

THE PROBLEM WITH CONCEPTUAL MANDELANISATION

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajct.v5i1.4>

Submission: October 5, 2024

Accepted: April 10, 2025

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that *selective homage* is antithetical to the collectivist ethos that characterises African societies and constitutes a major problem in Mesembe Edet's theory of 'Conceptual Mandelanisation' (CM). CM as an approach to system-building is built on reverence for the "deified personage" of Nelson Mandela. In search of a practical foundation for system-building in African philosophy, Edet proposed the theory of CM as a solution to the failures of system-building projects in postcolonial African philosophy. I shall first consider what is meant by CM in Edet's philosophy. I then establish why CM as a theory promotes a system of *selective homage* due to its over-glorification of the sacrifices of one individual or leader over those of the community. I conclude my analysis by arguing that a consistent system-building project that aims to appropriate the personage of Africans would, in fact, appropriate the personages of the community or the collective personage of all its outstanding leaders, rather than that of a single individual.

Keywords: Conceptual mandelanisation, Mesembe Edet, *Selective homage*, African philosophy.

Introduction

Edet's purpose in his notable paper, "The Question of Conceptual Decolonisation in African Philosophy and the Problem of the

Language of African Philosophy: A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu and a Proposal for Conceptual Mandelanization in the Africa We Know,” is to demonstrate the evident inadequacy of current approaches to system-building projects in African philosophy undertaken by African philosophers. According to Edet, African philosophers have been going about the project of system-building the wrong way and, consequently, have been wasting their efforts pursuing the wrong activity. This realisation necessitates a change in approach to Africanising philosophy within and outside the African continent. It calls for a reconceptualisation of concepts.

Edet’s critical project of reconceptualising relevant concepts in African philosophy takes off with a critique of Kwasi Wiredu’s (1980, 1998) projects of cultural reconstructionism and conceptual decolonisation. In Edet’s assessment, Wiredu’s proposals, which call for the decolonisation of concepts in African philosophy through indigenisation, fail to provide what he calls “a rigorously worked out or well thought-out theoretical framework or specified methodological preconditions for the erection of an authentic philosophical system or method which can arrive at philosophical truth based on fundamental first principles which can be validated” (EDET 2015, 206). Furthermore, the failure exposes the lack of a coherent theoretical and methodological framework for Africanising philosophy in Wiredu’s projects. This challenge requires a solution that Edet provides with his project of CM, which is characterised by reconceptualisation and expansion of the meanings of concepts along the lines of Nelson Mandela’s personage.

My aim here is to consider the strengths of Edet’s theory as a possible contribution to African political philosophy. Consequently, I shall not be discussing Wiredu’s positions in this paper for want of space, and because Edet has already provided enough analysis of them in his essay. After providing a brief overview of Edet’s theory of CM, I shall establish why CM, as a theory, promotes a system of *selective homage* due to its over-glorification of the sacrifices of one leader over others. I conclude by arguing that *selective homage* is antithetical to the collectivist ethos that characterises the African sociopolitical milieu and constitutes a major problem in Edet’s theory. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of Edet’s CM theory.

Edet's Notion of Conceptual Mandelanisation

On the question of system-building in African philosophy, Edet believes that African philosophers have approached the project of system-building in the wrong way. Current approaches, he argues, have led to the wastage of efforts due to *the language problem*. *The language problem* in African philosophy describes the problem of determining what ought to be the appropriate language for communicating African ideas. As Godfrey Tangwa (2017, 130; see also NGUGI 1981) puts it, it captures the “larger debate about the language of African academic productions and artistic expressions.” This problem is engendered by the multiplicity of languages, cultures, ethnicities, and peoples across the African continent. In this section, I discuss Edet's programme of CM and the questions it raises for African sociopolitical philosophy.

Edet argues that, so far, African philosophers have continued to carry out their project of system-building an authentic African philosophical foundation using the languages of their former European colonisers. To him, this approach to deconstructing entrenched postcolonial epistemic structures detracts from the main project of constructing an authentic African philosophical system. It is an exercise that changes nothing at the systemic level in the way Africans engage in their philosophical reflections, except, perhaps, the names of some fundamental philosophical concepts, as these concepts still retain their Western characterisations. What this means is that current approaches to decolonising – and/or Africanising – philosophy make the proverbial mistake of *putting the cart before the horse*. This is one of the problems Edet identifies in Wiredu's Cultural Reconstructionism and Conceptual Decolonisation projects.

On the question of the failures of decolonisation projects, Edet begins his critical project of CM with a critique of Wiredu's proposals. In his assessment, Wiredu's proposals fail to provide a rigorous, systematic, and clear theoretical framework for constructing an authentic philosophical system that leads to philosophical truths. To him, this is evident in the fact that after proposing a switch to philosophising and writing in indigenous languages, Wiredu failed to live by the principles of his philosophy as he continued to philosophise and write in the language of a former European coloniser—that is, the English language (EDET 2015). Decolonising and Africanising

fundamental concepts in philosophy and the wider system of knowledge production and dissemination are not wholly irrelevant and unimportant. However, to Edet, the project of decolonisation is not important enough to take centre stage in philosophical discourse over other more urgent challenges like protracted wars, political corruption, authoritarianism, famine, diseases, and postcolonial exploitation of the African continent, amongst others. Addressing the morally unacceptable living conditions of Africans is what philosophers should be paying more attention to. Thus, for progress to be made on the African project of system-building, there is a need to explore new approaches to the Africanisation of philosophy projects by African philosophers, as language alone is not the sole determinant of what should count as an authentic – African – philosophy. For this reason, Edet proposes the theory of ‘Conceptual Mandelanisation’ as a practical application of philosophical theories to address important existential problems that Africans face in the postcolonial world. In his view, comparatively, these problems are more important and require urgent attention.

Edet describes CM as a:

[R]adical reconceptualisation of the relevant concepts [and problems arising from the African condition] to acquire new or expanded meanings within the African existential context. Such meanings, it would be appropriate to say, are appropriations or abstractions of the attitudinal redefinitions demonstrated by Nelson Mandela. (EDET 2015, 199)

From the above, we can rightly divide the goals of Edet’s programme of CM into two: (1) Reconceptualisation of relevant – and discarding of irrelevant (?) – concepts by expanding their contents to reflect the lifeworld of the African environment where such concepts are used; and (2) adapting the new concepts to embody the legacies, attitudinal dispositions or character of Nelson Mandela. According to Edet, some of the terms that require reconceptualisation are:

Freedom, Justice, Peace, Equity, Leadership,
Corruption, Governance, Poverty, Illiteracy,

Nationhood, Development, Progress, Disease, Healthcare, Youth restiveness, Violence, Unemployment, Political culture, Infrastructure, Single term, Technology, Technological development, Environmental pollution, Materialism, Religion, Intolerance, Tolerance, Love, Hate, Leadership humility, Selfishness, Selflessness, Compassion, Integration, etc. (EDET 2015, 218)

The above concepts are what Edet considers to be the most important and what African philosophers should prioritise. Edet views these concepts and the problems they raise as being relevant because they tend to generate universal philosophical interests over other concepts raised by decolonial African philosophers. The duty of the African philosopher who wants to engage in productive reflection, therefore, is to make one of these issues the subject matter of their philosophical reflection. Most importantly, they must do so by aligning their reflections with “the abstracted or appropriated values and qualities of Nelson Mandela” (EDET 2015, 218)— the South African anti-apartheid activist, politician, statesman, and the first black president of South Africa from 1994 to 1999.

Edet’s (2015, 218) CM theory places great emphasis on reconceptualising social issues and aligning them with “the appropriated values and qualities of the deified personage of the Madiba.” However, little explanation is given in the literature about what characterises these values, or what should be prioritised given that Nelson Mandela was a man of many talents. Should we appropriate his freedom-fighting values or should we prioritise his kind and forgiving nature? Moreover, Edet did not provide any justification as to why the “deified personage” of Nelson Mandela should be prioritised in the project of constructing and conceptualising a solution-focused African philosophy over the personage of other African leaders and activists. Furthermore, Edet failed to articulate why appropriating the values of a single individual from a particular community is preferable to appropriating that of the community where the individual was raised since it is a commonplace belief in African societies that every child belongs to a community; and is the community that is the giver of values (as per MBITI 1970 &

MENKITI 1984) which makes every individual a representative unit of their community. In the next section, I discuss why this model of *selective homage* is antithetical to the collectivist ethos that characterises the African sociopolitical milieu and constitutes a major problem in Edet's theory.

Mandelanisation as a Philosophy of *Selective Homage*

Having discussed the notion of CM as articulated by Edet, the final section of this paper addresses the strengths of CM as a contribution to African philosophy in light of its consistency with African collectivist values. Here, I contend that CM's adoption of one individual's values over those of the community that raised them is inconsistent with the African communitarian outlook. I call this preferential practice approach *selective homage*. Below, I discuss why this constitutes a problem for Edet's theory.

As far as a social, cultural, religious, and political organisation is concerned, philosophers and non-philosophers alike commonly agree that Africans – especially those of the sub-Saharan extraction – are communitarian in outlook. Afro-communitarianism – that is, communitarianism with distinctively African characteristics – as a philosophy captures the relationship of interdependence that defines social, cultural, religious, political, and economic life in traditional African society. At the centre of Afro-communitarianism is the emphasis on the promotion of harmonious living, the common good, and respect for communal relationships and values (see MBITI 1970; MENKITI 1984; TUTU 1999; ASOUZU 2004). The latter is consistent with the general belief that it is through the community that individuals can flourish and actualise their full potential. The most forceful expression of the Afro-communitarian principle is captured in John Mbiti's seminal book, *African Religions and Philosophy*. According to Mbiti:

In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes this existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the

corporate group ... Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people ... whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am". This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man. (MBITI 1970, 141)

From Mbiti's characterisation of the Afro-communitarian view of individuals within the traditional African society above, one finds a strong emphasis on a two-way complementary relationship between the community and its members. Individuals find their being or become conscious by belonging to a community, and the community, in turn, finds its strength through its members. As the *creator* of the individual, the community, as a matter of necessity, inculcates certain social, cultural, religious, moral, and political values on its members. For this reason, whatever the individual becomes, the community, for the most part, has a role to play in shaping and helping its members to reach their full potential. Individuals, in turn, owe their achievements to the support of their community and its members. This relationship characterises the Afro-communitarian way of life in traditional African society.

CM, *as an approach to system-building*, is built on reverence for the "deified personage" of Nelson Mandela. Suppose my reading of Edet is correct, then, it seems he finds the personage of Mandela to be morally appealing and on that basis, a worthy role model whose life should inform the development and Africanisation of philosophy in Africa. The idea of developing authentic African philosophy around African characters is worthy of commendation. As an approach that aims to develop an African-centred philosophy focused on African political leaders, CM makes a distinctive contribution to African political philosophy. I agree with Edet and Wiredu before him that an authentic African philosophy must not just be African in name and description, but must go beyond names to utilise resources from the

African lifeworld in its systematisation and production of African ideas.

However, although Edet's theory may have been well-intentioned in paying homage to worthy African leaders – like Nelson Mandela – who sacrificed personal comfort in service to their people, his approach faces the problem of *selective homage*. To understand what we mean by *selective homage*, consider the following scenario:

Suppose Ada and Agada live in a communitarian society where they have invested significantly in raising their only child, Ofuasia. They have paid for expensive private lessons, ensured she has the best sports coach, enrolled her in a well-staffed school, and surrounded her with a community where all members share the communitarian values of looking out for each other's children and neighbours, and exist corporately in interdependent relationships. In this community, the well-being of each person is seen as interconnected. To live here is to embrace the cardinal philosophy that “a person is a person through other people” (TUTU 1991, 35). Members of this community recognise themselves as belonging to a bundle of life where the values of the community, for the most part, are tied to and inextricably caught up in the personal ideals of its members.

Now, let's imagine that on the day of Ofuasia's graduation, the school chooses to solely acknowledge Ofuasia's exceptional achievements in winning all the school medals, without giving appropriate recognition to her teachers, the school, her parents who invested their resources, or her private tutors and sports coach, all of whom contributed to her success—as a community. Here, Ofuasia is elevated above the community that supported her and paved the way for her success. This is a typical example of *selective homage*. Instead of being portrayed as a product of her community, she is presented as a Nietzschean

Übermensch or superhuman, reinforcing an individualistic narrative rather than acknowledging the collective effort that shaped her success.

As expressed in the Afro-communitarian framework discussed above, *selective homage* seems to be inherently antithetical to the collectivist ethos that characterises the traditional African sociopolitical milieu. Unquestionably, the issues raised by Edet are important and worthy of social and political attention. Nevertheless, ignoring the community's role in raising a successful leader – or member – might in a sense be construed as a form of recognitional injustice. It is a common belief in African society that a well-behaved child reflects well-behaved parents—this belief is consistent with the Afro-communitarian idea. When this thought is extended to the community, a well-behaved person reflects a well-behaved and organised community. The Annang people of Akwa Ibom in Southern Nigeria have a saying that captures this point: '*Ábūd ìnámá idád, ànàm ùbòñ ìdád*', which loosely translates in English as 'A person with a mental health condition feels no shame, it is the family that feels shame'. The import of this saying is that a person's outrageous conduct inherently brings shame to their family and kinfolk. In other words, a person's kinfolk and by extension, their immediate community, have a role to play in ensuring that a child – and every member of the community – is raised to embody and carry the community's ethos and mores at all times, wherever they may find themselves.

If we accept the Afro-communitarian individual-community complementary relationship as true—that every child is a representative of their family and every individual is an ambassador of their community, then, it seems it would be at odds with the foundations of African communal values to *Mandelanise* individuals without a commensurate *Mandelanisation* of their community for having a role to play in shaping the individual's moral and leadership values. A consistent system-building project that aims to appropriate the personage of Africans, then, would appropriate the personages and characters of the community or the collective personage of all its outstanding leaders over that of a single individual. This, I think, would be a more consistent system-building project. What such a

conceptual framework might be called is beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

In this paper, I established that CM, as an African political theory, promotes a system of *selective homage* due to its over-glorification of the sacrifices of one – or some set of – leaders over others. Before critiquing Edet’s theory, I first discussed CM as a possible contribution to African political philosophy. I then concluded by arguing that although Edet’s theory may have been well-intentioned in paying homage to worthy African leaders who sacrificed personal comfort in service to their peoples, *selective homage* is inherently antithetical to the collectivist ethos that characterises the African sociopolitical milieu and constitutes a major problem for his theory. Bypassing this problem will require a reconceptualisation of CM into an approach that acknowledges the collective contributions of a community in raising a successful leader. After all, a leader is a product of their environment.

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