address global challenges and promote peaceful coexistence (Wiredu, 1990). Cultural particulars, on the other hand, are the unique aspects and expressions of specific cultures. These include languages, customs, traditions, beliefs, and social practices that define a culture's identity and distinguish it from others (Gyekye, 1997). Wiredu emphasizes the importance of respecting and preserving these particulars, as they contribute to the richness and diversity of human experience. Cultural particulars are vital for maintaining cultural identity and continuity, and they offer valuable insights into different ways of life and worldviews. Wiredu argues that acknowledging and valuing these particulars is essential for fostering genuine intercultural dialogue and understanding (Wiredu, 1998).

Intercultural dialogue allows for the exchange of ideas and experiences, promoting creativity and innovation. It also provides an opportunity for cultures to address misunderstandings and conflicts, paving the way for peaceful coexistence and collaboration (Hallen, 2009). Wiredu's philosophy emphasizes the need to balance cultural universals and particulars, recognizing that both play a crucial role in shaping human experiences and interactions. By acknowledging universals, cultures can find common ground and work together to address global challenges. By valuing particulars, cultures can preserve their unique identities and contributions, enriching the global cultural landscape (Gyekye, 1997). Wiredu's philosophy contributes to the development of a more inclusive and representative global philosophical discourse. By advocating for conceptual decolonization and recognizing diverse philosophical traditions, Wiredu's ideas challenge the dominance of Western thought and encourage the exploration of alternative philosophical perspectives (Masolo, 1994). This approach enriches philosophical discourse and promotes a more comprehensive understanding of human experiences and issues, reflecting the diversity of cultural perspectives and contributions (Hallen, 2009). Wiredu's great intellectual engagement is his endeavor to offer an African viewpoint on the problem of cultural particulars and universals. is acknowledged by D. A. Masolo (2005), who wrote that:

Wiredu contributes and adds an African tone to the familiar and perhaps one of the most influential preoccupations of twentieth-century philosophy, viz., analytic theories on the relation between language, meaning, and mind. What he adds to the literature is the view that meaning cannot be understood in pure logical terms without the collective and relational social base that makes the very idea of meaning possible. Meanings and, by implication, mind, are objective in the sense

that they are biologically made possible, and not in the sense that they exist as entities independently of the communicative act.

Wiredu's level of success in this endeavor is however debatable due to internal inconsistencies and weaknesses in his argument. It would seem that cultural universals cannot be explained by Wiredu's biological universalism. In a previous study titled *The Akan Concept of Mind*, Wiredu (1983) pointed out that the soul, which he claimed is equal in all humans at all times because it transcends the biological, is the foundation for the universality of the one human family. Okra is a quasi-material component of humans "whose destiny is received from God and whose absence means death and whose presence in the body means life" (Wiredu 1995). In other places, Wiredu (1996) supported the biological universality of man by citing the norms of human cognition and behavior, such as induction, reflective perception, abstraction, and the rules of non-contradiction. In light of these philosophical changes, it is important to remember that Wiredu's analysis could ultimately be upended by conceptual inconsistency if he doesn't clarify the connections between these disparate views. A predictable consequence of this conceptual confusion is that we shall have as many universals as we like because we can frequently spot significant similarities between two or more cultures.

Godfrey Onah's rejoinder to Wiredu's critique is that it is a continuum from "its biological base to all the spirals of potentialities" that Wiredu (1996) refers to as human experience. What these spirals consist in case they are not biological, Onah (2002) inquires. The argument "There is the idea of an advance beyond the biological at the human level, (but) there is no implication of an ontological transcendence of the biological" (Wiredu 1996) shows that Wiredu is acknowledging this challenge. Onah (2002) inquires more about what these human level beyond biology consist and how it can be argued to be without ontologically exceeding the biological. Kwasi Wiredu's theory of cultural particulars and universals offers a good platform to make sense and travel cross-culturally in a more globalized world. Intercultural communication, understanding, and cooperation are promoted by Wiredu's philosophy, which emphasizes the coexistence and interdependence of universals and particulars. His theories are critical in building a more inclusive and more equitable world where people of different cultural backgrounds can work together to solve problems and learn from one another.

## **Conclusion**

Kwasi Wiredu's philosophy of culture is a pioneering as it engages African heritage with universal philosophical thought. His appeal for conceptual decolonization acts as a bitter reminder that African philosophy must be un-entangled from colonial intellectual legacies in a struggle to be representative of lived experience, languages, and values in African societies. Wiredu's approach is not a rejection of Western philosophy, however, but a re-consideration and remodelling in terms applicable in African contexts. This intellectual independence lies at the very centre of developing a genuinely African philosophy that speaks to local and universal problems.

Wiredu's idea to reconcile tradition and modernity defies conventional wisdom that progress involves abandoning traditional values. Instead, he demonstrates that traditional African thought and practice can be reconciled with, and even be enriched by, contemporary technological and scientific advancements. This reconciliation of the new and old gives a model for culture-based development with practical applications to rapidly changing African



societies. Moreover, Wiredu's challenge to ethnophilosophy undermines reductionist accounts of African philosophy as naive description of culture. Wiredu's focus on how thought comes to be constituted by language is particularly significant. He maintains that African languages, with their respective conceptual schemes, offer alternative ways to experience the world. In inviting us to use African languages to be engaged in philosophical argument, Wiredu opens new possibilities to generate knowledge and keeps intellectual richness in these languages. Overall, Kwasi Wiredu's philosophy of culture offers a strong framework for coping with problems in cultural identity, intellectual decolonization, and balancing tradition and modernity. His thought has long-term implications for African philosophy and global thought and offers a wider and more sensitive philosophical thought approach.

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