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ROUNDTABLE



The African novel and the question of communalism in African philosophy

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Jeanne-Marie Jackson's *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* provides an analytic framework for understanding the novel as a form of philosophical expression in African intellectual history. More specifically, she uses individualism as a tool for tracking the expression of abstract "philosophical thinking" in a selection of African novels.¹ For Jackson, it is the fictional individual in the novel who is the primary bearer of philosophical thought.² Jackson situates this interpretative heuristic **vis-à-vis debates** about ethnophilosophy which dominated African philosophy in third quarter of the twentieth century. Like Paulin Hountondji, perhaps the most well-known critic of ethnophilosophy, Jackson emphasizes that philosophical **practice at a bare minimum requires** a second-order reflexivity toward conventional hegemonic beliefs in a given society, and this second order discourse takes the form of an argumentative **a** stance toward those beliefs. Her general suggestion is that the best place to look for philosophical thought in the aforementioned sense is to examine individual thinkers, whether real or fictional.

It should be stressed that this definition of philosophical thinking or practice says nothing about its content. Philosophical thinking may represent assent to beliefs which are hegemonic in a given society, but it does so by explicitly arguing for them. Hence, philosophical practice can be conservative without ceasing to be philosophical. What matters for Jackson are the formal procedural elements, not the content. In fact, throughout the book, Jackson is careful not to conflate formal elements with substantial elements. For example, this is evident in the procedural or formal definition of rationality, which she adopts from Kwame Anthony Appiah. Rationality is defined by Jackson in terms of adequate responsiveness based on available evidence and reflection on logical relations of entailment among the beliefs that one adopts. Of course, thinking rationally in this sense might lead one to false beliefs.³

Defining rationality in procedural or formal terms allows Jackson to explain the key questions raised by some of the novels she examines, such as Jennifer Nansubuga

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¹Jackson uses the term "philosophical thinking" explicitly in her book, see Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 185. She also uses the term "philosophical practice", see Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 20. Jackson appears to be using these two terms as synonyms, and I will be following her in this practice.

²Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 22.

³*ibid.*, 116.

50 Makumbi's *Kintu*. In *Kintu* the central problem involves a confrontation between two
51 different theoretical paradigms which posit two conflicting ontological configurations,
52 but which seem to generate empirically equivalent theories in the sense that they
53 both accommodate the relevant observable phenomena. The first paradigm seeks to
54 explain the relevant phenomena by positing a realm of invisible spirits and a world
55 where the multi-generational transmission of curses is possible. The second paradigm
56 seeks to explain the relevant phenomena by natural causation through invoking men-
57 tal illness. Both paradigms generate theories which can account for what the charac-
58 ters experience, yet they also contradict one another in a very salient way.⁴

60 Furthermore, once one defines rationality in procedural terms, the "supernatural
61 paradigm" and the theories it generates cannot be ruled out as irrational based on
62 content. In principle, it is possible for such a paradigm to be an expression of rati-
63 onality originating from certain conditions or from a certain "place," to use Jackson's
64 expression. Thus, the formal, procedural definition of rationality allows for a kind of
65 pluralism reflecting expressions of rationality that start from specific places, as
66 Jackson emphasizes repeatedly.⁵ Ideally these plural expressions of rationality will
67 eventually converge on the truth in the future: "the destination stays the same, but it
68 is supplied by many more tributaries."⁶ However, there is a specter which haunts this
69 pluralism.

71 The problem stems from the fact that hidden within her definition of procedural
72 rationality there are several substantive elements. For example, the definition calls for
73 responsiveness to the relevant evidence, yet it is not clear how one can decide which
74 elements of experience count as "relevant evidence." Moreover, it is not clear if there
75 is a way to reference independent criteria to adjudicate disputes between proponents
76 of the two aforementioned paradigms about what counts as evidence. It is a great
77 merit of Jackson's book that it makes salient these kinds of philosophical problems
78 which are expressed in African novels such as *Kintu*, even if Jackson is perhaps too
79 optimistic about the possibility of everyone arriving at the "same destination" in the
80 end. We may all follow the procedural elements which constitute rationality but still
81 end up widely diverging. The formal structure of rationality can only be operative if
82 specific historically inflected experiences give substantial content to the formal pro-
83 cedural elements. However, in this case, the universality which the formal procedural
84 definition of rationality was intended to guarantee might end up being illusory.

87 Another important contribution to African philosophy and the study of African
88 intellectual history made by Jackson's book concerns debates about the relationship
89 between the individual and the community. Debates in African social and political
90 philosophy have tended to revolve around communalism.⁷ For example, the possibil-
91 ity of endorsing individual human rights, while upholding a sufficiently strong ver-
92 sion of communalism, has been subjected to much debate in African political
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96 ⁴Ibid, 125.

97 ⁵Ibid, 134.

98 ⁶Ibid, 121.

⁷Polycarp Ikuenobe, "Tradition and the Foundation for African Renaissance."

philosophy. The starting assumption of many of these debates, which tend to be normative in nature,⁸ is often a descriptive claim to the effect that Africans prefer communal forms of living where the community has primacy vis-à-vis the individual, and that this is expressed in their moral intuitions. This descriptive claim is evident in, for example, Thaddeus Metz's influential paper.⁹ As Olúfé, mi Táíwò has noted, this descriptive claim does not match up with existing social practices in most African societies today.¹⁰ It seems that these intuitions have been foisted upon most Africans by African philosophers who are concerned with developing a distinctly African moral theory. The novels Jackson examines would seem to provide support for Táíwò's contention that the primacy of the community vis-à-vis the individual is contested. For example, the main protagonist in J.E. Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound*, Kwamankra is a liberal philosopher who dearly values his solitude.¹¹ Kwamankra does not turn his back on the project of collective liberation, but he believes that he needs to protect his solitude and his individuality in order to best serve this project of collective liberation. Ernst Cassirer's description of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as having to flee from society "in order to serve it and to give it what he was capable of giving" is quite apt as a description of Kwamankra.¹²

The same observation holds true of Stanlake Samkange whom Jackson interprets as a liberal intellectual.¹³ The concern with liberal individualism is also evident in another novel that Jackson discusses, namely Tendai Huchu's *The Maestro, the Magistrate, and the Mathematician*.¹⁴ This is not to say that the primacy of the individual is uncritically valorized in the novels that Jackson examines. Nevertheless, the idea that a version of communalism best corresponds to the intuitions of most Africans is implicitly subjected to criticism in almost all of the novels that Jackson examines. Insofar as there is a representational goal to these novels and these novels achieve this representational goal, they provide some of the intuitions that African moral and social philosophy should be responsive to. In fact, proponents of communalism, such as Polycarp Ikuenobe, have been using African novels, specifically Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, to support their claim that some form of communalism is required to make sense of the relevant intuitions.¹⁵ However, Jackson's book shows that construing African novels as only, or largely, expressing communalist moral intuitions is too simplistic.

Jackson's emphasis on formal, procedural criteria allows us her to provide an account of African literature that does not unduly prejudge what is and is not African. This is especially salient in her treatment of liberalism. Jackson shows that liberalism, with its defence of the negative liberty of the individual, has appealed to several African intellectuals, such as E. Casely-Hayford and Stanlake Samkange, whose

⁸In the sense that these debates are centered around how we ought to live, they thus invoke a standard of goodness or rightness.

⁹Thaddeus Metz, "Toward an African Moral Theory."

¹⁰Táíwò, "Against African Communalism."

¹¹Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 50.

¹²Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant and Goethe*, 9.

¹³Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 71–3.

¹⁴Ibid, 156.

¹⁵Polycarp Ikuenobe, "The Idea of Personhood in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*."

work is extensively discussed by Jackson. To this list we can add other figures such James Africanus Beale Horton and other members of the Gold Coast intelligentsia who supported the formation of the Fanti Confederation in the 1860s and the early 1870s.¹⁶ Turning to the twentieth century, one can point to Ali A. Mazrui and Obafemi Awolowo as famous African liberal intellectuals.¹⁷ Jackson also shows that the appeal of liberalism cannot be explained as the product of “mental colonization” as many postcolonial and decolonial theorists claim.¹⁸ The question of the relationship between liberalism and colonialism is treated with subtlety in the book. This is especially evident in her critical engagement with Samkange’s *On Trial for My Country*, which Jackson interprets as an attempt to query whether “liberalism” should reference the actual historical doings of liberals (including colonialism, racial segregation, land dispossession and so on) or whether it should refer to some set of philosophical ideals which are insulated from history.¹⁹ This question has no easy answers, but the fact that it is posed explicitly in Jackson’s book is important. Even if one were to answer this question by claiming that “liberalism” refers to the actions of people who considered themselves liberals, the issue would not be settled. As Jackson notes, there were African liberal intellectuals, such as Casely-Hayford, who believed that their commitment to liberalism required that they struggle for self-rule. This equally applies to Samkange. Hence, even if one takes the historicist route, the matter of the relationship between colonialism and liberalism is not easily settled.

Jackson’s work can be situated in relation to recent work in African philosophy, such as Táíwò’s *Against Decolonization* (2022), which questions the grounds for the exclusion of liberalism from the study of African intellectual history. Both Jackson and Táíwò break new ground for African intellectual history by refusing to define who counts as an African intellectual based on substantive terms, i.e. based on the beliefs held by those who are deemed African intellectuals. Both of them would reject the thesis that refusing the theoretical frameworks which first emerged in Western European societies, such as liberalism and Marxism, is a necessary condition for being counted as an African intellectual.²⁰ Moreover, with respect to their conception of decolonization, they both define it in formal procedural terms and not in terms of the acceptance or rejection of specific beliefs. Thus, Jackson defines decolonization in the intellectual sphere in the following terms: “decolonized conceptual comparison is not about what epistemology one chooses to valorize, but the act of developing an apparatus for educated choice” (44). On Jackson’s view, a decolonized mind is not characterized by what it chooses but rather by the manner in which it chooses.²¹

Although Jackson is not explicit about this, it would follow from her view that the problem is not that colonialism brought with it foreign cultural elements to African societies. Rather the problem is that it did so in a manner that created a distorted environment for rational acceptance or rejection, through the introduction of

¹⁶Horton, *Letters on the Political Condition of the Gold Coast*, 167.

¹⁷Mazrui, “Africa, My Conscience, and I.” Also Táíwò, “Obafemi Awolowo: Knowledge, Leadership, Governance,” 64.

¹⁸See, for example, Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa*, 46; Imafidon, “Alterity, African Modernity, and the Critique of Change,” 14.

¹⁹Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 80.

²⁰Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation*, 164–5.

²¹A similar point was also made by Wiredu, “Toward Decolonizing African Philosophy and Religion,” 295–6.

197 distorting factors such as the prestige associated with the colonizing power, and, of
 198 course, the use of force. If this is an adequate description of the environment that was
 199 created by colonialism, then the struggle against colonialism is essentially an effort to
 200 create an environment where these distortions are minimized or entirely eliminated.
 201 This conception of decolonization obviously differs from the currently dominant con-
 202 ception which is associated with “decolonial” thinkers such as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-
 203 Gatsheni, who hold that decolonization involves getting rid of every foreign element
 204 that was adopted by Africans during the colonial period regardless of whether it came
 205 to be held for good or bad reasons.²² However, one unpalatable consequence of this
 206 view is that an African who came into contact with, say, the theory of evolution **through**
 207 natural selection during the colonial period and through interacting with a colonial offi-
 208 cial, but who was impressed by its explanatory power would be labeled as mentally
 209 colonized despite the fact that she came to adhere to the theory of evolution **through**
 210 natural selection for good reasons such as its explanatory power relative to its competi-
 211 tors. I think that this shows that the dominant conception of decolonization is deeply
 212 flawed and that a more restricted conception of decolonization, such as the one that
 213 Jackson proposes is much more palatable. In 1784 Kant wrote that the motto of the
 214 Enlightenment is “sapere aude! Have courage to make use of your *own* under-
 215 standing!,”²³ I submit that this is also a good motto for any plausible conception of
 216 decolonization, and I am inclined to think that Jackson would agree.
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233 Notes on contributor

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 235 focuses on the history of African philosophy broadly conceived. His work has previously
 236 appeared in *The Journal of African Cultural Studies*, *Kant Studies Online*, *Journal of Historical*
 237 *Sociology*, and *Science & Society*.
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 239

243 ²²See, for example, the misplaced critique of Samir Amin in Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial*
 244 *Africa*, 11. This critique ultimately stems from an overly broad conception of decolonization. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's
 245 conception of decolonization draws upon the notion of decoloniality as articulated by Walter Dignolo.

²³Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” 17.

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