

## RESIGNIFYING THE UNIVERSAL: CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON THE POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN IDENTITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

The dimension of the debate on the relation between the universal and the particular in African philosophy has been skewed in favour of the universalists who argued that the condition for the possibility of an African conception of philosophy cannot be achieved outside the “universal” idea of the philosophical enterprise. In this sense, the ethnophilosophical project and its attempt to rescue the idea of an African past necessary for the reconstruction of an African postcolonial identity and development becomes a futile one. A recent commentator even argues that works concerning African identity are now totally irrelevant and misguided. In this essay, I will be arguing, on the contrary, that the universalist’s argument, much like its critique of ethnophilosophical reason, mistakes the nature, significance and necessity of such a *resistance* (rather than *original*) identity that the ethnophilosophical project promises. I will also argue that the fabrication of such an identity facilitates the avoidance of an uncritical submersion in the universal as well as a proper conception of an African development. This, furthermore, is the only avenue by which the imperialistic ontological space of universal humanism, in which most universalist claims are rooted, can be made more polygonal and mutually beneficial for alternative cultural particulars.

L’homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers  
(Man is born free but is everywhere in chains)

--Rousseau

The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for particular purpose.

--Wittgenstein

### Introduction: On the Universal and the Particular

Philosophers celebrate perennial problems. One of such problems is that of universals and their relationship to particular concrete objects. From the specifically metaphysical altercations between the realists and the nominalists, we can abstract certain culturally specific problematics: How does the universal category of, say, the *human* appropriate

particular cultural experiences? Or, to use a Heideggerian terminology, what does it mean for various human beings *to be*? Consequently, how can we theorize the African's "being-in-the-world"? And, what role does the African philosophical project play in such theorisation?

African philosophers' confrontation with these problems has been particularly mediated by the need to specify the conditions necessary for the possibility of an African philosophy and development. In other words, given the unique confrontation with Europe that gave rise to the body of works we refer to as "African philosophy," African scholars were faced with the problem of identifying certain cores of *African* experiences that will serve as the basis for deriving *philosophy* from a specific cultural environment. They saw the need to differentiate the African experience from specifically Western experience and its influence on philosophical speculation. And on the basis of this differentiation, to reconstruct an African identity that will serve as the fulcrum for determining a path for African development after colonisation.

The debate in African philosophy has been ably divided between the universalists and the culturalists (or, in strictly African philosophical terms, between the ethnophilosophers and the professional philosophers).<sup>1</sup> The universalists contend that the only justification for an "African" philosophy is as a particular instantiation of a universal philosophy originating in the West. On the other hand, the culturalists argue that all philosophies are particular cultural phenomena that follow specific cultural evolutionary pathways.

In the controversy concerning both the proper methodology of doing this African philosophy and the means of achieving an African identity suitable for the proper

conception of an African development, the universalist seems to have won. However I will be arguing that this triumph is actually pyrrhic in the sense that what the universalist seems to have gained both methodologically and substantively, is at the great cost of misunderstanding the issue of an African postcolonial identity. Specifically, my argument is that it is only an uncritical adoption of universalism in the shape of the concept of *the human* that can warrant its critique of the ethnophilosophical project central to the culturalists. The strategy I will adopt is to examine a recent universalist claim that maligns the necessity of an African identitarian project as a veritable path towards a beneficial conception of African development.

The universalist position is ably represented by Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Anthony Appiah. According to Hountondji, “By ‘African philosophy’ I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans themselves and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.”<sup>2</sup> This characterisation stems from his contention that philosophy itself is a theoretical discipline—like physics, mathematics and linguistics—with a methodological orientation and some set of substantive issues with which practitioners are preoccupied. Philosophy, for Hountondji, begins when the discipline discursively begins to confront its own problematics. On this tradition of discursiveness, he writes:

...philosophy never stops; its very existence lies in the to and fro of free discussion, without which there is no philosophy. It is not a closed system but a history, a debate that goes on from generation to generation, in which every thinker, every author, engages in total responsibility: I know I am responsible for what I say, for the theories I put forward...A philosophical...work...is intelligible only as a moment in a debate that sustains and transcends it. It always refers to antecedent positions, either to refute them or to confirm and enrich them. It takes on meaning only in relation to that history, in relation to the term of an ever-changing debate in which the sole stable element is the constant reference to one self-same

object, to one sphere of experience, the characterization of which, incidentally, is itself part of the evolution.<sup>3</sup>

Given this explanation, authentic philosophical cogitations become textual, while orature (fables, dynastic poems, epics, proverbs, myths, and so on) pales as only a *pre-text* of the tradition of discursivity peculiar to a universal philosophy. Hountondji's absolutism about the theoretical circumference of autonomous philosophy therefore excludes the ethnophilosophers' conception of philosophy as primarily a cultural field preoccupied with the analysis of oral literature and other items of the preliterate culture. The theoretical move, by ethnologists, social scientists and cultural anthropologists, from a descriptive analysis of human cultural ideas and institutions to the attempt to study "... *beliefs* and *values* and draws conclusions about the *mode of thought* that are imputed to their formulation and observance..."<sup>4</sup> is, for Hountondji, an unjustifiable ethnophilosophical strategy.

Wiredu's universalist argument is also very simple. For him, the theoretical and critical nature of philosophy cannot afford the ethnophilosophical view of it as an uncritical *communal* undertaking. The adequacy of any philosophy has nothing to do with its origination but rather with its discursivity: its ability to "generate theories that can illuminate the problems of the day" and thus provide "the context of ideas within which particular choices and preferences in the realm of action—whether economic, political, cultural or scientific—can be made."<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, philosophy has a cogent relationship with science or rather with the habits of mind characteristic of science: "habits of exactness and rigour in thinking, the pursuit of systematic coherence and the experimental approach."<sup>6</sup> Although he is specifically clear on the culture-relativity of philosophy, he is insistent that philosophy

can be universal.<sup>7</sup> Such a universal philosophy, for instance, would be aided by what Wiredu calls “the fundamental biological unity of the human species.” This derives from the fact that “there is a *human* way of developing in which instinctual drives are in due course transformed into structured thought, discourse and action.” The basic essentials of this process proceed “in similar ways among all human beings.”<sup>8</sup>

Hountondji’s and Wiredu’s universalism is marshaled against the culturalists’ position summed up in Hountondji’s pejorative term: Ethnophilosophy. The ethnophilosophical reason is represented fundamentally by what Hountondji sees as an attempt to postulate *unanimity* in philosophical beliefs among Africans, and hence to uncritically initiate a confrontation with the African traditional past. On this understanding, “critics of ethnophilosophy [therefore] argue that a focus on the past detracts from a critical posture that evaluates all practices in terms of what they contribute to the liberation of Africa... for African philosophy need not express a particular outlook for Africans.”<sup>9</sup>

In “Humanistic Cultural Universalism,” Oyeshile provides a critical elaboration of this critique of ethnophilosophical reason, and particularly an argument for a cultural universalism that can motivate Africa’s search for a paradigm of an authentic postcolonial development. Though not really directed at the ethnophilosophical project in a way that Hountondji’s and Wiredu’s critiques were, his critical analysis also negates ethnophilosophy and especially its search for an African postcolonial identity. His basic argument in the essay is that “African development should only be sought in universalist terms which should involve certain humanistic values.” For this reason, therefore, “most works concerning African identity are now irrelevant, and if they are not, they are

misguided.” The urgent task in Africa and of the African scholars is, in this regard, “human development in all its ramifications and not the assertion of the African personality (identity) which was more relevant at a particular period in our history.”<sup>10</sup>

Oyeshile’s two claims are that (a) a humanistic cultural universalism provides a veritable starting point for launching the project of an African development, and (b) this universalism *excludes* a search for a cultural identity from the vantage point of the African. In his own admission, Oyeshile’s argument draws largely from Appiah’s universalist conception of African philosophy and his critique of African cultural nationalism (read: ethnophilosophy). Appiah’s universalism is based on the contention that cultural nationalism in its pan-African guise is really a racial construct created by Europe as a subjugating strategy. As such, it assumes a cultural or racial unity of the African and African diasporic people. However, according to Appiah, since the biological and cultural arguments for races failed to establish their existence, then Pan Africanism fails also for that reason. Its vision of a completely different or a completely homogeneous Africa in dialectical opposition to the West is also false.

This is the fulcrum of Appiah’s thesis. If it is correct, for him (as well as for Hountondji), to argue that Africa really does not have a common traditional culture, a common language, a common religion, or even belong to a common race, then a case can be made for the alignment of Africa to the universe of humanity.<sup>11</sup> The first part of this case is that Africa, apart from being a geographical entity accommodating diverse peoples and cultures, “shares too many problems and projects to be distracted by a bogus basis for solidarity.” These problems include those that every modernising region is facing in a rapidly globalising world: common ecological problems; a situation of

dependency; the problem of racism; the possibilities of the development of regional markets and local circuits of production; and so on.<sup>12</sup> Thus, since we as Africans are now confronted with a new *self* more individualistic and atomic than the self of the precapitalist societies, then its inescapability becomes something to celebrate. Within this modern society therefore, what exists is not the cult of difference or race but rather the solidarity of humanity.

The second part of Appiah's case is that, like every other universalists, he also deploys arguments for an autonomous philosophy with a substantive concern for certain fundamental problems. These problems—causation, good and evil, mind-body, justice, illusion, reason, reality, truth, etc—may really appear Western but are actually universal in scope. While these problems may be seen as constituting the core of the Western philosophical tradition, Appiah contends that they can as well be seen “as growing out of a history of systematic reflection on widespread, prereflective beliefs about the nature of humankind, about the purposes, and about our knowledge of and place in the cosmos.”<sup>13</sup> Something therefore counts as philosophy if it confronts these issues critically with the required “traditional philosophical method.” (We therefore arrive at the logic of Hountondji's definition of African philosophy.) For Appiah, it would be extremely difficult to conceive of a *human* culture where nothing like these fundamental issues is present or that does not have “*any* crucial organizing concepts.”

Essentially therefore, for Appiah,

We [Africans] will solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a special situation, and we shall not solve them if we see them as African problems, generated by our being somehow unlike others... If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer fully autochthonous *echt*-African culture awaiting

salvage by our artists (just as there is, of course, no American culture without African roots).<sup>14</sup>

Africans must, in other words, jettison the illusion of a unique African identity in a global world that is not only interdependent but also rapidly integrating. Furthermore, the project of an African development becomes realisable within this humanistic universalism that ensures cultural interrelationship rather than insularity.

It seems quite obvious how Oyeshile could arrive at his argument of a humanistic universalism unburdened by the unnecessary encumbrances of cultural nationalism and its identity illusion. Following Appiah, the two horns of his contention becomes clearer. On the one hand, the issue of African identity was relevant “as a rallying point for a people who wanted to have a belief in themselves, a people who wanted to be capable of determining their own destiny in the face of motley values.” On the other hand, such a reason no longer applies because “the identity issue does not address the urgent problems confronting Africa. It lays more than enough stress on the African personality rather than on the compelling problems of scientific development, hunger, religious emancipation and political anarchy.”<sup>15</sup>

In a straightforward reflection of the overt optimism of Appiah’s universalism, Oyeshile also remarks that

Of course, it is a truism that Africa is currently enmeshed in political and economic problems. Solutions to these problems would go a long way to engender development. However, these problems can only be solved if we as Africans see ourselves as an integral part of the world order. It is then that political rights and other political values will be respected by African political leaders. It is also then that the goal of economic emancipation can be pursued vigorously.<sup>16</sup>

What I have done in this section of the essay is to lay down the case for universalism and the impossibility of an unnecessarily provincial burden of identity



within its imperative. The most common denominator among the universalists is their trenchant critique of the (African) identity issue. This is followed, especially in Appiah and Oyeshile, by a simplistic, one-dimensional optimism in the efficacy of humanistic values and concert as the ultimate panacea for the resolution of human problems. Though Oyeshile does not seriously consider metaphilosophical issues in his critique, philosophy plays a pivotal role in the construal of their humanism. In the next section, I will critically examine how a supposedly universal construal of philosophy led to a “universal” humanism whose ethnocentric bent constrict the ontological space. It will be clear from this that most conceptions of the universal use it as a conceptual forum for a particular identity manifestation.

### **Philosophy and the Shape of the Human**

The philosophical enterprise, as we noted above, is crucial to the universalists’ conception of a viable universal humanism. It is equally significant for the specification of the conditions for an African philosophical project oriented towards a postcolonial African identity and development. The universalists divorce an authentic philosophical discourse from a purely provincial need. For them, philosophy must be autonomous of all identity issues since it promises a virile humanistic universalism. After all, philosophy, according to the argument, is the ultimate *human* achievement!

How does this idea of autonomous philosophy contribute to our formulation of the utility of African identity *contra* the universalist’s contention? As I will be showing, a critical interrogation of these concepts (i.e. the human, the philosophical) will lead to the *particularist* concepts, theories, canons and identities which have been denied to individual cultures in the putative necessity of universal humanism.<sup>17</sup>

The foundation of modern philosophy is supposedly derived from Descartes' unique confrontation with the perennial problems of philosophy. Basically, the Cartesian *Weltanschauung* differentiates between the human and the animal domain and on this basis claims that the mental is different from the physical. In short, it demanded the predominance of epistemology in modern philosophy. Thus, from the presumption that philosophy is a uniquely human phenomenon,

Cartesians postulate the absolute autonomy of philosophy. They presuppose that there is a distinct set of philosophical problems independent of culture, society and history. For them, philosophy stands outside the various conventions on which people base their social practices and transcends the cultural heritage and political struggles of people.<sup>18</sup>

On this account, Hountondji, Wiredu, Appiah and Oyeshile would be Cartesians. The point is not really a strange one given the scientific positivism consequent upon such a view of philosophy. It is in the Cartesian philosophical framework, that is, that we witness the unique coincidence of *episteme* and *scientia*.

Yet, Descartes, a 17th century French philosopher, scientist and mathematician, was only responding to specific historical circumstances in relation to the medieval period. For example, the rise of science and the advent of the capitalist production. Cornel West explores the metaphilosophical insights in Heidegger's, Wittgenstein's and Dewey's metaphilosophical arguments against the ahistorical character of Cartesian autonomous philosophy. Through his critique of the historical hermeneutics of Heidegger, the cultural descriptions of Wittgenstein and the pragmatic orientation of Dewey, he arrives at a definition of Afro-American philosophy as "...the interpretation of Afro-American history, highlighting the cultural heritage and political struggles, which

provides desirable norms that should regulate responses to particular challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans.”<sup>19</sup>

It is a wonder that in spite of this particularist definition West goes on to explicate a humanistic view that can guide an understanding of Afro-American culture and politics. I will argue later why his humanism is more robust and critical than that of Oyeshile and the others. But for now, we need to interrogate what made the Cartesian conception of autonomous philosophy a unique ontological strategy for invading the space of the universal *anthropos*. I suspect that an attempt to answer a similar question would have given Oyeshile and the universalist movement a critical outlook on “the universal.”

In his discussion of the utility of social memory—of preservation, selection, elimination and invention—in the process of identity formation, Mazrui gives us an opening into the analysis of the Western appropriation of the ontological space of the *human*. This began with the arbitrary incorporation of ancient Greece into the ancestral lineage of Euro-American cultural heritage. This, for Mazrui, is a blatant case of false memory—inscribing into one’s past what is originally not a part of it—as well as that of macro-plagiarism, “a massive borrowing by one civilization from another in a manner which deliberately obscures origins and denies acknowledgement and attribution.”<sup>20</sup>

Since philosophy as the ultimate rational enterprise is putatively the discovery of the Greeks, the archetypal *humans* (from whom Hegel’s absolute spirit began its non-historical march towards substantive objectivity and “essential universality” culminating in Euro-American cultures), the Cartesian autonomous philosophy is thereby complemented by an ahistorical conception of humanism as “something essential, above and beyond the accidents of historical or national difference.”<sup>21</sup>

The history of the signification of the “human” is certainly one that bears out what a commentator has described as the Humpty Dumbtean conclusion that the meaning of humanism belongs to politics rather than to semantics. Politics, that is, speaks to the issue of which, among all the available meanings, is to be master. According to Davies,

For the meanings of a powerful and complex word are never a matter for lexicography alone. They are tied inescapably to the linguistic and cultural authority, real, absent or desired, of those who use it. The important question, over and above what the word *means* in a particular context, is why and how that meaning *matters*, and for whom.<sup>22</sup>

A panoramic view of all perspectives on the concept—civic humanism, Protestant humanism, rationalistic humanism, romantic humanism, positivistic humanism, liberal humanism, Nazi humanism, Heidegger’s antihumanist humanism, and the humanist antihumanism of Foucault and Althusser—reveals that they have been imperial, “they speak of the human in the accents and interests of a class, a sex, a ‘race’. Their embrace suffocates those whom it does not ignore.”<sup>23</sup>

This exclusionary as well as smothering element is what Symonds traced from the discovery of romantic humanism to the dawn of modernity in Europe. For him,

The essence of humanism consisted in a new and vital perception of the dignity of man as a rational being apart from theological determinations, and in the further perception that classic literature alone displayed human nature in the plenitude of intellectual and moral freedom... The study of Greek opened up philosophical horizons far beyond the dream-world of the churchmen and the monks; it stimulated the germs of science, suggested new astronomical hypotheses, and indirectly led to the discovery of America...<sup>24</sup>

We seem to have, on Symonds’ testimonies, imperial colonisation flowing from a romantic conception of the human! We therefore arrive at the triumph of the Arnoldian “central, truly human point of view”: essential, above and beyond historical or national differences.

We must wonder, as Davies does and most of the universalists do not, about the accent placed on “*central*,” “*truly human*” and “*human*.” The implication seems to be that every appeal to an abstract and essential humanism is an appropriation of at worse a suffocating, and at best a discompassing perspective that perpetuates the domination of those who are perceived to be inauthentically human. Thus,

Each of us lives our human-ness as a uniquely individual experience; but that experience, we are asked to feel, is part of a larger, all-embracing humanity, a “human condition”, to which *the great poets of the European tradition, Homer and Dante and Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton and Goethe, can give us the key.*<sup>25</sup>

However, given this protean adaptability of the term, it would only be logical to explore its nebulous boundaries and depths from a particular human perspective. Oyeshile is not cautious enough to investigate the specific historical and local interests that may be at work within such a grand concept. This is necessary because universalism is meant to dissolve such particularities like race, sex, class, culture from which most people experience human-ness. According to Davies, “humanism” is an anachronism that is still deeply embedded in contemporary consciousness and everyday common sense

to the extent that it requires a conscious effort, every time someone appeals to “human nature” or “the human condition”, to recall how recent such notions are, and how specific to a particular history and point of view, and how very odd it would seem, in cultures historically or ethnologically unlike our own, to separate out and privilege “Man” in this way.<sup>26</sup>

This cultural appropriation of the *anthropos* is followed by a denial of an African influence not only on the Greek cultural heritage, but on world history as a whole. In other words, there is an ontological attempt to efface black, African identity from the template of a supposed universal culture. Gordon theorises this as the ontological attempt at the phenomenological invisibility or disappearance of Africans and Afro-Americans.

The existential-phenomenological approach of Gordon theorises the interactive dynamics of the ontologies of white and black ego-genesis and the resultant “imperial battles for ontological space” (as a space of self-positing and its realisation). These battles are imperial because Euro-Americans have defined the ontological space of white ego-genesis in such a way that makes it possible to evade the humanity of Africans.<sup>27</sup>

In his account of bad faith, Gordon argues that since human beings generally deal inauthentically with the specific—political, economic, racial or, for Gordon and Sartre, ontological—hindrances between self-positing and self-realisation, it implies that the self’s project of being always falls short of its projected ideal. However, in bad faith, we pretend to a greater degree of self-integration than our ego has in fact achieved. This pretense must however be concealed through certain evasive or compensatory existential activity of exploitation. For the white, this manifests through an acute racial stereotyping, a “projective non-seeing” that performs “the phenomenological disappearance” of black humanity.<sup>28</sup> This constitutive act of absence, invisibility, displacement and anonymity is

...fundamentally phenomenological, that is an absence that is constituted as a meaning in the white consciousness. This spell of phenomenological invisibility is an important contribution of the European and Euro-American philosophical consciousness to the larger encompassing cloud of non-seeing conjured by European imperialism to veil the humanity of Africans.<sup>29</sup>

The result is that the formation of the white ego is simultaneously the deformation of the black ego. Paradoxically, however, in denying “the forces of civilizational origins” and in the effacement of African humanity, it becomes quite obvious that the Euro-American cultural establishment unwittingly undermines its quest for the universal.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, if a people’s humanity is seriously interrogated as the Africans’ was in colonialism, then why should it not be logical to question the putative universal

humanism? That is, if they have been ontologically effaced from the *anthropos*, what possible means could they have of participating in it? It must therefore become obvious why it is really awkward to claim, as Oyeshile does, that the issue of self-identity of the Africans was only useful at a point in their cultural development. On the contrary, a culture's dynamic relation with others is, *inter alia*, a constant reevaluation of its identity and esteem, "the act of self-definition forever remains open-ended, with no guarantee of triumph. Indeed, the process takes precedent over the result, since any static self-identity soon disintegrates the self."<sup>31</sup> And since the ontologically invisible Africans would always experience Europe and America as the questioning of their very existence, Oyeshile would definitely be wrong to claim that any attempt to reclaim that identity is irrelevant or misguided.

It becomes unimaginative to formulate the counter-thesis that it is the problem of identity rather than that of development that is primary for Africans. Without the former, the latter is meaningless. What then makes this reclamation possible?

### **African Experience and the Constitution of Modernity**

Friedrich Nietzsche, the ancestor for many dimensions of antihumanism, has argued, in *Human All Too Human*, that

All philosophers involuntarily think of "man" as an *aeterna veritas*, as something that remains constant in the midst of all flux, as a sure measure of things...*Lack of historical sense is the family failing of all philosophers*; many, without being aware of it, even take the most recent manifestation of man, such as has risen under the impress of certain religions, even certain political events, as the fixed form from which one has to start out...<sup>32</sup>

What does a "historical sense" require in the attempt to ensure the phenomenological visibility of the Africans in the ontological struggles for relevance? Gordon argues that

the question of existence is, in itself, an empty one; it is always a conjunctive affair. In other words, the question must always be situated in the existential realities of theorising blackness and the African. According to him,

At the heart of existential thought are two questions; “What are we”? and “What shall we do?” these questions can be translated into questions of identity and normative action. They are questions, further, of ontological and teleological significance, for the former addresses being and the latter addresses what to become—in a word, “purpose.”<sup>33</sup>

Since the elements of African cultural identity have been undergoing significant changes in response to their confrontation with European imperialism and American racism, it would seem necessary to reformulate a new context for the confrontation with the questions of identity and normative action. I suspect that Oyeshile and most of the universalists mistook the need for such a “resistance identity” for the attempt to glorify a “*mystique* of pure coherence” that is usually associated with the ethnophiles’ perception of the traditional African past.

In constructing such a resistance identity, some kind of reinvention would serve the Africans well. Many African scholars, including Appiah, see the need for such an *imagined* locus of solidarity. Like Appiah, Mazrui argues that “Real Pan-Africanism must go beyond the twin stimuli of poetry and imperialism. Pan-Africanism is based on a positive false memory—that Africa was divided by colonialism and was previously one.”<sup>34</sup> This project of reclamation radically confronts the necessity of an ethnophilosophical examination of the African cultural past beyond any romantic idealisation. Henry gives two reasons for the necessity of a phenomenological analysis of African traditional heritage.



One, through a Shutzian (reference to Alfred Shutz, the phenomenologist) proprietary relationship, African philosophers have a significant tie with these cultural constructs as invaluable properties in a way such that “expectation, (particularly of continuity), obligations and constraints are imposed upon us. This legacy is our responsibility in ways that cannot be for non-African groups.” We are therefore saddled with the responsibility of preserving and developing “this heritage by examining it ethnophilosophically, by reflecting on it in [our] own lived experience, or collectively with contemporaries and consociates.” Two, Henry further contends that this proprietary relation with the symbols and discourses of traditional Africa is extended to a unique ego-genetic relation with the predecessors in such a way that the relations “establish certain common cultural or mythopoetic elements in the formation of African, African-American, and African-Caribbean egos.”<sup>35</sup> This formative role of the cultural elements will constitute them as common elements that will facilitate the self-reflection of African/a philosophers on their own ego-genetic processes, and on the cultural identity of an African/a philosophy.

After immersing ourselves in historical thinking, a bit of Nietzschean modesty is in order. This is because Nietzsche holds that the “virtue of modesty” is required for historical philosophising. This takes many dimensions. The first is that after the ontological determination of the self-identity of Africans and African philosophy, African philosophers must go on to confront the socio-existential dimension of the African predicament that bears directly on the problems of African development. This is generally the problem of how African cultures can be *modern*. This, after all, is the basis for the universalism of Appiah, Hountondji, Wiredu and lately Oyeshile.

However, as the preceding arguments have revealed, modernity is originally and incredibly constituted as a western—Euro-American—phenomenon together with its exclusionary ontology. West rightly defines modernity as

the descriptive notion that connotes the historical state of affairs characterized by an abundance of wealth resulting from the industrial and technological revolution and the ensuing cultural isolation and fragmentation due to a disintegration of closely-knit communities and the decline of religious systems.<sup>36</sup>

The question of how African can become modern is only meaningful from the background of the rescue of African cultural visibility from the anonymity of Euro-American philosophical and cultural imperialism and humanism. A regained cultural distinctiveness provides a strong arsenal for meeting a modernity defined by science and technology. In other words, since the scientism of Euro-American modernity requires the “phenomenological disappearance” of myth, tradition, religion and other supposedly extra-scientific discourses, and since these “extras” are crucial for the authentic formation of an African postcolonial identity or ego, then a dialectical relationship between the two will be significant for the constitution of an African modernity as an important dimension of the modernity project itself.

Africa’s relationship with Euro-American modernity constitutes an ambivalent challenge: that of participating in its achievement without simultaneously surrendering to its ethnocentric underpinnings. Here, we achieve our second point of Nietzschean modesty through Benhabib. In “Cultural Complexity,” she also confronts the question of ethnocentric discourse and global imperative: “Whence does the moral imperative to treat others with universal respect and according to egalitarian reciprocity derive?” She replies:

I think the only honest and sensible response...is that indeed these norms only make sense against the background of the hermeneutic horizon of modernity; but also to point out that modernity, although the most significant elements constituting it were first assembled in the West, is a world-wide process and phenomenon. From its very inception, the dynamic of modernity has set world-historical forces into motion which have in turn transformed it into a common human project, and not just a Western one. Once the ideas of universal equality, liberty, and brotherhood—and eventually sisterhood—were formulated through the political revolutions of modernity, there no longer was a historical option of going back to premodern conceptions.<sup>37</sup>

Even in this context of a world-historical modernity, an African dimension of such a modernity—the challenge of nation-building, of evolving viable and appropriate democratic institutions; the problems of inculcating a political morality and eradicating rampant political corruption; the problems of traditional moral standards disintegrating vis-à-vis urbanization; and even the problems of AIDS and globalisation—requires, still following Benhabib’s concession, “the continuing identity of a society and culture” which is based upon “its capacity to deal with outside challenges and contingencies while also retaining the belief of its member in its normative systems and value structures.”<sup>38</sup>

We next turn to the implications of these ruminations for the constitution of a universal humanism not partial to one imperial perspective.

### **The Imperative of Resignification**

The fundamental argument I have been developing hitherto is that Oyeshile’s humanist universalism is not only myopic about the formation, significance and necessity of a postcolonial African identity that is resistant rather than a glorification of a mystique, his theoretical framework betrays a naïve understanding of the complex amalgam of issues that accompany the imperial conception of such universalism. In other words, he fails to

analyse critically the concept of the universal in its particularity and ideality; for example, that the paradox that *humanity is one and many*.

We cannot argue that since the supposed “human”, the Cartesian subject, is really invented in the image of Euro-America—that is, this subject “is not a woman, not black, not a migrant, not marginal, etc”—then we should abandon the concept or its general rhetoric as “a hopelessly contaminated concept, to be thrown out with the bathwater of humanist delusion.”<sup>39</sup> This, I suspect, would be the fundamental objection of the universalists. But I maintain that an awareness of this delusion strengthens the concept and guides one against any uncritical humanistic optimism, *pace* Oyeshile and others. It is the humanist delusions that necessitates the imperative of resignification.

The first point in that project is to note that before the conscription of a humanist universalism to the processes of imperial power, conquest and empire fed by the desire for the “*discovery* of the future,” the early humanists—before “humanism”—were orientated on the excitement surrounding the “*recovery* of the past.” This implicitly identitarian orientation was broadened by their peripatetic desires. I suppose that such nomadic contact beyond their own provincialities enlarged their humanistic sensibilities and sensitivities beyond the desire to dominate. Their physical and intellectual peregrination led to the development of inter-generational and inter-racial collaboration around the theme of friendship unmarred by ideological perceptions. Put in other words, just like Machiavelli who, through the pages of the recovered ancients’ manuscripts, felt their generosity and kindness (*umanità*) in responding to his modern probing, the early humanists too were generous in their accommodation of those who do not share their

peculiarities and cultural milieu—as long as they were humans. And this is in spite of being partial to their own linguistic idioms.<sup>40</sup>

In the early humanists, we have the form of an encompassing humanist universalism that is multivocal; a coherent vision of the human from its multidimensionality or concrete plurality rather than in a hollowed, ethnocentric singularity.<sup>41</sup> This leads to the second point in the project of resignification. Once again, let us return to Benhabib's struggle with "the problem of universalism and concrete ethical communities" or what she calls "the problem of the concrete universal." The concept of concrete universality has to do with the problem of *situating* or *concretizing* the universal. This concept, for her, recognises the distinction between the "two visions of universalism": "one which considers the other as a generalized other, as a being entitled to the same rights and duties which we would grant ourselves, and the other which sees the human person as a 'concrete other' with specific histories, needs, and trajectories."<sup>42</sup>

Contrary to the essentialism of an imperial humanism, Benhabib argues that

[M]y anti-essentialism is simply introducing this moment of narrative articulation [in the sense of an "account giving"] into the concept of culture and seeing how members of cultures identify themselves as members in creating narratives of belonging. These narratives of belonging, of history, of memory, always have references to other narratives, to other moments of identification. I'm interested in the interaction between the self and other, the "we" and the "they." And I think this is a universal aspect of all human communities. We are different from those over there, on the other side, insofar as we narratively identify ourselves with a group.<sup>43</sup>

Such an anti-essentialist reading of culture and the universal is similar to West's idea of a humanist tradition of African-American thought and behaviour. His basic argument is that culture is more fundamental than politics in regard to Afro-American

self-understanding, “it presupposes that Afro-American cultural perceptions provide a broader and richer framework for understanding the Afro-American experience than political perceptions.”<sup>44</sup> However, out of all the traditions that provide an explanatory matrix—the vitalist, the rationalist, the existentialist and the humanist traditions—West favours the humanist conception of Afro-American history because it neither romanticises nor reject Afro-American culture (as the vitalist and the rationalist traditions did). Rather, a humanist understanding

accepts this culture for what it is, the expression of an oppressed human community imposing its distinctive form of order on an existential chaos, explaining its political predicament, preserving its self-respect, and projecting its own special hope for the future... the humanist tradition provides a cultural springboard useful in facing the ever-present issue of self-identity for Afro-Americans and join their political struggle to other progressive elements in American society.<sup>45</sup>

It seems that Benhabib’s and West’s portrayal of a humanistic universalism gives more hope for a culture’s advancement than Oyeshile’s. This is because it becomes a concept that allows one to gaze into one’s humanity from the perspective of a cultural past. It has the fundamental task of enlarging the ontological and political spaces of existence for the self-definition and self-determination of all particular cultures. It is exactly this significant cultural mooring that Oyeshile denies as being unnecessary for the understanding of African development. Without such a root or self-image, however, Africa’s gaze into a developmental future will always be with perplexed eyes.

## Notes

1. This characterisation is really simplistic, but it mirrors the most important schism between the universalists and the particularists. This basic, unsophisticated distinction has been elaborated into four methodological approaches: the ethnophilosophical (or descriptive) school, the sagacious (or sage-ethnological) school, the nationalist (or nationalist-ideological-political) school, and the professional (or linguistic-analytic) school. In recent times however, there had been other methodological schools: the hermeneutical (or phenomenological) approach, the narrative approach (or the narrative-hermeneutic approach), literary/artistic approach, and so on.
2. Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, trans. by Henri Evans with an introduction by Abiola Irele (London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1983), p. 33.
3. Ibid. pp. 72, 83.
4. Barry Hallen, "Modes of Thought, Ordinary Language and Cognitive Diversity," in Claude Sumner and Samuel Wolde Yohannes (eds.) *Perspectives in African Philosophy: An Anthology on "Problematics of an African Philosophy: Twenty Years After (1976—1996)"* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2002), p. 215. Emphasis in original.
5. Olusegun Oladipo, *Philosophy and the African Experience: The Contributions of Kwasi Wiredu* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1996), p. 17.
6. Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 32.
7. For a theoretical elaboration of his universalism, see Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996).
8. Kwasi Wiredu, "Canons of Conceptualisation," *The Monist: An International Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (October, 1993), p. 461. Emphasis in original
9. Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman, "Introduction to Part Three," in Lott and Pittman (eds.) *A Companion to African-American Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 153.
10. Olatunji A. Oyeshile, "Humanistic Cultural Universalism as a Veritable Basis for Africa's Development," *Concordia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 51, 2007, pp. 43, 44.

11. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 26.
12. Ibid. p. 180. The preceding quote is from p. 26.
13. Ibid. p. 86.
14. Ibid. pp. 136, 155.
15. Olatunji Oyeshile, "Humanistic Cultural Universalism," p. 48, 49.
16. Ibid. pp. 57-58.
17. In formulating this strategy, I have simply appropriated Fashina's argument against Appiah's critique of nativism. The argument reads thus:  
 But I think Appiah dismisses the [cultural] nationalists too easily. What are we to say about a cultural nationalist who studies the concepts and theories of other cultures seriously not because she mistakes them for universals but because she believes that this would lead to the "particularist" concepts, theories, and canons which she asserts of her own cultural productions?  
 See Dipo Fashina's review of Appiah's *In My Father's House*, *Ethics*, Vol. 104, No. 4, July 1994, p. 901.
18. Cornel West, "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience," in Lott and Pittman (eds.) *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, p. 8.
19. Ibid. p. 11.
20. Ali A. Mazrui, "Cultural Amnesia, Cultural Nostalgia and False Memory: Africa's Identity Crisis Revisited," *African Philosophy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2000, p. 92.
21. Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 19. I owe my critical approach to Davies' historical excursion into the signification of the concept of humanism.
22. Ibid. p. 6.
23. Ibid. p. 131.
24. Symonds, J. A., *The Renaissance in Italy*, 1898, pp. 52, 2 cited in Davies, *Humanism*, pp. 22, 23.
25. Davies, *Humanism*, pp. 21-22. Emphasis added.
26. Ibid. p. 25.



27. Paget Henry, "African-American Philosophy: A Caribbean Perspective," in Lott and Pittman (eds.) *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, p. 52. See also Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), and *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
28. Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, p. 24, cited in Henry, "African-American Philosophy," p. 52.
29. Ibid.
30. Cf. Ali Mazrui, "Cultural Amnesia..." p. 96.
31. Cornel West, "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience," p. 25.
32. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 1880, cited in Davies, *Humanism*, pp. 32-33. Emphasis added.
33. Lewis R. Gordon, "African-American Existential Philosophy," in Lott and Pittman (eds.) *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, p. 34.
34. Ali Mazrui, "Cultural Amnesia..." p. 90.
35. Paget Henry, "African-American Philosophy," p. 56. (The preceding quotes are from the same page.) Henry makes use of Shutz in methodologically constructing ways of relating to the ego-activities of traditional African predecessors whose lived experiences do not overlap with ours. Shutz argues that we can reach the world of the predecessors through records, documents, artifacts and other expressions of their subjectivity left behind; or through a living person who may have had a contact with them. Though this relation lacks the reciprocity of face-to-face contact, one can achieve such reciprocity through what Shutz calls the bequeathing of property (as cultural heritages) in which the predecessors continue to influence our lives.
36. Cornel West, "Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience," p. 12.
37. Seyla Benhabib, "Cultural Complexity, Moral Interdependence, and the Global Dialogic Community," in Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover (eds.) *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 252-253.
38. Ibid. p. 238.
39. Tony Davies, *Humanism*, p. 59.
40. Ibid. pp. 78, 79.

41. Such a conception of a singular “Hu-man-ism” can be traced to a huge editorial and interpretive mistake around the quotation: “What a piece of work is man.” This can be referred to as the most distinguished of humanist mottos. Yet, this quotation appeared in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (II, ii) as: “What a piece of work is a man!” The omission of the indefinite “a” shifts the burden of interpretation from plurality to singularity, a “generic inclusiveness of the human” limited by an ethnocentric *folie des grandeurs*.
42. Seyla Benhabib, “Concrete Universality and Critical Theory,” An Interview with Alfredo Gomez-Muller and Gabriel Rockhill on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2006. Interestingly, this interview appeared in the same volume of *Concordia* that featured Oyeshile’s universalist rejection of African identity.
43. Ibid. p. 34.
44. Cornel West, “Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience,” p. 13.
45. Ibid. pp. 24, 27.