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## **Rethinking Political Philosophy in Modern Africa: a Proposal**

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**ABSTRACT** What would happen if, instead of taking an instrumentalist view of the ideas of modern African political thinkers, we consider those ideas as indeed they are, attempts by them to proffer answers to the central questions of political philosophy as those are apprehended in the African context? If we did, we would end up with a robust, sophisticated discourse properly denominated 'Modern African Political Philosophy' in which we recognize, possibly celebrate and, ultimately, assess the quality of answers that African thinkers have provided. The importance of recognizing a body of work under this genre cannot be overemphasized given the many debates, controversies, misrepresentations abroad in accounts of the relationship between Africa and modernity. It is almost as if there is only one way that African thinkers have related to modernity: in antagonism. I argue that one can give an account in political philosophy that shows that the received wisdom is profoundly mistaken. To do so requires that we rethink political philosophy in the modern African context.

If there is one part of the world for which the theme of the XXIInd World Congress of Philosophy could not have been more apposite, it is Africa. No doubt there are many areas of philosophy that need

rethinking in the African world today. Perhaps none is more urgent than that of Africa's relations to, place in, experience of, and engagement with modernity. In this piece, I propose to implore African scholars to look at the specific area of the political discourse of modernity and Africa's encounter with and contributions to it. This means looking at what Africans have made of the legacy of modern political philosophy in their own experience.

What would happen if, instead of taking an instrumentalist view of the ideas of modern African political thinkers, we consider those ideas as indeed they are, attempts by them to proffer answers to the central questions of political philosophy as those are apprehended in the African context? If we did, we would end up with a robust, sophisticated discourse properly denominated 'Modern African Political Philosophy' in which we recognize, possibly celebrate and, ultimately, assess the quality of answers that African thinkers have provided. The importance of recognizing a body of work under this genre cannot be overemphasized given the many debates, controversies, and misrepresentations abroad in accounts of the relationship between Africa and modernity. It is almost as if there is only one way that African thinkers have related to modernity: in antagonism. I argue that one can give an account in political philosophy that shows that the received wisdom is profoundly mistaken.

I have identified three central questions of political philosophy: (1) what type of being is it whose well-being is the ultimate end of any political order and what will best conduce to its being the best of its type that it can be? This is the sense in which some conception, however rough, of human nature is germane to the design and operation of any political order. (2) The second question central to political philosophy to which African thinkers responded is the following: Who may rule, given that not all can rule? Answers to this question attempt to provide justification and legitimacy for political

arrangements under which some exercise power and others are required to obey. (3) The third and final question central to political philosophy that is of moment in this discussion is the following: How ought we to organize society for purposes of governance and social living? Put differently, what political and other social arrangements are likely to conduce to the efflorescence of that which is best in us?<sup>1</sup>

It cannot reasonably be said that Africans have not at different times proffered answers to these questions. What we need are serious efforts on the part of African scholars to periodize those answers and, in addition, extract from specific African cultures and regions answers to the central questions of political philosophy. While we can identify ancient or classic African accounts responding to those questions—different types of monarchy ranging from limited to absolute, from elective to hereditary, popular rule moderated by gerontocracy, and so on, our discussion limits itself to modern African political philosophy. It is that tradition of discourse that was inspired by and, for the most part, was a creative response to, two significant alien historical movements that irrupted into the lives, land and mindscapes of various African communities at the beginning the nineteenth century: Christianity and colonialism. Given that the first represented the more significant impact on the African mind, and its specific inflection is inseparable from the tenets of modernity, it is not a stretch to suggest that it inaugurated a new epoch in African history that has continued till the present. And when the era of colonialism came, it was a modern-inflected variant, a situation that explained its many conundrums and contradictions. Meanwhile, Africans' exertions either under the influence of Christianity or the sway of colonialism were bathed in the modern ether and took their coloration therefrom.

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<sup>1</sup> Olufemi Taiwo, "Post-Independence African Political Philosophy," in Kwasi Wiredu, ed., A Companion to African Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 244-245.

I argue that the answers to the central questions of political philosophy that Africans have given and the institutions that have come to dominate the African landscape and polities since the early nineteenth century have been conditioned, in some cases determined, by the continent's place in, reaction to, engagement with, criticism or endorsement of the core ideas of modernity. So, in a sense, rethinking African political philosophy in light of its modern inheritance will (1) reinscribe African contributions into the discourse of modernity; (2) present an Africa-centered political philosophy that treats of universal themes of modern political philosophy using the African experience and the contributions of African thinkers as the key and; (3) educate contemporary scholars who are guiding Africa's continuing struggle with modernity at the present time.

There is a near total abstention by professional philosophers, African and non-African alike, from serious consideration of the political philosophies abroad in the continent. Even then, few are the attempts that take seriously the philosophical expostulations of African thinkers. Among the latter, Julius Nyerere has probably received the most attention. Others such as Sekou Toure, Kwame Nkrumah, and Gamal Abd-el Nasser have received cursory attention. In this connection, Robert July's *The Origins of Modern African Thought*<sup>2</sup> remains the only book of its kind in the field. There are two solid anthologies that between them contain the most compendious collections of original thinking by Africans in political matters: J. Ayodele Langley, ed., *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa, 1856-1970*<sup>3</sup> and Gideon-Cyrus M. Mutiso and S.W. Rohio, eds., *Readings in African Political Thought*<sup>4</sup>. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek's *Political Discourses in African Thought*:

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<sup>2</sup> (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> (London: Rex Collings, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> (London: Heinemann, 1987).

1860 to the Present<sup>5</sup> continues the historical and synthetic thrusts of these works.

What I propose as a rethinking of political philosophy in Africa will adopt a thematic approach that is less about history than it is about the ideas themselves and how they fit in the general discourse of political philosophy taken as a subdiscipline of philosophy. Hence, while we give the appropriate recognition to the disquisitions of African thinkers, such a move will represent only one piece of the rethinking. Another will witness the philosophical exploration of statecraft, structures of governance, grounds of legitimacy in a polity, the limits of political power and its distribution, the principles of citizenship and what individuals or groups may or may not do to or with the body and appurtenances thereof of another. Discussions of this sort constitute the warp and woof of political philosophy. We need to identify these themes and seek to synthesize African responses to them as a primary discourse of modernity across the African continent.

I have already started this rethinking in a new book titled, How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa.<sup>6</sup> Talking about the proposed rethinking in political philosophy, the period to be covered will range from the mid-nineteenth century to the third quarter of the twentieth century. I refrain from stating specific dates since this is not to unfold historically; even as we should take seriously the historicity of our subject matter. I have already anticipated this thematic approach in, for the post-independence period, 'Post-Independence African Political Philosophy'<sup>7</sup> and the nineteenth century in "Two Modern African Constitutions"<sup>8</sup> and "'The Love of Freedom Brought Us Here": an

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<sup>5</sup> (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, ed., A Companion to African Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 244-245.

<sup>8</sup> See How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa, chapter 6.

Introduction to Modern African Political Philosophy'.<sup>9</sup> We should expect to have several volumes based on the various colonial languages dominant in the continent as well as studies arising from the engagement within particular traditions and linguistic areas.

Although there are anthologies dealing with “political thought” in Africa, there is precious little by way of materials that offer serious, concise, and critical presentations of African political philosophy of the sort that we propose should issue from rethinking political philosophy in the contemporary situation. Beyond the mere fact of remedying a significant absence in the global discourse of modernity there is the urgency of the subject matter of which it treats. At a time when many African countries are prosecuting what I call late transitions to modernity, especially in its politico-legal dimensions, and here Africa is not alone, it behoves African scholars and the students that we are charged to tutor to guide the continent aright in this its latest encounter with modernity.

There is a sense in which many of the problems that analysts continue to identify in African politics are easily traceable to the nonconsummation of the project of modernity in the continent. Whether or not one is disposed to embrace modernity, there is no doubt that taking seriously its fundamental tenets is sure to have a salubrious effect on the state of intellectual discourse in the continent. As a bonus, it might actually give us graduates who have a rich understanding of the philosophical presuppositions of the practices and institutions that they are called upon by their training to run and are thereby enabled to do better at the task. But this current engagement is not without precedent in the intellectual history of the continent. We build on the insights that have been offered by some of Africa’s politicians and political thinkers.

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<sup>9</sup> Presented to the Xth Annual Conference of the International Society for African Philosophy and Studies (ISAPS), University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston, Jamaica, April 2-4, 2004.

The qualitative difference is that we take seriously both their status as philosophers and the philosophical import of their perorations as well as the philosophical implications of ideas, practices and institutions that populate the African political landscape.