

**AFRICAN STUDIES THROUGH LANGUAGE-BASED  
TECHNIQUES**

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v7i1.5>

**Submission: November 7, 2017 Acceptance: February 26, 2018**

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**Abstract**

In this article, we argue that language-based techniques have the capacity to generate original ideas and thus account for progress in any discipline. We claim that language-based techniques used by some African scholars such as hermeneutics (critical interpretation of cultural corpus) and related ones such as transliteration (adaptation of alien intellectual legacy) are creatively inadequate to inspire progress because they do not lead to the creation of new concepts and original ideas in African thought. We claim also that the technique of intellectual decolonisation with its foremost expression in Kwasi Wiredu's 'conceptual decolonisation' and Kwesi Tsri's 'conceptual liberation', are two recent language-based strategies aimed at overcoming the creative problem inherent in the techniques of hermeneutics and transliteration. We argue that these two techniques are equally inadequate because they are tantamount to what can be called 'conceptual manipulation', which is not a creative strategy for progress in African thought. The goal of this paper therefore is to expose the creative weaknesses in these techniques in order to show that there is a dearth of creative language-based techniques in African studies and make a call for the formulation of one.

**Keywords:** African philosophy, hermeneutics, transliteration, conceptual manipulation, conceptual decolonisation, conceptual liberation.

**Introduction**

Is there a creative future for African studies in the interpretation of culture, copying of alien intellectual legacy or manipulation of concepts? The answer is no. Our main goal in this paper is to justify this negative answer by criticising such trending techniques as hermeneutics, transliteration and intellectual decolonisation. Any trace of African intellectual history to the postcolonial time, it seems, would inevitably begin with the nationalist ideological thinkers and maybe a few other colonial era ethno-philosophers. But much of what is attributable to this group is hermeneutical, for example, Nyerere's ujamaa is an interpretation of traditional African notion of extended family system. Similarly, Senghor's Negritude and Nkrumah's consciencism are various interpretations of African traditional communal worldview. Unarguably, hermeneutical posturing such as these may be no less rigorous, but they are no more original either. They are mere analytical interpretations of the voices of the tribe or what Paulin Hountondji would call the silent "collective unconscious of the African peoples" (1996, 63). The problem is that unlike in the Western intellectual epistemic formations, the originality of these ideas cannot be traced to any specific African individuals. In this regard, they relapse into ethnophilosophy. Their modern espousers become mere interpreters of what Wiredu calls "community thought" (1980a). One, therefore, is compelled to ask: beyond the voices of the tribe where it seems the last relic of originality could be traced, albeit in the form of community thought, can the strategies of hermeneutics, transliteration and intellectual decolonisation unveil new concepts and open new vistas for thought in contemporary African philosophy and studies?

We will show that hermeneutics, understood simply as critical interpretation of cultural corpus, and transliteration, understood simply as adaptation of alien intellectual legacy, are grossly limited in that whilst they are capable of bringing elements of the African worldview to philosophical light or highlighting conceptual imposition as the case may be, they nonetheless lack the capacity to engender creative and innovative thinking among its users.

To overcome this challenge, some African scholars seek strategies different from hermeneutics and transliteration which collectively can be described as intellectual decolonisation. Kwasi Wiredu called his own "conceptual decolonisation" (1980b/1984) and Kwesi Tsri developed what he called "conceptual liberation" (2016), both of which we shall criticise as conceptual manipulation. To be specific, on the one hand, while Wiredu's conceptual decolonisation seeks to eliminate from our thoughts the modes of conceptualisation

which colonisation brought to us and which continues to shape our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choice, thus, in a way, conceptual decolonisation seeks to Africanise philosophical concepts or more broadly, shows how concepts can be framed in African philosophy to have value tapped from the native African languages. On the other hand, Tsri's conceptual liberation seeks to free Africans from the imprisonment of degrading concepts such as black, Negro and so on. In reality, what these two strategies amount to is the manipulation of concepts from what the concepts are or are capable of, to what they want them to be for purely Afrocentric reasons.

The assumption here is that concepts are strategic to philosophy. In fact, as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari explain, proper tools of philosophy should yield new concepts because philosophy is that discipline that is concerned with the production of concepts. Hence, "...the following definition of philosophy can be taken as being decisive: knowledge through pure concepts" (1994, 7). Bruce Janz also shares similar view suggesting that concepts represent the basic building blocks of thought (2014). If, therefore, African studies thrived on techniques that appeared to feast on Western conceptual remains, then it was time someone did something about that. By introducing conceptual decolonisation and conceptual liberation, the actors, it is safe to assume, aim at transcending hermeneutics and transliteration, and ushering in new language-based techniques that can advance the course of African studies. Whether these projects in conceptual manipulation are productive or not and whether they are needed or not, shall form part of our discussion in this paper.

First, we will show that hermeneutics and transliteration as language-based techniques are creatively limited and as such do not offer methodological preconditions for the creation of new ideas and concepts in the African place.

Second, we will show that the claim of Western conceptual domination of the African intellectual spaces is real, which makes the projects of conceptual manipulation, set in motion by Wiredu and Tsri, attractive. We will then present the case for conceptual decolonisation and conceptual liberation and show that besides not being creative, they are, in addition, unoriginal and translate to mere manipulation of concepts. This is new evidence that makes at least, Wiredu's conceptual decolonisation doubtful. We will conclude with a call for creative techniques that can yield new concepts and open new vistas for thought in contemporary African studies.

**Why is a Language-based Technique needed in African Studies?**

Long before writing was invented, humans communicated through other media including verbal expression and before written literature gained popularity in scholarship, oral literature was long in practice in different cultures. Today, when we talk about the need for language-based techniques for the intellectual liberation of African scholarship, there is strong temptation to overlook orality. But oral literature studies, offers a clear example of the intellectual struggle within the context of conceptual decolonisation and liberation. The unsettled debate over the basic issue of an appropriate name for the art and its forms of manifestation reveals the debilitating extent of the colonial overhang in the thought processes of many African scholars. For instance, such terms as 'verbal art', 'traditional literature', 'oral literature', 'folk literature' and, more recently, 'orature' have been considered, applied and propagated as names for the art by some scholars. However, these have hardly yielded any creative originality or satisfaction, even to their proponents. The attempts, themselves, have been driven by a desire to escape the Western prejudices which in the first place denied creative artistic capacity to Africa and later grudgingly admitted the existence of same, only as a primitive phenomenon. Such prejudices consigned oral tradition and its forms, including art/literature to the primitive mind. In their attempts to conceive the unwritten art of Africa in these terms, they merely manipulated those concepts without much creativity and ended with a consolidation of the very meanings they sought to escape.

Their use of 'verbal', or 'oral' in reference to the art has not cured the inherent prejudice but has, in addition, created the false impression that the art is essentially created and realised through the use of the vocal cord. The reality is that the creation and realisation of a large corpus of the art, including its surrogate forms: drum poetry, aerophonic (including flute and horn) poetry; the choreography, mimes, and many more, are not achieved through the use of verbalisation or the vocal cord. Thus, the concept of the art as 'verbal art', or 'oral literature' is a misnomer, is deceptive and is less than creative. In the same way, the attempt to refer to it as 'traditional' or 'folk literature' creates the false impression of art, the practice of which is limited to the uneducated (in Western terms), simple and poor who belong to, or exist in the countryside; it also connotes primitivity of both the art and its practitioners, strengthening the very prejudice that it seeks to overcome.

The same scholars acknowledge the unwritten nature of the art but proceed to approximate it to the Western concept of literature when they refer to it as 'oral literature', 'traditional literature', or 'folk literature'. Not even the seemingly more ingenious coinage of 'orature' is original, or creative enough; it is a mere conflation of two already

inadequate words – ‘oral’ and ‘literature’. Yet the cultures that produce the art have clear words in their original languages that adequately name it and articulate its concept. The application of the Western concept of literature to African ‘oral literature’ is manipulatory, even as it fails to accurately represent the original conception or understanding of the corpus. There is the added complication of evaluation of the corpus based on canons derived from Western literary criticism, which are foisted on the art estranging it from its original concept and natural canons of interrogation.

The example of oral literature scholarship demonstrates the acute desire for both conceptual decolonisation and liberation and also the failure in the struggle for both, arising from the adopted inadequate techniques of both transliteration and conceptual manipulation which fall far short of originality and creativity. It makes a strong case for a carefully designed language-based technique as an alternative pathway.

A language-based technique as we employ it in this context roughly is any method of thought that involves language analysis, interpretation, transliteration, translation, re-definition, decolonisation and conceptualisation. The main supposition for all those who ascribe importance to language-based techniques is that language is central to the unravelling of ideas and the study of reality. The popular language-based techniques are analysis and hermeneutics. In this work, we shall discuss in addition, transliteration and intellectual decolonisation. The question then is; is there a need for language-based creative techniques in the kindred disciplines that constitute African studies? The answer from our point of view is yes. The reason is not far-fetched. Language is central to thought - we think in languages before we pen down our thoughts. Employing a given language for scientific research enables it to develop its conceptual capacity and in turn, such a language enables its speakers to develop and promote their culture and intellectual history. It is in this connection that Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981) and Euphrase Kezilahabi (1985) argue that doing African scholarship in African languages constitute a form of liberation for the African idea or the decolonisation of the African mind. Rianna Oelofsen reinforces this position when she argues that the development of concepts rooted in African languages and culture can inspire the decolonisation of the African intellectual landscapes i.e. the universities and other institutions of knowledge production, which will lead to the decolonisation of the African mind (2015,130). We can argue that it is for the reason of the importance of language that Wiredu identifies it as the first intellectual pillar to be decolonised (1993 & 2002). Evidently, once African studies are done in African languages as wa Thiong’o and Kezilahabi recommend, or at least are used for conceptualisations as Wiredu and

Oelofsen recommend, it will be fairly easy to develop a language-based technique that would not only promote African studies but tell the African story in literature and history and frame the African idea in philosophy and other disciplines. But it is hard to justify a programme that completely displaces colonial languages which are used in Africa as the language of our study as wa Thiong'o and Kezilahabi recommend. For example, the very structure of what is today Africa and its territorial realities are defined by colonial linguistic preferences. If one is to embrace wa Thiong'o's and Kezilahabi's insight, how then should current African societies be structured? What is Nigeria today or Ghana if not a linguistic representation of ideas of the colonial powers that birthed these new politico-economic geographical realities? In this regard, we may be content with conceptual decolonisation pending such a time one or more African languages attain wide geographic spread.

A language-based technique eminently involves the Western-styled method of analysis but there may be tension as to the suitability of an alien method in African philosophising, specifically the method of analysis. A number of African scholars have argued that articulating fresh methods for African studies is important whether or not the Western methodic accumulations are adequate (See OSUAGWU 1999; CHIMAKONAM 2017). Their hunch is that method is cardinal to the location of thought because it defines how a people view and relate to reality and if African studies were to be done using Western developed methods, it would be like studying reality through the Western lens. However, there are others who think that this problem does not exist (See JANZ 1997; AGADA 2015). The suggestion is that even if the African scholar employs a Western method, the worldview corpus he works with and his mindset are still African; method is just a framework and does not necessarily determine the raw materials, the research goal and the outcome. Therefore, the methodic requirement for them is unnecessary. Alena Rettova in a way argues that the presence of the method of analysis in African studies should not constitute grounds for worry if we are to base the method on African languages. The main worry should be about the postcolonial reality in which scholarship in Africa and by Africans is done using alien languages. As she put it:

Since the beginning of the development of the corpus of the African philosophical writing, African philosophy has been written exclusively in European languages. African philosophers write in English, in French, in Portuguese, in German, in Latin, and if we may include the non-African authors who made substantial contribution to African philosophy and the languages into which the major works of

African philosophy were translated, we would arrive at a large number of European (and possibly, even Asian) languages, but very few, if any, African ones. (RETTOVA 2002, 129)

The above discovery by Rettova highlights the problem African intellectual culture face in the postcolonial era. As premium is placed on European languages in all the kindred disciplines in African studies, many African scholars and researchers have abandoned their native languages. This means that those languages cease to develop amounting to a great loss for Africa. Indeed, there are losses in terms of culture, originality of thought and intellectual history which makes the campaign to use African languages in African studies very important. But Rettova admits that there may be problems of limited syntax and reach with using African languages for robust intellectual research. This is certainly true and cannot be ignored but it is possible that syntax could be built and enlarged, although, the same may not be as easy for the problem of reach given that our world has transformed into a global village where Africa is not a major player economically, politically and diplomatically. In any case, we are not going to wade into this debate here as it constitutes unnecessary digression to our research purpose. What we want to establish in this short section is the necessity of language-based techniques in African studies, if without language, we may not be able to study and improve on what there is or create new concepts in order to advance research and human knowledge in different directions and fields. The problem is that while some insist that such techniques should be based on African languages, others do not see this as exceptionally necessary given the fact that African languages have very small reach. What appears important for the latter group is to be able to convey the African idea, and if we are in addition, able to develop our elementary concepts using African languages, that would be enough. Our concern in this work is whether such a technique has been devised that can aid African scholars not only to analyse reality, but to formulate new concepts or not. In the following two sections, we will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of some language-based techniques that have been developed and are now being employed in various disciplines in African studies with regards to the formulation of new concepts.

### **The Poverty of the Techniques of Hermeneutics and Transliteration in African Thought**

Hermeneutics as it is employed in African studies roughly consists in the use of philosophical tools such as language and logic to access and bring to light the ideas embedded in African worldviews. As Ademola

Fayemi puts it, “the concept of hermeneutics refers to the methodology of achieving a deeper understanding of materials such as symbols, culture, language and history through detailed interpretation” (2016, 7). Unfortunately, some find it difficult distinguishing the hermeneutical approach of African thinkers from the concern of those they ridicule as ethnophilosophers. They are all merely forms of cultural excavations, except that the former is critical and rigorous while the latter is not. Others think that the African hermeneuticians rely too heavily on Western conceptual frameworks. And this over reliance on Western concepts for this other group is not helpful to African studies. It would, they seem to think, hamper the development of original ideas in African studies. Some of its contemporary proponents include Theophilus Okere, Okonda Okolo and Tsenay Serequeberhan to name just the prominent ones. We will not discuss their ideas here because it will amount to a needless digression.

But, there are two ways of identifying the creative poverty of hermeneutics in African studies namely, interpretation and method. When a hermeneutician is working on selected cultural corpus, his foremost interest is to extract and present the philosophical elements in that culture. Some examples include, Innocent Onyewuenyi on the subject of reincarnation in Igbo culture (1996); Victor Ocaya on the subject of logic in Acholi language (2004) and Babalola Balogun on the subject of rights in Yoruba culture (2017). For lack of space, we will not be able to discuss these attempts in detail, but it is important to indicate that these scholars undertook hermeneutical exercises in their various cultures to unearth and synthesise epistemic formations embedded in those cultures. Methodologically, this process involves critical examinations of beliefs and practices some of which may have been unjustified in light of logic prior to the inquiries of the hermeneuticians. These critical examinations are then succeeded by expert judgment of the hermeneutician or the interpretation of the ideas he has uncovered, analysed and authenticated. No doubt, interpreting what is laden in a culture in light of logic as the hermeneuticians in African thought do, is not a trivial project if without it, we may not know or be able to lay claim to any worldview corpus as an epistemic legacy of our ancestors. Indeed, the hermeneutical inquiries in African philosophy and studies are important to strengthening the foundation of the disciplines and opening of new directions for research in the future of African studies as a whole. Think of the Great Debate during which some Western iconoclasts attempted to deny the practice of philosophy to Africans and the presence of logic in African languages; it is only a hermeneutical exercise that can neutralise this type of objection and they did. Even in the years following the end of the debate and up to this day,

hermeneutical approach remains viable and needful. It is hard to claim that all of Africa's pre-colonial thoughts have been analysed and uncovered. Innocent Asouzu (2004, 132-138) describes in an interesting detail that those he calls the anonymous traditional African philosophers were very productive and creative centuries ago. Their ideas whether in the fields of anthropology, sociology, languages, religion or philosophy, still resurface in speech, proverbs and various cultural practices in Africa today. Most of these ideas are captured and studied in the field of African oral literature. It is the hermeneutician that can study and bring them to light once again and for them, hermeneutics remains a viable approach in African studies. For example, the African philosopher, historian, religionist, linguist and even the oral literature expert, employs it one way or the other to carry out his studies of African worldview.

However, the activity of interpretation (or the fleshing out of philosophic ideas from the worldview corpus) and the method of analysis that undergirds it, still come short of the creative spark needed in African studies. This is because; scholarship is not exhausted in dusting up what is embedded in a culture, it necessarily has to extend into conceptual formulation. Until African scholars for example, unveil new concepts, their discipline may not make the desired progress. It may also be insightful to indicate that the importance of framing concepts in native African languages cannot be gainsaid. It is the language of conceptualisation that shapes concepts and imbue them with ideas and meanings. African languages therefore, will generate concepts with African culture-inspired ideas and meanings. The problem however, is that from the way the African hermeneuticians—those that work on the doctrine and others that work on the method—employ and utilise the approach of hermeneutics, one can see very little room for conceptual formulation, and this critique applies to the likes of Okere, Okolo and Serequeberhan to name just a few.

We turn now to transliteration. This is an approach some African scholars employ in presenting what they think are African versions of Western ideas. It is a very controversial method in the sense that it means two different things to two opposed groups in African thought namely, the idealists and the practicalists. The idealists are of the view that the 'ideal' way to do authentic African scholarship is to gestate original ideas. Any idea that is not original to the African researcher that produced it should not be treated as a corpus in African thought. The idealists claim that what African scholars who adapt ideas that already exist in Western scholarship do is mere transliteration. They describe this procedure as a cheap and parasitic strategy—a form of intellectual theft. Some members of the idealist group include Innocent

Asouzu, Jurgen Hengelbrock and Heinz Kimmerle to name just a few. While Asouzu (2007, 27-35, 287-291) regard and criticise the endeavours of these African scholars as copycat scholarship, Hengelbrock and Kimmerle variously castigate it as lacking in intellectual originality (ASOUZU 2007, 13-35). African scholars like Kwame Nkrumah (Consciencism), Leopold Senghor (Negritude) and Julius Nyerere (Ujamaa) who variously developed what can be called African versions of socialism, a political and economic ideology already systematised in the West are accused of transliteration. But this accusation of transliteration cannot be in terms of concepts because; consciencism, negritude and ujamaa have not been borrowed from the West; it is the doctrine of socialism, which they claim to Africanise, that may be guilty of transliteration. What is implied is that a good number of African scholars today indulge in one form of copycat or the other when they appropriate and present ideas that are developed in Western thought and label it African. It is in this connection that Kimmerle suggests in the preface he wrote for Sophie Oluwole's book that the latter discussed ideas that have already been exhausted in Western thought (OLUWOLE 1999, xiv), which is an indirect way of calling Oluwole a copycat.

For the other group we call the practicalists, they defend their method as proper. They claim that what they do is practical suggesting that there is no need to waste time and energy dwelling in the ideal. Philosophy for example is a universal language spoken in different dialects in different places. What matters is not the similarity of ideas and method but a proof that other peoples have something to offer too. Our ideas, for these scholars need not be different after all, we are all human beings faced with similar challenges across the world. Scholars in one corner of the world can appropriate ideas from their counterparts in another corner insofar as they can establish that the impulse that jolted them and the outcome show a significant and unique experience. In this light, they would argue that Consciencism, Negritude and Ujamaa may be versions of Socialism but they are not Western; they are rather African versions. This alone, the practicalists claim, makes them original to Africa. They find support in Janz's explanation that "to require African philosophy to come up with a new and unique method in order to be called philosophy is an unfair requirement" (1997, 234). Thus, the practicalists are not denying appropriating ideas and methods from Western scholarship, what they deny is the accusation that what they do amounts to transliterating or copying their Western counterpart. It is only practical to employ an existing method in order to reach a quick, African-styled outcome and there is nothing shameful or degrading about that. On the whole, they reject the labels of

transliterators and copycats and would rather describe themselves with the flamboyant name, the practicalists.

However, even if we grant the defence mounted by the practicalists, that what they do does not amount to transliterating or copying of Western ideas, it is still a “shortcut way” of doing African studies, and as such, it is hard to see how such a strategy that involves borrowing both ideas and methods can yield original ideas for any field of African studies. When one borrows ideas, methods and the likes, what other new thing can such a strategy produce? Creatively, we can see the poverty of transliteration which opts for adaptation of borrowed ideas into another intellectual tradition. One obvious point to make is that the practicalists have little or no intention of formulating original concepts to be used in explicating thoughts; they simply appropriate relevant ones from alien traditions to carry out their inquiries and this is hardly original or even innovative.

In the last three decades or so, African philosophy for example, has progressed seemingly through crude trial and error techniques. Some of these techniques have close affinity with language like hermeneutics and even transliteration. However, some now think these techniques are creatively limited and have often led to a proliferation of unoriginal endeavours. Recently, some African thinkers have begun to explore new techniques that are, for want of a better word, manipulative. Prominent among these are Kwasi Wiredu’s conceptual decolonisation and Kwesi Tsri’s conceptual liberation. In manipulating concepts, hermeneutics and transliteration engender scenarios in which the use of linguistic strategy, either to interpret worldviews or copy alien ideas makes it difficult, if not impossible for the users to communicate new ideas. In the kindred disciplines in African studies as we have explained, while hermeneutics is used to interpret old ideas, transliteration is employed to restate foreign ideas; both, therefore, represent a form of recycling wherein new ideas are not created.

African studies on the contrary require a creative spark that involves the production of concepts and the opening of new thought vistas as a minimum to make the needed progress that can advance the intellectual history of the African peoples. For the sheer lack of this creative spark which we have established above, both hermeneutics and transliteration are inadequate to drive the progress of the kindred disciplines in African studies. It is for this reason that the creators of the projects of conceptual decolonisation as well as conceptual liberation praise them as the veritable strategies that can make up for the lack of creative spark in hermeneutics and transliteration. In the next section, we shall discuss these two new strategies under the emblem of intellectual decolonisation.

**The Problem with the Technique of Intellectual Decolonisation**

The proponents of intellectual decolonisation may argue that most postcolonial African intellectuals who engage in hermeneutical exercises are entrapped in the recycling of old ideas when they present their findings. If the thoughts they produce managed to scale the huddle of mere interpretation of the voices of the tribe using alien conceptual framework, they would immediately be trapped in the mire of transliteration. Either way, they are caught in the web of complete dependence on Western conceptual accumulation. Thus, they identify lack of originality—the production of new ideas in the form of new concepts or new theories which can be credited to specific individuals—as one of the main problems of the postcolonial African intellectual place. It is for this reason that they formulate the strategies of conceptual decolonisation and conceptual liberation as possible solutions. But again, it is difficult to argue satisfactorily that hermeneutics is conceptually barren as we see in the above, thereby raising a red flag as to the veracity and justification for their projects. If such a justification exists, it must be hinged on the capacity of their strategies to make original contributions to the contemporary African studies for example. As it stands, neither Wiredu's nor Tsri's strategy offers any real in-roads into conceptual articulations, let alone proffer a clear description of how this could be done.

There are today, three main originators of intellectual decolonisation in African studies. Among African philosophers, the Ghanaian thinker Kwasi Wiredu is associated with the birth of what he calls “conceptual decolonisation” (1980b). In African literature, Chinweizu Ibekwe, Jamie Onwuchekwa and Ihechukwu Madubuike are noted for what they describe as “Decolonization of African Literature” (1980). Finally, the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o is known to promote the cliché - “Decolonizing the Mind” (1981) in the field of languages. It is important to observe that these are all strands of intellectual decolonisation and as such, share some elements in common. We will briefly highlight these similarities before singling out Wiredu's version for discussion.

Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa and Madubuike (1980), in their seminal work, [Toward the Decolonization of African Literature] believe that African literature is under attack from Eurocentric criticisms, which would want it to comply with European concepts and canons that are clearly irrelevant to the literature, its experiential features, world-view and aesthetic values. The intention of such imperialist criticisms is to lure African literature into Eurocentric aping upon the false premise of a universal literary culture which, in truth, is essentially European. Thus, African literature not only loses its

independence but also both its uniqueness and vibrancy. European critical issues are inflicted upon African literary criticism, with the active connivance of African scholars, even when such issues bear no relevance to the African literary experience. All these are manifested in the uncritical desire of such scholars to gain acceptability and recognition from imperialist Europe, whose canons and thought processes they graft unto African literature.

Chinweizu, n.d.n., believe that European critics reserve the right to interpret their literature to their European audience but do not have the right to interpret or determine how African literature should be interpreted to the African audience. The African critic must therefore liberate himself from his “mesmerisation” with Europe and its abstract, obfuscatory critical canons which mystify rather than elucidate African literature and its scholarship. Authentic African literary criticism, they believe, should interrogate the work of art in terms of its relevance to the thinking, tradition, values and experiences of the society it applies to. It should draw its material and sensibilities from the African world and its experiences; its forms, concepts, generic considerations and even criticism must be derived from the people’s unique understanding and aesthetic values. Otherwise, the outcome would remain the grovelling consolidation of the existing destructive colonial mentality which compels literary scholars to see African literature from the prism of European literary canons and aesthetic values.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1981), on his part, shares the views of the troika above but sees both the problem and its solution as being deeply set in the language of education and socialisation, which constitutes a lethal weapon of both mental colonisation and liberation rolled into one, depending on who wields the weapon. While the imperialist deploys his language as a strategic weapon of mental enslavement, the enslaved ought to deploy his own indigenous language as a weapon for his mental liberation. wa Thiong’o underlines the main thrust of his quest as he dedicates his work to: “... all those who write in African languages, and to all those who over the years have maintained the dignity of the literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African languages” (1981, iv).

Essentially, he recognises the inherent power of language as a vehicle that encapsulates and transports culture and its world-view, including the thought processes of its speakers. It explains the cunning strategy by which the imperialists ensured that Africa learnt to define itself in terms of the language of their colonial masters: English, French, Spanish, etc. The result is that the writings of Africans are done in English and those other imperialist foreign languages with the sad implication that the cultures and thought processes they bear are

superimposed on the Western educated Africans. These, then, extend the mental colonisation to upcoming generations of Africans who read and are further mis-educated by them. In other words, colonisation of the mind is in itself a language-based strategy which can be effectively countered by another language-based strategy that pushes back and engenders a reversal through sustained return to the indigenous language of the colonised mind.

wa Thiong'o therefore rejects the claims of such scholars as Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara that the foreign language of their education is their 'inheritance' which they can and should twist and bend to accommodate and effectively express their unique African indigenous experiences. By struggling to figure out how "best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience", wa Thiong'o believes that the African writer ends up doing violence to the African languages, as they 'prey' on the "proverbs and other peculiarities of African speech and folklore", while enriching the borrowed languages (1981, 9). While it is a creative yield for the borrowed languages and the cultures which they carry, it offers nothing in return to the victimised African languages and cultures. He rather shares in the conviction of Obi Wali whose warning he quotes: "...the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture". Indeed, until African writers accept that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would merely be pursuing a dead end (1981, 28). He calls for a "rediscovery and resumption" of African indigenous languages and leads by reliance on his own indigenous language for his future writings, as part of the larger regenerative struggle for cultural, intellectual and other forms of liberation.

Thus said, we now turn to Wiredu who argues that the future of African philosophy lies in decolonising familiar concepts such as truth, reality, being, etc. The Great Debate in African philosophy which lasted nearly three decades was not a waste of time though, according to Wiredu, but it was time to take the next bold step and conceptual decolonisation is a veritable option. If for nothing else, the debate drew our attention to the dangers of bad philosophy or the type of thought Paulin Hountondji ridiculed as ethnophilosophy. As Wiredu put it, Hountondji has been wrongly accused of denying African philosophy or that Africans can do philosophy or even that ethnophilosophy was a kind of philosophy, whereas all he said was that ethnophilosophy was a bad philosophy (2002, 53 fn 2). This very point that ethnophilosophy is a bad type of philosophy was the centrepiece of the arguments of all those who call themselves members of the universalist or modernist or

professional school of thought in the history of African philosophy. For Wiredu therefore, African thinkers are not just after doing African philosophy; they are after doing a good African philosophy and conceptual decolonisation is a precondition for that objective (2002, 56). Wiredu identifies two aspects of conceptual decolonisation, one negative and the other positive:

On the negative side, I mean avoiding or reversing through a critical conceptual self-awareness the unexamined assimilation in our thought (that is, in the thought of contemporary African philosophers) of the conceptual frameworks embedded in the foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought. And, on the positive side, I mean exploiting as much as is judicious the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes in our philosophical meditations on even the most technical problems of contemporary philosophy. (WIREDU 1996, 136)

From the above, Wiredu, in a latter work, defines conceptual decolonisation as “the elimination from our thoughts of modes of conceptualization that came to us through colonization and remain in our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices” (WIREDU 2002, 56). Wiredu thus blames the tendency to do nothing as the main factor that continues to entrench colonial mentality in African studies as a whole. One effective means for overcoming colonial influence in doing African philosophy for Wiredu is his strategy of conceptual decolonisation which involves disrobing concepts of their foreign accretions and looking at them from the lens of African native languages. But even Wiredu himself admits that applying conceptual decolonisation is not going to be as easy as it sounds because African philosophers philosophise mainly in foreign languages. He explains that “languages (in their natural groupings) carry their own kinds of philosophical suggestiveness, which foreign as well as native speakers are apt to take for granted” (2002, 56). Wiredu argues that if one is by virtue of colonial history trained right from childhood in a foreign language and learned to philosophise in such a foreign language, then he would perceive the foreign way of thinking as natural and thus would not even realise that such ways of thinking may not be natural to him as someone from a different culture, specifically an African culture. As a result, Wiredu exclaims that the African philosopher who is entangled in a colonial language might not even be aware of the likely neo-colonial aspects of his conceptual framework. The solution according to Wiredu is for African philosophers to try to philosophise “in their own

vernaculars even if they still have to expound their results in some Western language” (2002, 56-57).

This all sounds very attractive but the challenge is not necessarily how exactly is one going to think in his native language but specifically how to disrobe regular philosophical concepts like existence, truth, object, substance, quality, belief, fact, idea, and indeed the entire collection of concepts Wiredu<sup>1</sup> listed of their so-called foreign or better still, Western appendages. Wiredu<sup>2</sup> himself attempted doing this with the concept of mind in his native Akan language but as far as we can see, what he did that was new was to find Akan language cognate for mind which he says is *adwene*. His argument that *adwene* does not translate to any type of substance let alone a spiritual one *ala* Descartes, but to ‘capacity’ is hardly satisfactory. This is because; it does not require a custodian of Akan language and custom to know that ‘capacity’ cannot be independent of substance. It is something—an epistemic agent—that must be referred to as possessing a certain “capacity”. In fact, if Wiredu claims that mind in Akan translates to capacity, one must be compelled to ask him, capacity from what? In claiming that the idea of mind in Akan is something akin to capacity rather than to a substance is suspect even to those of us who are not native speakers of Akan language. This is new evidence that makes conceptual decolonisation more doubtful than ever on which one can stand and argue that the value of the thesis of conceptual decolonisation lies more in its very beautiful statement than in its practical utility; which is why we describe it as involving conceptual manipulation.

Not everyone will subscribe to our conclusion. Unfortunately, some scholars still find conceptual decolonisation appealing for example, it inspired Kwesi Tsri to develop conceptual liberation as recently as 2016. others like Mary Carman (2016) and Oladele Balogun (2018) are all contemporary advocates of conceptual decolonisation. We will come to Tsri’s conceptual liberation shortly but first, let us discuss the convictions of Carman and Balogun regarding the viability of conceptual decolonisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Wiredu, Kwasi. “The need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy”. Presented at the UNESCO sponsored conference on Post- Colonial African Philosophy, held in Vienna, Austria, October 22-24, 1993. Published by permission in [Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy: Four Essays] by Kwasi Wiredu, selected and introduced by Olusegun Oladipo. Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Wiredu, Kwasi. “The Concept of Mind with particular reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans”, reprinted in G. Floistad, ed., Contemporary Philosophy, vol. 5: African Philosophy. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987.

Since the days of Olusegun Oladipo (1996, 2002), the well-known early defender of Wiredu's conceptual decolonisation, not much has been seen in terms of vocal scholarly support or defence of Wiredu until Carman's recent publication. Carman began her defence by insisting that the call for intellectual decolonisation going on in various universities in Africa aimed at revising what we research and teach, is a challenge that should be taken seriously and ought to be taken up by those working in African philosophy and philosophy in Africa, more generally. She adopts the strand by Wiredu called conceptual decolonisation which she seeks to defend from two categories of objections namely, decolonisation and methodology. Carman found these two categories of objections in the critical animadversions by Sanya Osha (1999, 2005), Innocent Asouzu (2007) and Mesembe Edet (2015). In the first category, Carman claims that critics argue to the "effect that Wiredu fails to take into account literature that we might think is necessary background for a project of conceptual decolonization...As a result, the worry is that it is not clear that Wiredu's project is really one of decolonization. Or, if it is, it is badly conceptualized." In the second category, Carman claims that "because Wiredu's project is badly conceptualized, the methodologies he proposes, of critical reflection, evaluation and synthetisation, are problematic for a project of decolonization because they risk undermining the very aim of the project" (2016, 236). These two problems tend to portray Wiredu's project as unhelpful in decolonising African philosophy, but Carman argues that the criticisms are misdirected and unfair. To the former, she admits that Wiredu might not have engaged with the postcolonial literature on decolonisation or the self-critical literature within the Western traditions, but it does not deny the project its connection with decolonisation or even invalidate it as something that was badly conceptualised. To the latter, Carman clarifies that Wiredu's affirmation of cognitive universals is a defence of a robust methodology which need not undermine the project as one of decolonisation. On the whole, Carman argues that when combined with critical literature that addresses decolonisation as well as the post-colony, the basic tool in Wiredu's project which is critical reflection can be a helpful procedure in tackling the challenges of decolonising African philosophy and philosophy generally.

Besides Carman, Oladele Balogun is the other recent promoter of Wiredu's version of intellectual decolonisation. Balogun mounts a defence of conceptual decolonisation as a viable option in contemporary African philosophy claiming that political colonialism may have ended but mental colonialism has taken over. Mental colonialism for him involves an uncritical assimilation of the conceptual schemes embedded

in foreign languages and culture, in the way of life of contemporary Africans. For him “one of the major preoccupations of the contemporary African philosophers should be the task of conceptual decolonization...Such a task is unavoidable in Africa today because many of the problems of self-understanding and other predicaments experienced on the continent are closely connected with the uncritical super-imposition of alien categories of thought on African conceptual understanding” (2018, 275). For this reason, African philosophers have a responsibility to decolonise the conceptual accumulation in the discipline, tap into the linguistic and cultural appurtenances of the various African peoples and re-create an intellectual culture that would be truly African.

Despite the defence of Wiredu’s project above, we think that the fact that it entails manipulation of concepts, constitutes sufficient and new ground to doubt its veracity and not just its viability as earlier critics tend to focus on. The substance of conceptual manipulation will be discussed below. In the same way, we want to indicate that Tsri’s project is also guilty of manipulating concepts.

Tsri wants us to hoot for what he calls conceptual liberation, much like the revolutionary mantra of a deluded Marxist, but the question is; what does this really mean in practical terms? He gave an exciting example with the concept ‘black’ no doubt, in his book [Africans are not Black: The Case for Conceptual Liberation]. However, whatever he set out to achieve with his strategy of conceptual liberation was either lost in the arguments of the book itself or not clearly presented. What he consistently argued for was that the use of the colour ‘black’ to categorise Africans should be discontinued because; the concept black is racist. Africa, and indeed, Africans cannot truly be liberated when such concepts are employed to describe or categorise them as a section of humanity. As one reads the nine-chapter book, s/he struggles in vain to see a real example of conceptual liberation. To make matters worse, there is no place in the 191-page book where the author clearly offered a clear discussion of what he calls conceptual liberation except for passages that equated it with wa Thiong’o’s programme of decolonising the mind. So, how are the readers supposed to know what is implied by this exotic concept? As a matter of fact, the only passage with as little as a clear statement of what conceptual liberation might imply simply glossed over what is claimed to be the goal of the book. To be specific, Tsri states that “The ultimate liberative goal of this book, based on these findings, is to call into question the categorical use of the term ‘black’ and to advance a case for a conceptual liberation of those whose humanity have been imprisoned in the odious concept ‘black’ for centuries” (2016, 172). This is a brave and audacious undertaking, one

must admit but perhaps, another instalment of the book is required to clear the clouds gathered by the present book.

From the above, we can see that Tsri's idea of conceptual liberation is about banning certain racist concepts that degrade Africans. So, the liberation in question is not from a human agency who is callous and unfeeling. This is curious because it animates the affected concepts in the sense that the concept black for instance, is treated as a rational agent who dominates, subjugates and dehumanises the African. What is implausible in Tsri's articulation is that blame is misallocated. Instead of liberating Africans from a section of humanity who use the odious concepts to categorise them, Tsri advocates liberation from those concepts as if to say the concepts in themselves are epistemic agents. This is why we observe that what Tsri has indulged in is a form of conceptual manipulation. Granted that people like Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1993) and Judith Butler (1990/1999) may have suggested the epistemic agency of words and concepts as played out in the conception of the feminine, Tsri's programme, given the circumstance and context, would have done better by imposing culpability on human agents who consciously create and deploy the racist concepts rather than on the concepts themselves.

What we call conceptual manipulation has two senses; (1) when an actor manipulates a concept to change it from what it means in a given language group to what he wants it to be and still attribute it to that language group, and (2) when an actor manipulates a concept in such a way that he gives it agency and culpability. While Wiredu's conceptual decolonisation pertains to the first sense, Tsri's conceptual liberation pertains to the second.

To the first, Wiredu is guilty of manipulating concepts in the sense that he takes a concept like mind in the philosophy of the colonisers and looks for its cognate in an African language. Since the meaning of the concept in the philosophy he regards as that of the colonisers is already known, Wiredu attempts to manipulate the cognate he has identified in his Akan language to negate the meaning of the concept in Western philosophy. Concepts are central to the business of philosophy. In fact, Janz has powerfully declared that "The life-blood of African philosophy (as with any philosophy) is the generation of new concepts adequate to an intellectual milieu" (2014, 9). One may argue that this was what Wiredu did with the concept of *adwene* but this is not the case because; Wiredu clearly presents *adwene* as an Akan concept defined by the Akan people following the elementary linguistic rules in Akan language and not as a new concept defined by him. *Adwene* is not a concept in philosophy generally, it is not even a known or existing concept in African philosophy; but Wiredu presents it as an existing

concept in Akan thought defined by the Akan people. Yet, at the same time, he defends it as if it is his own idea. Following the latter impression, one can say that it is Wiredu's brainchild, defined and conceptualised by him. Inasmuch as this procedure is in order, what Wiredu did that was wrong was to present his own conceptualisation as though it was the general idea and understanding of the Akan people as a whole. That *adwene* is defined as a 'capacity' and not a substance, is Wiredu's idea craftily attributed to the Akans. Kwame Gyekye, a fellow Ghanaian philosopher who speaks the Akan language like Wiredu has in another context drawn attention to the fact that Wiredu may be misrepresenting the Akan understanding of certain concepts. For example, Ajume Wingo curiously observed that Wiredu's account of the Akan concept of person is different from the one his countryman Gyekye presented (WINGO 2006). Is it possible then that Wiredu might be manipulating concepts to mean what he wants them to mean as opposed to what they actually mean within the Akan language scheme? This is our suspicion here, one we have demonstrated with his claim that mind for the Akan people means something like 'capacity' rather than a substance. What makes us to fault Wiredu's strategy is that common-sense tells us that capacity cannot stand on its own because it is something possessed by something else and the possessor necessarily has to be substantial.

To the second, Tsri is also guilty of manipulation of concept in the sense of treating them as possessing moral agency which they do not possess. Concepts, despite their powerful influence in thought still fall short of moral agency. They are powerful and critical to the intellectual discourse, yet, concepts are not humans and humans are not concepts. Tsri's project treats concepts as if they were moral agents. The central advocacy of conceptual liberation is the liberation of Africans from the grip of racist concepts. It is hard to see how concepts are to blame here or how they imprisoned Africans. Clearly, concepts, no matter how odious do not conceptualise and use themselves. It is humans—entities with moral agency that formulate concepts from the elementary linguistic rules of a specific intellectual milieu. Thus, Tsri's project on conceptual liberation is badly conceptualised. It does not make sense to say that certain concepts like black, Negro, etc., are holding Africans in chains and that Africans should seek liberation from the concepts. What it makes sense to say, is that one should seek liberation from a group of people who formulate and use such concepts to categorise Africans in a degrading manner. What Tsri did on the contrary is mere manipulation of concepts.

## Conclusion

In sum, we proffered strong arguments to show that merely interpreting extant cultural corpus or copying alien intellectual legacy will not be enough to move African thought forward. We also looked at the criticisms which Osha, Asouzu and Edet levelled on the strategy of intellectual decolonisation, specifically that of Wiredu and attempted to go beyond them to provide new reasons to doubt the veracity of the strategies that manipulate concepts especially, again, that of Wiredu which some contemporary scholars like Oladipo, Balogun and Carman still find appealing.

What we have done in the above is to show that; (1) certain popular language-based techniques in African studies such as hermeneutics, transliteration and intellectual decolonisation are incapable of driving the progress of the various disciplines in African intellectual landscape, (2) the two prominent strands of intellectual decolonisation considered in this work namely, Wiredu's conceptual decolonisation and Tsri's conceptual liberation did not and were shown to be incapable of remedying the creative weakness in hermeneutics and transliteration. We tried to proffer new reasons why the two strands of intellectual decolonisation remain doubtful. Specifically, we showed that the two strands by Wiredu and Tsri respectively, above all else, amount to mere manipulation of concepts and makes no creative contribution to African studies. Our conclusion is that there is a need for creative language-based procedures that can drive progress in African studies through conceptualisation in various African vernaculars but that the three techniques considered in this work do not meet the requirement. We, therefore, call on African scholars that specialise in language-related areas to pick up this gauntlet.

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