

Africa and her Challenge to Modernity *

by

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The topic I propose to discuss is here “Africa and her Challenge to Modernity”. To talk of Africa and her challenge to modernity enfolds many possibilities but it is not without conundrums. These are not quite hospitable times to talk about modernity, unless of course one were merely interested in restating the usual patter about what modernity has done to Africa and like attitudes. That is not what I propose to do in what follows. Additionally, to talk of Africa’s challenge to modernity, one might have the impression that Africa is external to modernity, has no truck with it in some manner of speaking and is daring modernity. This, too, will not be a fruitful tack to take. What then gives?

In my view, Africa’s challenge to modernity is related to another challenge that I had slightly over ten years ago identified in respect of Africa and Philosophy in my essay, “Exorcising Hegel’s Ghost: Africa’s Challenge to Philosophy”¹. There I lamented, but also spiritedly challenged, the exclusion of African phenomena from the province of the discipline of philosophy. I traced the mindset that always locked Africa away in a box marked “DIFFERENT”, and placed any discourse about Africa beyond the pale of the discourse of the rest of humanity to the blood libel that Hegel executed in his *Lectures in the Philosophy of World History*², a text much celebrated by philosophers everywhere. I argued there that that mindset has dominated and continues to dominate the ideological understanding of Africa’s place in the concert of humanity. Not much has changed since then. In this discussion, I wish to extend the same consideration to the issue of Africa’s place in modernity. So, when I speak of Africa’s challenge to modernity it is to be understood in the following general terms:

1. What have been the relations between Africa and modernity?
2. How have Africa and its phenomena featured in the discourse of modernity?
3. Why should we care about these questions?

Before we answer these questions, it is proper that we outline the main tenets of modernity that will frame our discussion. We work with a very historicized and, therefore, narrow conception of modernity. Modernity refers to that movement of ideas, practices and institutions that originated in Europe the roots of which are generally traced to the Renaissance, moving through the voyages of Discovery, the Reformation and the Enlightenment. It gave us such milestones as the English Civil War and Act of Settlement of 1701, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, as well as Capitalism. But, it is modernity’s philosophical discourse that interests us because, ultimately, its most lasting impact has not been that it enabled us to build nuclear weapons or send humans into space. Rather, in creating and widely disseminating a new and radically different view of human nature unique to it, and creating the kinds of values, practices and institutions promotive of the efflorescence of this specific mode of being human, modernity represents an epoch all its own in the history of human evolution.

I work with a rather benign—others will consider it rather sanguine, given the current debates about its worth—conception of modernity. Various components make up the modern

way of life. The first is a philosophical anthropology succinctly described by G.W.F. Hegel as “the principle of subjectivity”. According to Hegel,

the principle of the modern world is freedom of subjectivity, the principle that all the essential factors present in the intellectual whole are now coming into their right in the course of their development. Starting from this point of view, we can hardly raise the idle question: Which is the better form of government, monarchy or democracy? We may only say that all constitutional forms are one-sided unless they can sustain in themselves the principle of subjectivity and know how to correspond with a matured rationality.³

He expounded the idea further at #124:

The right of the subject’s particularity, his right to be satisfied, or in other words the right of subjective freedom, is the pivot and centre of the difference between antiquity and modern times. This right in its infinity is given expression in Christianity and it has become the universal effective principle of a new form of civilization. Amongst the primary shapes which this right assumes are love, romanticism, the quest for the eternal salvation of the individual, &c.; next come moral convictions and conscience; and, finally, the other forms, some of which come into prominence in what follows as the principle of civil society and as moments in the constitution of the state, while others appear in the course of history, particularly the history of art, science, and philosophy.⁴

Although Hegel goes on to derive civil society and, subsequently, the state from this basis, it is only insofar as this principle is also the basis of the individualist anthropology that defines modern times that it is of interest to us. The centrality of the individual to the dominant forms of social living in modern society and its associated derivative notions of civic, moral and legal responsibility are manifestations of what Hegel celebrates as the triumph of subjectivity. The sociological concomitant of this metaphysical principle is individualism.

No doubt, the idea of individualism predated the modern age. My contention is that (1) the notion of the individual that is dominant in the modern age is without precedent, at least in the Euro-American tradition from which the remaining parts of the world who have embraced modernity extracted it; and (2) it is under the modern regime that individualism is the preferred principle of social ordering and almost everything else is understood in terms of how well or ill it serves the interests of the individual. Thus, although it is true that there was some recognition of the individual in pre-modern epochs, it is in the modern epoch that the individual is not merely supreme; whatever detracts from the rights of the individual is, precisely for that reason, to be rejected.

This notion of the individual took a long time to emerge but it received one of its most dramatic consecrations in the Protestant Reformation when the subject, that is, the individual, was made the centrepiece of Christian soteriology. The subject must win eternity for himself, helped of course by grace. One’s genealogy, status and similar attributes counted for nothing or, at least theoretically, ought to count for nothing in the allocation of goods, services, or even recognition. The key element is that of individual striving, what the individual makes of herself

and whatever talent she is endowed with by Nature. To this principle we trace the Merit Principle; the meritocracy that promises rewards to individuals according as they show themselves worthy, by developing their talents. One consequence of the focus on the individual in the modern state is that no longer are individuals' futures determined by the circumstances of their birth. Humans can abridge status, class, and other boundaries, as long as they are willing to improve themselves enough to fit them for whatever station they aspire to occupy. One can easily see how racism and sexism, wherever they exist, subvert this modern orientation.

The second component that interests us here is a social ontology respecting the relation between the individual and the community, manifested in the peculiar bifurcation between the state and civil society. It is the basis for probably the most dramatic innovation brought by modernity in its wake: the principle of governance by consent. I refer to the central tenet of political theory in the modern age under which no one ought to acknowledge the authority of, or owe an obligation to obey, any government in the constitution of which he or she has played no part. That is, no government is legitimate to which the governed have not consented. When the American revolutionaries first used this principle as their rallying cry in 1776, it was the first culmination of a new principle of legitimacy, the philosophical grounds of which had been foreshadowed in the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and others. From that point on, whether it was in the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, the much less abrupt transfer of power from the monarch and the nobility to the House of Commons in Britain, the authority of every ruler by the grace of God, or by reason of birth, was vulnerable to the challenge posed by the new thinking concerning the issue of who ought to rule when not all can rule.

A third component is a philosophy of time concerning the relations among the past, the present, and the future. It is a horizon that is always open to the future; one in which things never are, they are always becoming. This yields a near obsession with the 'new' in the modern age. Change is celebrated for its own sake and the best is forever yet to come. The ideological orientation built on this is the abiding faith and almost unquestioning commitment to progress. The belief in progress, in its desirability, and its possibility is at the bottom of much of the restlessness of the modern age, in which nothing is regarded as settled and, as noted earlier, the best always is yet to come. Few are the inquiries made into the desirability of progress and to question change is to earn the scorn of the apostles of the modern age for whom rest is synonymous with decay and death.

Finally, we identify a social epistemology in which Reason plays a central role and knowledge is founded, not on revelation, tradition or authority, but on conformity with Reason. Modern society fancies itself as a society of knowledge, one in which the claims of tradition and authority do not mean much and every truth claim must be authenticated by Reason. Whoever can show that she has superior knowledge commands our assent and respect. This is contrasted with the pre-modern situation where authority went largely unchallenged, tradition reigned supreme and reason was appointed a handmaiden to Revelation. These four components conjointly make up the subject-matter of the philosophical discourse of modernity.⁵

We may now respond to the first of our three questions: What have been the relations between Africa and modernity? Rocky, to put it mildly. Here are a few assumptions that inform

my discussion, even though I do not defend any of them on this occasion. My relationship to modernity is fraught with ambivalence. I am either a savage critic of modernity or an overly enthusiastic defender of it. In this discussion, I am wearing my ambivalence hat and here is why. I do believe that modernity, in its Enlightenment Project inflection represents a giant leap forward in human history and that the gains it offers, had they been on the table in colonial Africa, would have made for a better life and more salubrious history than that bequeathed by colonialism in the continent. I assume that of many subject peoples in the world, Africans have borne, in a somewhat disproportionate manner, the burdens of modernity without ever having enjoyed its most important benefits. So, in a sense, what I am doing is arguing for the continuing relevance of modernity in the African situation. Yet, were this to be a different occasion, I would insist that even the best that modern society has to offer falls radically short of what would be the best life for humans and the best society to lead that life in.⁶

Why have the relations between Africa and modernity been rocky? The answer is a very simple one: because of the impact of colonialism. Colonialism? Yes, that is the simple answer. Certainly, Africans were not the only ones to have suffered the indignities and degradations of colonialism. The difference is that other ex-colonies have gone on to greater heights. India is a good example. Few will say that Nigeria and other ex-African colonies, with the possible exception of South Africa, have either thriving economies or can be adjudged modern states. Again, although many ex-colonies have managed to create polities marked by the rule of law and governance by consent, in spite of the fact that many African countries are now ostensibly under representative democracies, one will be hard put to call them modern polities. Why is this so?

It is time for us to rethink the relationship between modernity and colonialism in Africa. It is time to challenge the received wisdom that colonialism facilitated the introduction and installation of modernity in Africa. Were this to be true, the career of modernization processes in post-independence Africa ought to have been different. Given that it has been marked by failure, a fact that, in spite of recent gains in democratization and economic liberalization, continues to be reflected in the many books lamenting Africa's awful fate, we must ask why modernity - the essence that modernization processes seek to realize - has not taken hold in the continent.

If I may just seize this opportunity to point out a significant differential in the penetration of modern ideals in Nigeria and Jamaica, respectively, I would like to use the example of the fate of the army sergeant who slapped the civilian in that incident a few weeks ago at the residence of Luciano. The Jamaican army authorities immediately disciplined the non-commissioned officer and it made headlines in the papers and the incident was discussed in parliament. In Nigeria the officer would have to have killed the civilian and, even then, there is no guarantee that he would ever be punished for his action. Meanwhile, both countries operate a judicial system in which the accuser cannot at the same time be the judge. Nigeria is not atypical of the situation in the continent.

Why has modernity not taken root in the continent? Some might say that Africa is hostile to modernity and its presuppositions. Others might contend that Africans are congenitally incapable of working modernity. Both explanations have been canvassed in scholarly discussions in History, Political Science, and Political Economy about Africa's situation. Neither explanation is plausible. But making the case for their implausibility is not part of what I

propose to do here this evening. Rather, my aim is to argue that the kind of colonialism that took root in Africa ended up subverting modernity rather than enhancing it.

I am suggesting that when we think of the history of the relations between Africa and modernity, we should do so in the following terms: the Africa - modernity relation **before** colonialism and the same relation **after** colonialism. Why does it matter how we frame our understanding of the relation? Because what attitude we take towards the Africa - modernity relation is sure to be coloured by whether or not we apprehend this historiography and take its implications seriously. If we do, some of the conundrums associated with the relation will begin to make sense. For instance, the near total absence of the contributions of African intellectuals to the dominant narratives of the discourse of modernity will astound even more profoundly especially as it is clearer how the absence came to be constituted and why it persists. It will also place in clearer relief why it seems that the only relationship that African intellectuals at the present time can or do have with modernity is one of conflict rather than embrace.

And, finally, it will enable us to retrieve more aggressively those works by Africans of the period before colonialism who had made modernity their own and sought to remake their communities in its image. I must say that the track record of Caribbean scholars is far better in this respect. Works by Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Rupert Lewis, Lewis R. Gordon, C.L.R. James, Fitzroy Baptiste, Paget Henry, and Anthony Bogues, exploring the contributions of Caribbean thinkers attest to the correctness of my claim. As an element of a more complete intellectual history of the African world, such a move is to be commended on its own. As a way to equip our young with credible, because more grounded, alternatives to the penny a copy, flavour of the day approach to theory that many of us are goaded into by our lack of access to the fullness of our intellectual heritage, its value is inestimable. Needless to say, such a situation will augur well for relevant scholarship.

When colonialism was imposed on Africa, it was done, partly - I say partly because the main reason for colonialism in Africa was the exploitation of Africa's resources - in the name of bringing to Africans the fruits of civilization - a synonym for modernity in those days. Elsewhere I have shown the differences between the types of colonialism that obtained in the modern era. Here is how the arch-imperialist philosopher, Lord Lugard, put the philosophical justification for British colonialism. The title of his major work, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa*, itself is a short-hand description of what he took to be the charge that the British had in colonizing Africa. The 'dual mandate' refers to the responsibility that it had pleased God and history to bequeath to Great Britain, to make available to Europeans and the rest of humanity the riches and resources of Africa which, according to him,

lay wasted and ungarnered ... because the natives did not know their use and value. Millions of tons of oil-nuts, for instance, grew wild without the labour of man, and lay rotting in the forests. Who can deny the right of the hungry people of Europe to utilise the wasted bounties of nature, or that the task of developing these resources was, as Mr. Chamberlain expressed it, a 'trust for civilisation' and for the benefit of mankind?⁷

On the other hand, Great Britain must bring the light of civilization to the blighted heathenish peoples of the 'Dark Continent'.

As Roman imperialism laid the foundations of modern civilisation, and led the wild barbarians of these islands [Britain, that is] along the path of progress, so in Africa to-day we are repaying the debt, and bringing to the dark places of the earth, the abode of barbarism and cruelty, the torch of culture and progress, while ministering to the material needs of our own civilisation.⁸

Lugard voiced this common sentiment among Africa's colonizers more eloquently than any other.⁹

Even at the present time, it is not unusual for apologists of colonialism to claim that modernity represents part of colonialism's legacy in the African continent. But, if this is the case, then it is fair to expect that conditions on the continent will reflect some of the tenets that we identified above. Given that this definitely is not the case, we are then forced to conclude that the reason that modernity has not taken roots in the continent is because Africans are congenitally unable to embrace or work it, or there is something in the African soil and air that is inhospitable to modernity. I know that these are the standard ways of accounting for the rocky relation between Africa and modernity.

Africa's challenge to modernity, in part, requires the scholars of modernity, African and non-African like, to explore in more depth the **real** history of the genealogy of modernity in Africa. Such a perusal will show that at least in West Africa, before the imposition of formal colonialism, there had been Africans who, under the tutelage of Christian missions, had been inducted into modernity and had become apostles of the way of life it enjoined.¹⁰ They were frustrated in their efforts once colonialism was imposed and, this is very important, our current understanding of the relations between Africa and modernity has been framed by this colonial inflection.

This is an important point. When the initial crop of Africans to embrace modernity did so, they did, for the most part, with a view to marrying the best of their indigenous heritage with what they had imbibed from the missionary school of modernity. When they were supplanted by the racist band of colonial administrators and their allies in the trader and missionary communities, their capacity to influence the course of change in their territories became attenuated. On one hand, many of them gave up on the transition and embraced a very conservative agenda, which saw them seeking to restore so-called African values and practices with nary a critical consciousness. Others kept up their engagement with modernity and persisted in deepening their work on the transition. There is little doubt, however, that they no longer controlled the direction or pace of social change in the territories.

On the other hand, the new cohort of administrators, missionaries and traders disseminated the idea of the backwardness of African peoples which they traced to Africans' non-membership of the human community. As time went on, modernity, in the African imaginary, became one with that in the name of which they were imperialized and brutalized. Meanwhile, the education that was purveyed by racism-dominated colonial teachers ultimately extirpated the memory of the earlier African converts to modernity as builders or propagators of the modern way of life. In the consciousness of subsequent generations of educated Africans they merely survived as local pastors, not even missionaries. The fact that very few Nigerians

know more about Samuel Ajayi Crowther, than that he was “the slave boy who became bishop”, is the ultimate testament to how completely colonial mis-education structured the collective memory of educated Nigerians, to take a limited example.

By the time that independence was attained, African scholars had been manoeuvred into having a mainly antagonistic relationship to modernity which is conflated with all things Western. Bereft of the recollection of their forebears’ more creative and confident engagement with modernity, generations of African scholars in the post-independence period were dissuaded from embracing modernity as a matter of principle, only as one of expediency. That attitude continues to permeate the continent.

Let us take just one illustration: the principle of subjectivity and its sociological concomitant, individualism. Had the theorists and practitioners of colonialism adhered to their much-vaunted intention to transform the colonies and protectorates into modern polities and socialize their inhabitants into the modern way of life, I would like to argue, the history of the former colonies and protectorates would not be what it has been so far. First, the principle of subjectivity and its sociological concomitant, individualism, were not extended to the natives. In the colonial situation, as Frantz Fanon pointed out so poignantly, the native could not be an individual.¹¹ The native is a type and all differentiation is erased from native society. One cannot overemphasize this point. The explanation is very simple. There is an abiding belief, shared by Africans and non-Africans alike, that African societies are essentially communalistic and there is a fundamental reluctance to pollute these waters with any introduction of the bad philosophy of individualism. The continuing influence of the basic models disseminated by colonial anthropology is unmistakable here. This is a problematic characterization. It ignores the fact that what need to be accounted for when we investigate social forms are what type of individualism can be found in various societies, what indigenous nodes of individualist transformations are there to be isolated, and how those nodes were affected by colonialism. What is at issue is not whether there were forms of individualism in any but the most primitive societies, but what kind of individualism there is and what role it plays in social ordering. In addition, a blanket condemnation of individualism reinforces the reluctance to identify its presence in African societies, past and present. I abjure such a blanket condemnation.

Every colonial situation is marked by hierarchy. And, I do not wish to claim that the principle of subjectivity or the formal equality of all human beings in modernity preclude the installation of any hierarchy. But not all hierarchies are undesirable. Hierarchies of merit are constitutive of the modern age. Think of the guild master-apprentice relationship. To assimilate the formal equality of guild masters and apprentices as human beings to their equality in the workshop situation is to abort the skill transference process that is supposed to mark the relation between the master craftsman and his apprentices. The earlier apostles of modernity in Africa were willing to assume the role of apprentices to Europe’s master craftsmen’s. They did accept that there had been a severe rupture—Slavery and the Atlantic Slave Trade—in the flow of their history which had adversely impacted their agency and, hence, history-making capacity. They had reason to look forward to their graduation from apprentices to guild masters in their own right after a period of instruction.

For the process of grooming just described to succeed, the masters must not merely

concede the humanity of their apprentices; they must take it for granted. The only issue between them must be the willingness of the master to impart know-how and the teachability of the apprentice and his enthusiasm for instruction. The master, too, must prepare to make himself irrelevant to the continuing life of the apprentice beyond graduation and the success of the entire process must be judged by whether or not the master works to make himself irrelevant beyond graduation and the apprentice progresses from journeyman to craft master.

Furthermore, for the above process to succeed, the master must additionally recognize, embrace, and work with the autonomy of his apprentices. To put it technically, success requires that he treat the apprentices as autonomous individuals possessed of different capacities and infinitely variable in their personalities. Had the colonizers taken seriously their much professed self-appointed task of moving Africans along the path to modernity, they would have fostered the Africans' capacity for autonomy and cultivated it in their sponsorship of individualism as a principle of social ordering.

Can we say that what we just described characterizes the nature of the relationship between Africans and their erstwhile colonizers at the present time? All we need to do is look at how Africans continue to be without voice and when they show that they have a voice, a singular marker of the capacity for autonomy and individuality, how routinely that voice is silenced or ignored by their fellow residents of modernity's mansion. At the present time, different descendants of those who imperialized us in the past always manage to claim somehow that they and only they know best what Africans are and what they need. We see it in Art, Music, and other expressive forms.

Now, I would not like to be misunderstood. Many of us Africans are afraid of autonomy. The principle of subjectivity is a double-edged sword. It means that when one messes things up she must take responsibility for her actions. She must be ready to take her lumps, so to speak. Are Africans so ready? I always marvel at the ability of African leaders to bask in the role of the appointed beggars to the world. They do not dream big dreams. They take no big risks. They are always satisfied with the handouts from their erstwhile imperial rulers, forever begging for increases in their pocket money, welfare amounts, call it what you will. Either they have forgotten or, worse still, they never learned how to be subjects and cannot bother to acquire it.

Our scholars are no different. In the academy, at the same time that no serious academic associations outside of South Africa survive, African academics always find a way to make sure that the African Studies Association either in the United States, Canada, or even as far away as Australia, does not lack in fresh blood from Africa to enable it to thrive, not just survive. Herein lies another aspect of the challenge: Africa and Africans should bet on subjectivity, embrace autonomy with all its attendant risks, and stand or fall accordingly. Even if we were to fall in that situation we would be falling gallantly and with our self-respect intact.

In lieu of autonomy and the risks that it entails, we have persistently embraced the aid model bequeathed to us by colonialism. Because colonialism denied our humanity, it could not trust us to have judgment, much less exercise it. It put us on aid, handouts, that had the net effect of atrophying our subjectivity and weakening our bodies and minds enough that we hardly ever think of solving our problems ourselves without reference to Europe and America. Here

whatever differences I hinted at above exist between Africa and its Diaspora in the history, operation, and aftermath of colonialism in them pale into insignificance. If what I have seen in my short stay here in Jamaica in terms of our eagerness to accept handouts from Spain and China, to take just the most recent examples, is anything to go by, my Jamaican cousins are as much in the vice grip of the aid model, as are their continental relatives.

Just as happens in other situations, we have become addicted to the handouts that others are willing to give us. We are the international equivalents of welfare recipients who misread a stop-gap instrument for a way of life. Needless to say, we suffer from the same indignities—our will is bent by our donors; we require their approval for the minutest changes in direction in running the affairs of our so-called sovereign countries. The most humiliating illustration of this was a few years ago when the President of Uganda, an exemplar of the so-called new breed of leaders in Africa, went cap in hand to meet with a British junior minister to seek permission to increase Uganda's defence budget to facilitate its military's capacity to fight the LRA insurgency in the country.

I daresay that the aid model continues to dominate the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world. Notice that I said the rest of the world. India and South Korea are now aid donors to Africa. In February 2006, when Chad kicked out oil firms that it said were withholding revenues due it, one of them was from Malaysia.¹² It is a mark of how inured to aid the continent has become that I do not see Africans, especially their intellectuals, thundering against the indignity that comes with our being the appointed mendicants to an increasingly affluent world. Africa's leaders dutifully trooped out to Beijing in November 2006 to have Chinese leaders regale them with their, Chinese leaders, that is, desire to do right by Africa through aid and unequal trade deals designed only to secure for China more of Africa's raw materials at rates that cannot allow the continent to break free from their dependence on aid. They have since done the same to Turkey and India. The challenge to repudiate the aid model in all its insidious manifestations - the Red Campaign, Bono, Live Aid, World Vision, and other such campaigns that indulge in the proliferation of pornographic images of African poverty and suffering, must make us say enough already.¹³

Given the centrality of the principle of subjectivity and its sociological concomitant, individualism, in the constitution and evolution of modernity, its subversion by the administrators is one of the signal failures of colonialism as practiced by the latter. As we remarked earlier, the colonizers denied the humanity of their African wards. Given that situation it stands to reason that they could not entertain the idea that Africans could be individuals. What they did instead was to recognize what they termed "tribes" with all the negative associations - herd instinct, unanimity of views, lack of social differentiation - that trailed it. They invested each "tribe" with "individual" traits that failed to recognize, much less accommodate, any differences among their individual members. Unfortunately, many African thinkers have adopted this spurious individuality and one can find it at the base of theories of African personality inaugurated under the inspiration of Edward Wilmot Blyden in the late nineteenth century and later adopted by thinkers ranging from Kwame Nkrumah to Nnamdi Azikiwe.¹⁴

At the beginning of the nineteenth century when under the direction of Christianity Africans embraced modernity they sought to develop themselves as individuals, even as they

recognized and valued their group memberships. The debates they had among themselves and with their European counterparts were dominated by concerns about African agency, the possibility of a native church, the creation of new men and women who would be the propagators of the new ways of life enjoined by modernity. By the late nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth, this point of view had been overthrown and supplanted by attitudes that questioned the viability of African agency, placed Africans at the bottom rung of the human ladder and proceeded to treat them as if they were children. The consequences that followed were devastating for the development of African agency. They are still with us as I write this as I hope to have shown above.

This brings me to the second of our questions above. I will be brief here. How have Africa and its phenomena featured in the discourse of modernity? If one looks at the narratives of the discourse of modernity, one would think that Africans have only ever been victims of modernity, not theorists of it or contributors to its construction. Nothing could be further from the truth. But the reason for the absence is easy to fathom. Once formal colonialism was imposed, the operators of the system put all their efforts into demonizing all Africans who dared to make modernity their own and into excising their contributions from the annals of the history of ideas. Given that by the time of independence in various African countries, the mode of education had become completely dominated by the tropes of colonialist pedagogy and historiography, it is no surprise that African intellectuals trained under that regime were, for the most part, amnesiac towards their own heritage and when they were not, thought lightly of it. Those who thought highly of it paid a stiff price in denials of opportunities for advancement especially in African institutions.¹⁵ Meanwhile, we were all taught to lionize the most ordinary of white adventurers in our homelands and know nothing or have the most perfunctory understanding of the contributions of our own intellectuals.

One part of the challenge that Africa poses to modernity is for those who subscribe to it to have a fuller understanding of the true history of the movement. This understanding has been expanded where Asia is concerned. Africa remains the perpetual absence. Here we need to borrow a leaf from India. Asia looms so large now in the discourse of modernity not because Euro-American intellectuals suddenly woke up to realize the immense place of India in the constitution of modernity and its discourse. No, Indian scholars, armed with a robust sense of their subjectivity, forced this recognition on Europe and North America. That is what African and African Diasporic scholars must do. A good place to start is by acquainting ourselves with the heritage of intellectual ideas in the global African world, not merely those that have received the sanction of authority by their inclusion in the so-called leading journals of Euro-America. As the saying goes, if you write, read, and discuss it among yourselves, they will read and discuss it, following your lead.

Why ought we to do the things that I suggested above? Because doing them matters to the present and future of Africa and those of its descendants around the world. I give just one example. Here again we see the divergent paths in the aftermath of colonialism in Africa and in the Caribbean. With the exception of Trinidad and Tobago, where a misguided attempt failed, and Grenada where it failed woefully in spite of what looked initially like success, no country of the Anglo-Caribbean has experienced coup d'état or attempts at them, except for the insurrection in Trinidad and Tobago with its religious orientation. Why more scholars don't celebrate this

remarkable success as a testament to success at being modern by the inhabitants of these isles escapes me. The situation in the continent is much different.

Many countries in Africa are at the present time instances of what are called newly-democratizing countries. But the democracy that is being canvassed and installed in them is of a peculiarly modern inflection. But when one looks at the practice of this democracy and its theorizing by African scholars, one is left with a queasy feeling that the so-called debates that are taking place in the continent are not the right ones. Liberal democracy is what supposedly we are operating, but we hardly ever have debates about the freedom of the individual, about the rule of law, about taxation and representation a principle under severe test in this country as I write this, about the responsibility of the governors to the governed, or the basis of governance in the consent of the governed, all supremely modern principles that, curiously, no longer feature in the political discourse in our lands. This has not always been the case.

In the immediate post-independence period, African politicians and political parties wrote copiously and, in a handful of cases, profoundly about freedom and its importance in the political lives of Africans and their polities. No doubt, it is easy to dismiss such writings as carry-overs from the struggle for independence from colonial rule when movement leaders appropriated the language of freedom and self-determination to oust colonial rule. But such a dismissal is mistaken, if not unwarranted. In the first place, it is to deny the possibility that African thinkers, who also led the struggle for independence from colonial rule, actually believed in the cause of freedom and sought actively to realize the kind of societies in which there is freedom for all. Secondly, it is to ignore the ample evidence of African thinkers' continuing engagement with the connected ideas of freedom and self-determination after independence. They may have failed at the practice of it - and there are very good theoretical reasons for this failure. But that they were exercised by its philosophical dimensions can only be doubted by those who are unfamiliar with their writings. As I have written elsewhere,

Obafemi Awolowo wrote *Path to Nigerian Freedom*¹⁶; Kwame Nkrumah wrote *Towards Colonial Freedom*¹⁷ and *I Speak of Freedom*¹⁸; Oginga Odinga lamented the unfulfillment of the promise of freedom after independence was won in *Not Yet Uhuru*¹⁹ [Swahili for 'freedom']; Julius Nyerere wrote *Freedom and Development*²⁰; Nelson Mandela knew that there was *No Easy Walk to Freedom*²¹; and Kenneth Kaunda asserted: *Zambia Must be Free*²². These and others are some of the basic texts of modern African political philosophy. One only wished that our professional philosophical output would reflect this simple fact. Nor were these preoccupations with freedom limited to political leaders or thinkers. They also featured in popular arts, especially highlife music by stars ranging from Ghana's E.T. Mensah to Nigeria's Victor Olaiya and Adeolu Akinsanya.²³

I can cite equivalents in calypso and reggae. Rare are those occasions now when a contemporary African - continental and Diasporic - politician or leader or even intellectual presents any serious intellectual discursus on similar themes.

In recent times, Africa has witnessed several elections at all levels of government in which multiple parties have contested for power. This situation mirrors the immediate post-independence period when multiple parties contended for votes, too, before the scourge of

single-party rule and the cancer of military rule combined to arrest the continent's development in all directions. But there is a significant qualitative difference between then and now: back then parties and their leaders, in many cases, fought elections and canvassed their respective electorates on the basis of ideological divisions based on philosophical orientations regarding human nature, the nature of society, the appropriate relation between the individual and the state, the grounds of legitimate power in the polity, and the privileges and forbearances of citizenship.

At the present time both African political leaders and intellectuals either believe that the philosophical challenges just adumbrated have been met in contemporary African polities or are bereft of any awareness of the importance of such questions to the kind of political practice that would deliver the promise of modern political arrangements to even the lowliest African or, if they are aware, they do not have the wherewithal to address them. Whatever the case is, what is clear in the present situation is that African politics has become reduced to "ethnic balancing", "religious permutations", "feeding the people", and other such inanities. For the most part these days, political parties in African countries exist to win elections so that they can become the sole distributors of largesse. There is hardly any debate about the core questions of political philosophy and the parties, for the most part, are nondescript patchworks of personal and regional interests dominated by moneybags and their sycophantic hangers-on.

Let me end with an illustration of why I insist that the debates that we are having are not the right ones. In the early twentieth century one of the pioneers of modern African political philosophy wrote:

We claim, in common with the rest of mankind, that taxation without representation is a bad thing, and we are pledged, as all free peoples have had to do, that in our several communities the African shall have that common weapon for the protection and safeguarding of his rights and interests, namely, the franchise. It is desirable, we hold, that by our vote we shall determine by what laws we shall be governed and how the revenues which we help to put together shall be utilized.

Equally do we hold with others that there should be free scope for the members of the community, irrespective of creed or colour, to hold any office under the crown or flag to which a person's merits entitle him or her.²⁴

I would like the reader to fasten upon the key phrases that I have stressed of the passage I quoted from J.E. Casely Hayford. There is not a single one of the phrases that does not refer in some way or another to the components of modernity that we identified earlier in this paper. When the American revolutionaries first made "no taxation without representation" their protest song in the eighteenth century they were inaugurating a new way of conceptualizing the relationship between the governor and the governed. But one cannot fully grasp the significance of this orientation unless one comes to a good understanding of the more ultimate principle that is enfolded in the idea of representation. The franchise is the political surrogate of the fundamental principle that free sovereign individuals should not have their wills bent by anyone except one to and by whom they have consented to have their will so bent. Once this fundamental requirement is met, the authority so installed can proceed to levy taxes and compel these sovereign individuals to do as it wishes, insofar as it does not subvert the power given it to

the service of faction. I am sure that the current Jamaican government might appropriate this cloak of legitimacy for its recent budget. Such an appropriation should be the topic of a vigorous debate. Finally, only merit, not ethnic membership, religious preference, or the like, entitles a person to hold any office in the modern state. When we combine these with the earlier injunctions regarding the worth of freedom and its constitutive role in the philosophical anthropology that under-girds modern institutions and practices, we can now ask whether it can seriously be doubted that an Africa in which these aspirations have been realized remains in the realm of dreams.

Of greater importance is the issue of the relevance that this rich legacy of freedom and self-determination has for the contemporary situation in Africa. Yes, Africans need food, housing, health services, and education. But to reduce the focus of political discourse and practice to these pragmatic concerns is to miss the woods for the trees. After all, the aforementioned needs are no less predicated of the lower animals. What is peculiarly human in the best of philosophical traditions is to rise above the level of the needs that we share with our beastly cousins. That the issues of freedom and self-governance loom large as indicia of a good life for humans cannot be denied in the modern world. That African politicians and intellectuals are no longer mindful of or agitated by such themes is to be lamented and excoriated. To the extent that we reintroduce the attainment of these ideals as a metric by which to judge the quality of our polities and the performance of our politicians, to that extent would we be restoring to the centre of our concerns the dignity of even the lowliest Africans and their capacity to lead lives marked by self-control and beauty. Hence, to the question of why we should reengage with modernity in the contemporary world the answer is simple: doing so promises a better life for Africans than what is on offer at the present time.

In conclusion, in talking of the challenge of Africa to modernity, the most important issue is not to talk as if Africa is squatting outside of modernity and is to be understood as asking modernity to show why she should do business with it. The fortunes of Africa and modernity have been intertwined for at least two and a half centuries. What Africa needs to do is to fight those who seek to keep Africa apart from the rest of humanity in order to patronize her while at the same time forcing the world to see what the African world has made of modernity in her own idioms and invite the world to drink from its wisdom of which there is abundance.²⁵

Notes and References.

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¹ "Exorcising Hegel's Ghost: Africa's Challenge to Philosophy,' in 'Religion and Philosophy in Africa," *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 1, Issue 4 (1998)[http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/v1_i4.htm]

² G.W.F. Hegel 1956 *Lectures in the Philosophy of World History*. New York: Dover.

³ G.W.F. Hegel, 1958. *Philosophy of Right*, trans. and intro., T.M. Knox; Oxford: Clarendon, p. 286.

⁴ Hegel, p. 84.

⁵ Those who are familiar with the works of G.W.F. Hegel, Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Enrique Dussel, Samir Amin, C.L.R. James, and David Harvey can easily detect the debts I owe in this section of our discussion.

⁶ See Olúfémi Táíwò, *Legal Naturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), chapter 6; “The Rule of Law: The New Leviathan?” *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*, vol. XII, no. 1 (January 1999), pp. 151-168; “Law’s Promise, Law’s Handicap: Race and Law at the Turn of the Century,” in *Dalhousie Review* vol. 80, no. 1 (2000), pp. 21-44; and “On the Limits of Law at Century’s End,” in David M. Rasmussen, ed., *Social and Political Philosophy*, The Proceedings of the XXth World Congress of Philosophy, vol. 11 (Charlottesville: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2001), pp. 69-80.

⁷ Frederick D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1965), p. 615.

⁸ Lugard, p. 618.

⁹ I have discussed this in full in “Reading the Colonizer’s Mind: Lord Lugard and the Philosophical Foundations of British Colonialism”, in Susan Babbitt and Sue Campbell, eds., *Racism and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 157-186.

¹⁰ See Olúfémi Táíwò, “Prophets Without Honour: African Apostles of Modernity in the Nineteenth Century,” in *West Africa Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2001) [<http://www.westafricareview.com>].

¹¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

¹² All the countries that I have mentioned here are ex-colonies, too.

¹³ The most egregious must be the Kenyan villagers who were willing to adopt the surname of a Danish artist just because he was going to donate a goat to each one who accepted his “generosity”! But it churns the stomach no less when I see Africans dance for Bono and other publicity-seeking, aid-promoting, but never-spend-their-own-money Euro-American celebrity canvassing aid for Africa!

¹⁴ See, in general, Hollis R. Lynch, ed., *Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden: Black Spokesman* (London: Frank Cass, 1971); Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Renascent Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1968); Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom* (London: Panaf, 1961); AMSAC, ed., *Pan-Africanism Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).

¹⁵ Think of how long it took to constitute African philosophy as an academic discipline and for the study of the ideas of African thinkers to be accepted as legitimate candidates for theoretical study.

¹⁶ Obafemi Awolowo, 1947. *Path to Nigerian Freedom*. London: Faber & Faber.

¹⁷ Kwame Nkrumah, 1973. *Towards Colonial Freedom*. London: Panaf.
- *I Speak of Freedom*. London: Panaf.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ O. Odinga. 1968. *Not Yet Uhuru*. London: Heinemann.

²⁰ J. Nyerere. 1973. *Freedom and Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²¹ N. Mandela. 1964. *No Easy Walk to Freedom*. London: Heinemann.

²² K. Kaunda. 1962. *Zambia Must be Free*. London: Heinemann.

²³ Olúfémi Táíwò, “‘The Love of Freedom Brought Us Here’: an Introduction to Modern African Political Philosophy,” (forthcoming).

²⁴ Magnus J. Sampson, *West African Leadership: Public Speeches delivered by J.E. Casely Hayford* (London: Frank Cass, 1969), p. 68.

²⁵ This is the latest revised version of a Public Lecture originally delivered to the African Students Association of Binghamton University, Binghamton, New York, U.S.A. on November 29, 2006. I am grateful to the Association and those who attended the lecture for their probing questions which have helped to make this a better piece. I would also like to thank Adeolu Ademoyo, who facilitated my invitation and who continues to be an invaluable interlocutor after all these years. Another version was read to the Philosophy Lecture Series, Department of Philosophy, Seattle University, Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. on June 6th, 2008.