Select Issues and Controversies in Contemporary African Philosophy

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Abstract
African philosophy today is a complicated and dynamic discipline. This presentation will concentrate on two topics that are currently of special interest. One concerns the meaning of the term 'communalism' when it is used to express a defining characteristic of Africa's cultures. The other concerns the reactions on the part of African philosophers and scholars to the movement that has come to be known in Western academia and culture as 'feminism'.

Trying to produce a representative portrait of African philosophy today is a daunting task. We are speaking of a continent that now has a population in excess of one billion people, comprised of 57 sovereign states, with populations that speak 700+ indigenous languages. Because of European colonialism, and the possibly related fact that very few people outside of Africa are fluent in any of those 700+ languages, for both national and international reasons, for the most part African philosophers continue to use the European languages introduced by those colonial powers (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and, some might argue, Arabic, and perhaps Afrikaans).

I am going to focus on academic African philosophy, since there is no denying that in its various forms it draws significantly on Africa's indigenous intellectual heritage. Yet there is also no denying that, even with that narrower focus, the areas I must endeavor to cover with you this evening are still complex.

Precise figures are not easy to come by, especially since some African countries are contending with the 'private' university phenomenon that is also affecting us in the West. My colleagues in Africa estimate there are presently between 2,000 and 3,000 government and private universities on the continent. But for us the more relevant question is how many of those universities contain Departments of Philosophy? Those same colleagues, who are all philosophers, think there are somewhat under a thousand. And, then finally, there is the issue of how many African philosophers are staffing those departments? Their final guesstimate is somewhere between 2,000 and 4,000.

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Now that we have shared this more or less factual information, let's proceed to deal with the two principal philosophical topics I've suggested should receive some form of special attention this evening. One concerns the growing interest in what is most often referred to as *communalism* and its role in contemporary African societies. The second concerns the reactions of several African women philosophers and academics to what is variously referred to as feminism here in the West.

1. Communalism and Moral Theory

Much more has been reported related to Africa's cultures by social anthropologists than by philosophers. It may or may not be significant that the major proportion of the former are Westerners, while the overwhelming proportion of the latter are indigenous Africans. In my discussion of communalism I am going to draw primarily on the writings of one of Africa's most distinguished living philosophers, Professor Kwasi Wiredu of Ghana. Although Wiredu will base his discussion of this topic on a mixture of hard data and theory, he will then propose a more comprehensive model for analysis that he believes, in principle, can help to specify the relationship between morality and community in any human society in the world today.

African communalism is often contrasted with (Western) individualism. This nomenclature highlights literally the underlying and central philosophical issue – why is it the case that the community is still privileged in the African context, particularly with regard to social and moral issues? Is the explanation and justification for this primarily historical and cultural – along the lines of: 'This is what we inherited from the forefathers'? Is it social and political – along the lines of: 'In the African context this has proved to be the most efficacious way to manage relations between individuals and their communities'? Or is it moral, along the lines of: 'This form of social organization is believed to best promote the interests and welfare of all'?

I want to begin by outlining a number of defining points to clarify what is meant by African *communalism*:

1. On the basis of present-day beliefs and practices in Africa and numerous anthropological and sociological studies, on empirical grounds it is a safe generalization to say that Africa's cultures evidenced, and to a significant degree still evidence, a

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communalistic character.[1] Wiredu writes that the 'human person is essentially the center of a thick set of concentric circles of obligations and responsibilities [to others] matched by rights and privileges [that principally benefit the individual] revolving round levels of relationships irradiating from the consanguinity of household kith and kin, through the 'blood' ties of lineage and clan [family and ancestry], to the wider circumference of human familihood . . .'[2]

2. 'Community' in the African sense therefore involves much more than the Western notion of a 'body of people living in the same locality'. For Wiredu, 'a person is social not only because he or she lives in a community, . . . but also because, by his [or her] original constitution, a human being is part of a social whole.'[3]

Simply claiming that African societies are communalistic could be a dated and uninformative generalization. One wants specifics as to what this involves. African philosophers are wary of hasty generalizations along these lines, because we are speaking of living cultures that deserve detailed study in their own right. African philosophers are convinced that, in many cases, an overriding communal element is there, but the precise manner in which it is expressed may vary. This should be an important consideration for, too often in the past, a synopsis of moral values in one particular African culture has been used to stereotype (or stigmatize) African morality generally. African communities have sometimes been characterized by Western scholars as 'organic' in character – meaning that individuals are much more closely bound together in many different ways than is the case in the West. And any individual who dared to challenge the

[1] 'Hence any group of humans that can be credited with any sense of morals at all – surely, a most minimal species credential – will have some sense of human sociality. But in the consciousness of moral humankind there is a finely graduated continuum of the intensity of this feeling which ranges, in an ascending order, from the austerely delimited social sympathies of rigorous individualism to the pervasive commitment to social involvement characteristic of *communalism*. It is a commonplace of anthropological wisdom that African social organization manifests the last type of outlook. [My own] Akan society is eminently true to this typology.'

[2] Wiredu, Kwasi and Kwame Gyekye. *Person and Community* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research and Values in Philosophy, 1992), 199

[3] Wiredu and Gyekye. *Person and Community*, 196.

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status quo, the established beliefs and practices, faced the threat of ex-communalization.

Wiredu is, therefore, willing to go into greater detail, as long as it is about his own Akan culture. But before we proceed, one point of clarification is appropriate, both here and for what will follow in our discussion of feminism. Akan society is *matrilineal*. In other words, one traces one's ancestry through the female line – as embodied by one's mother and her own maternal lineage. But that distinction, at least as far as Wiredu is concerned, does not specifically affect the moral values prioritized by Akan society.

Here are some of the more specific things he has to say:

1. The underlying or foundational notion of the Akan community is linked to a particular view of *morality*. Being moral in a communal setting is what transforms a human being into an authentic *person*. And being a person 'means that an individual's image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which his or her actions benefit others than himself [or herself] . . . by design . . . . an individual who remained content with self-regarding successes would be viewed as so circumscribed in outlook as *not to merit the title of a real person*.'[4] Becoming and being recognized as a *person*, rather than merely human, therefore involves a moral dimension as importantly as a social one.
2. 'Family' is what is sometimes referred to as the 'extended family' in the African context. As defined by the female line, a family may encompass one's grandmother and all her children and grandchildren, as well as the grandmother's brothers and sisters and their children and grandchildren. This is not to say that all these people live in the same household! But these are the people who constitute one's immediate relations and kin.

> For the dissemination of moral education or the reinforcement of the will to virtue . . . . The theater of moral upbringing is the home, at parents' feet and within range of kinsmen's inputs. The mechanism is precept, example and correction. The temporal span of the process is lifelong, for, although upbringing belongs to the beginning of our earthly careers, the need for correction is an unending contingency in the lives of mortals[5].

[4] Wiredu and Gyekye. *Person and Community*, 200 (my italics)
[5] Ibid., 195

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3. Two more specific moral incentives that are critical to achieving *personhood* are as follows:

   a. Morality is not regarded as a purely intellectual undertaking. Passions and feelings may be involved in any moral conflict and therefore *goodwill* as well as duty becomes involved. This is something Wiredu believes generally true of African societies. By goodwill he means some form of 'human sympathy' or 'sentimentality'[6] that goes beyond mere duty, or of goodwill as merely a function of duty. As he puts it: 'There will always be something unlovable about correctness of conduct bereft of passion . . . . the ultimate moral inadequacy consists in that lack of feeling which is the root of selfishness.'[7]
   b. *Personhood* – being recognized as a morally enlightened and responsible member of the community – is the ultimate moral accolade. But this would never be attributed to an individual whose motives were primarily selfish and self-interested. Relationships with and responsibilities to kith and kin are meant to make moral isolation difficult. This means that some everyday actions are deliberately meant to better others rather than oneself. Indeed the typical Akan is conscious of and scrupulous to protect his or her *personhood* status throughout their lifetime.

As noted above in connection with *goodwill*, the African view of humanity finds the sometimes rigid Western conceptual and philosophical dichotomy between the rational and the emotional in human beings unacceptable when formulating a systematic basis for moral values and moral acts. This is because the notion of 'duty' as expressed by an exclusively or purely *rational* moral sense of responsibility, is regarded as neither a sufficient nor satisfactory basis for moral principles. This will shortly be elaborated upon by Wiredu's introduction of a notion of '*sympathetic* impartiality',[8] which he

[6] Wiredu and Gyekye. *Person and Community*, 197
[7] Ibid., 197–198
[8] Wiredu, Kwasi. Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 29 (my italics)

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will maintain should be the moral principle most fundamental to any human society.[9]

This means that Wiredu's more general approach to morality in any society is that it be approached as a *universal* phenomenon manifesting certain structurally foundational principles or rules that every society or community must strive to implement if it is to survive. This means that all of humanity share certain basic moral principles. Appreciation of how those principles are instituted in a particular culture should be assigned the highest priority for those committed to a vision of philosophy that truly crosses cultures.

How is one to reconcile this universality with the claim that African societies are distinctively communal by comparison with, for example, their individualistic Western counterparts? The argument here seems to have three major components:

(1) There are strictly ethical or moral universals. 'One is therefore entitled to ask if there is a principle of conduct such that without its recognition the survival of human society *in a tolerable condition* would be inconceivable.'[10] This is where Wiredu introduces what he calls '*the principle of sympathetic impartiality*.'[11] This may be expressed by the imperative 'Let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for others.'[12] It may seem reminiscent of the Golden Rule. But the reasoning used to justify its foundational character is as follows: 'It takes little imagination to foresee that life in any society in which everyone openly avowed the *contrary* of this principle and acted accordingly would inevitably be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish", and probably short.'[13]

[9] 'The basis of the quest for consensus in many Africa systems of moral thought is said to be social rather than religious. Morality in the African communal setting is therefore also regarded as primarily humanistic in character.' This limits the role of religion in many African systems of moral thought. 'One important implication of the founding of value on human interests is the independence of morality from religion in the Akan outlook: What is good in general is what promotes human interests. . . . Thus, the will of God, not to talk of any other extra-human being, is logically incapable of defining the good.' Wiredu and Gyekye. *Person and Community*, 194

[10] Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, 29

[11] Ibid., 29

[12] Ibid.

[13] Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective,* 29 (my italics, in part)

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(2) If this principle is supposedly '*a human universal transcending cultures*', (1996, 29; my italics)',[14] then how is one to reconcile its universal status with the apparent significant moral differences found in societies that evidence an *individualistic* rather than a communal orientation? To answer this question, let's imagine that we have a moral tool available that amounts to some kind of sliding scale. At one end of this scale let's place communities that are radically communal in nature and, at the other end, those that would be characterized as radically individualistic in character. But, and this is an important 'but', communal societies would still have to make room for a degree of individuality, and societies that are individualistic would also have to make some allowance for a degree of communality. In any case, the mixture of the two in any society could be measured in an approximate manner by sliding the cursor to the appropriate point on the scale.

> [T]he distinction between communalism and individualism is one of degree only; for a considerable value may be attached to communality in individualistic societies just as individuality is not necessarily trivialized within communalism.[15]

This does not mean that two societies that happened to be rated the 'same' in terms of their communal and invidualistic characters would therefore somehow be identical. But the differences that remained, and that often strike the casual observer as remarkable, would now be attributed to relatively superficial things like *'customs'* and *'lifestyles',* and may therefore be of use for highlighting the diversity of ways in which the universal moral principle of sympathetic impartiality is implemented in different cultures. Wiredu insists that: 'The real difference between communalism and individualism has [more] to do with *custom* and *lifestyle* rather than anything else. . . . [and] both [of these] are *distinct from morality in the strict sense*.'[16]

This would mean that people who exaggerate the differences between moral values in different cultures are in fact themselves exaggerating the relatively superficial anomalies generated by their

[14] Ibid., 29 (my italics)
[15] Ibid.
[16] Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective,* 72 (my italics)

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differences in *customs* and *lifestyles* rather than foundational moral principles. For example, he describes customs as 'contingent norms of life'[17] and argues that they might include *'usages, traditions, manners, conventions, grammars, vocabularies, etiquette, fashions, aesthetic standards, observances, taboos, rituals, folkways, [and] mores.*'[18]

I'm not sure I've done Kwasi Wiredu justice with this abbreviated summary. But before I move on to the discussion of feminism, there are three final points that I think should be made:

1. Wiredu certainly does not think he is providing an account of communalistic morality in Africa that has become an anachronism in the present day, that in effect suffered a mortal blow during and after the era of colonialism. In his informed opinion, as well as the anthropological sources to which he makes reference, it may be the case that the matrilineal extended family in Akan culture has been damaged and is less influential today than in the past. But that does not mean it has suffered a mortal blow. In fact, in his efforts to identify those 'traditions' in Akan culture that deserve re-affirmation rather than elimination, this is one that he emphatically supports.
2. He focuses on his native Akan culture because he knows it, intimately. But the fact that it is one of the relatively few matrilineal cultures in Africa is apparently not enough of a distinction to persuade him that its moral values and the foundation from which they arise are unique and therefore disqualify it as generally representative of Africa's indigenous cultures. Matrilineal or patrilineal, the status of the extended family, of family as involving substantive communal responsibilities, and of the paradigm of *personhood* – all are characteristics that he thinks are appropriate to the African context. (As we shall see, some African women philosophers may disagree with this point.)
3. Wiredu wants his approach to the topic of moral philosophy to be of general philosophical significance. He tries to avoid writing a pseudo-ethnographic account only of Akan culture by going on to formulate his principle of sympathetic impartiality and the notion of a sliding scale. These enable him to move beyond Africa and, in effect, to use insights arising from African philosophy to analyze morality in any society.

[17] Ibid., 30
[18] Ibid., 28 (my italics)

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2. Feminism

In this section of my presentation I am going to summarize interrelated arguments drawn from the writings of three contemporary African women academics who do not wish to be identified as feminists or with feminism in any sense of the word. The first, Ifi Amadiume, is a social anthropologist with strong epistemological as well as moral leanings. I will introduce her to you via her following brief statement about Western feminists:

> The dilemma and anger for us African women is the contradiction implied in the actions of these Western women, whose cultural and historical legacies we know. Yet they leave their problems at home, and cross vast seas to go and dictate strategies of struggle and paths of development to Africans, as highly paid consultants and well-funded researchers. At the same time, their own imposed systems [of development] are eroding all the positive aspects of our historical gains, leaving us impoverished, naked to abuse, and objects of pity to Western aid rescue missions.'[19]

Some of the implications of her remark are obvious. Under the auspices of various 'development' programs, Amadiume has had first-hand encounters with a number of Western experts who did not demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of the real-life situations of women in African societies. One is reminded of the stereotype of the female symbolically chained to her cooking pot, doomed to produce endless children as only one among endless wives, all totally submissive to a potentially ungrateful husband, with whom she enjoys questionable sexual pleasure as a consequence of female circumcision. This kind of fixation overlooks the fact that countless African women have for decades been fighting their own battles in Africa against multiple forms of feminine social injustice.

Amadiume paints a different picture of African womanhood, writ large to say the least:

1. She begins by critically embracing the speculative historical hypotheses, for which she believes there are still significant patches of empirical evidence, of the Senegalese scholar and father of Afrocentrism, Cheikh Anta Diop. What attracts Amadiume's interest, in particular, is Diop's hypothesis that

[19] Amadiume, Ifi. *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion & Culture* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1997), 197

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prehistorical and historical African cultures were *matriarchal* (rather than patriarchal) in character.

2. She argues that matriarchal cultures tend to favor 'pacifist' moral philosophies that prioritize comparatively 'motherly' values such as compassion, love, and peace.[20] [It would be interesting to hear what Wiredu might have to say about this.] But Africa's days as an independent cultural and imperial power came to an end in 95 B.C. with the Persian conquest of Egypt, and since that time in the face of increasing military invasions, climaxing with European colonialism, the cultures of Africa, to combat this violence more effectively, were compelled to turn to ever increasing ideologies of patriarchy.
3. That the evidence of these matriarchal influences can be found in the precolonial practices of her own Igbo culture,[21] as evidenced by the following:

    a. Igbo culture was gendered, but *not* on a strictly biological basis.
    b. In certain contexts men could be addressed as women and women could be addressed as men.
    c. 'As such, roles in the society were not rigidly masculinized or feminized.'[22]
    d. There were situations in which women were transformed into 'male daughters', and others in which they were transformed into 'female husbands'. In either capacity women could thereby be entitled to act as head of a family.[23]
    e. For example, in a situation where a man had no son to serve as the inheritor of his land, it was possible for him to appoint a daughter as a 'son' who would thereby be entitled to inherit that part of the estate. To quote Amadiume: 'Women owned land as "male daughters" when they had been *accorded full male status* in the

[20] Amadiume, Ifi. *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion & Culture,* 18, 84

[21] Amadiume, Ifi. *African Matriarchal Foundations: The Igbo Case.* (London: Karnak House, 1987)

[22] Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 185

[23] Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1987), 90

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absence of a son in order to safeguard their father's ancestral home or compound.'[24]

f. On the other hand, 'female husbands' were women who demonstrated the potential to be exceptionally successful in business, farming, or some other profession. Such talented individuals had need of others to work for them, since a one-woman enterprise would be severely limited in scope. These additional personnel were obtained in one of two ways: (1) straightforward employment; (2) on the basis of what was referred to as a 'woman-to-woman' marriage. These new wives might even eventually bear children, but they would carry the family name of the original female husband.

g. What is noteworthy about this arrangement is the social avenue it provided for the social and economic development of women who demonstrated a talent for the kinds of professional careers that false stereotypes of Africa still portray as open only to biological men.

h. Regardless of whether we are referring to 'male daughters' or 'female husbands', there could be no more than one head of a family at a time. When necessary, therefore, some women were transformed into the masters of other people, both men and women. Consequently, it was possible for some men to be addressed with the term 'wife', even though they were, in effect, serving a woman.

Nkiru Nzegwu is a Nigerian philosopher who happens to come from the same Igbo ethnic group as Ifi Amadiume. Nzegwu criticizes Amadiume severely for misunderstanding her own culture, particularly where the status of women is concerned. Amadiume's biggest mistake is the exaggerated role she implicitly assigns to *gendering*, to the status involved with being identified as male or female in Igbo culture. If gendering really is not significant in or to the culture, as Amadiume also claims, why is it that so many women have to go through a socially stipulated process that transforms them into men? Why must a woman be transformed into a man so that she may inherit? And why must a man be somehow de-maled in order to work for a woman. Some form of patriarchy is apparently still in force. This also implies that women continue to have second-rate status in the society *generally* rather than that, less importantly, in

[24] Ibid., 34 (my italics)

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some situations their status may be enhanced by in effect altering their gender so that they become somehow male.

A better understanding of Igbo society would be achieved by acknowledging the absence of the male-female distinction as a basis for social status and/or roles altogether. Nzegwu argues that lineage (family) and seniority are more important to determining the roles women may play. As, for example, is indicated by the fact that if a woman finds herself in a position where it is appropriate for her to inherit her father's estate, she would have no qualms about walking out of whatever other marriage and family she might already have become a part of, in order to assume that position in the family of her birth. For her primary obligation is to ignore gender and protect the lineage that originally produced her.

For Nzegwu Igbo precolonial society is therefore better understood as a dual-*sex* society, in which there were separate lines of development and roles of governance for men and women. Ultimately the two would have to come together to arrive at some form of general agreement before any decision fundamental to the welfare of the entire community could be agreed upon and implemented.

But what has effectively undermined this independence and equality of the sexes are the combined assaults of Western colonialism, Western development, and Western cultural imperialism. Europeans attempted to enforce their own patriarchal norms, which they took for granted as conventional, on African populations – reducing women to housewives, cleaners, and occasionally secretaries. They then appointed men to any positions of consequence in the colony (including university admissions, etc.). As for the additional inroads pursuant to the widespread marketing of Western popular culture, particularly music, in Africa, the continuing controversy over the disrespect explicitly directed at women more than speaks for itself.

I have saved the discussion of 'Ronke Oyewumi's work for last because, on the subject of feminism generally, she tends to be the most uncompromising of the three. Her controversial book, *The Invention of Women*, is a sustained attack on contemporary African Studies generally (philosophy included) with arguably important epistemological and moral consequences.

Although she too will eventually defend a number of generalizations about Africa's cultures that also are controversial, to give her arguments added empirical weight she begins by exploring the status of women in her native Yoruba culture of southwestern Nigeria.

In that culture, at least prior to European colonization, gender was not an organizing principle as far as the society itself was concerned.

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In other words, biological sex did not predetermine the roles a person could occupy or play. Male and female were of course acknowledged as differing anatomically and as playing different physical roles in the reproductive process.[25] But these facts of life were not then used as a basis for a socially gendered hierarchy in which human beings who, biologically, were men were privileged more than human beings who, biologically, were women (or the reverse). This applied to rulers as well as to all the professions.

This gender equality is still manifested, more specifically, by the fact that in the Yoruba language nouns, pronouns, and given names (for the most part) are not gendered. Also either males or females may be the head of a household. Marriage is viewed as a union of lineages (families and ancestries) rather than simply that of a biological male and a biological female. Lineage rather than biological sex is the predominant determinant of whether a particular individual is entitled to enter into a particular vocation (medicine, business, etc.). Finally, in social situations, age or seniority (not sex) is the primary index of status.

Oyewumi ventures more deeply into epistemological territory when she denounces the arrogance or ignorance of non-African scholars who undermine African Studies when they: assume that the concepts involved in gendering are somehow cultural universals to be found in any culture; when they assume that the typing of societies as being either patriarchal or matriarchal also must be some sort of cultural universal; when, as these two initial examples indicate, they ignore the possibility that there is an indisputable epistemological foundation to the methodology used for the study of cultures; and that therefore before engaging in groundless cross-cultural conceptual generalizations, it is imperative to first assess the epistemological basis of the cultures potentially involved.

The social sciences, for example, overflow with Western cognitive and conceptual paradigms and prerogatives. And they then impose, rather than empirically test, them upon non-Western cognitive systems and cultures indiscriminately. Western scholars continue to presume to dictate the correct ways to understand non-Western cognition and cultures to members of those same non-Western societies.

I think by now you've spent more than enough time listening to me hopefully giving fair representation to these African colleagues. I hope you can appreciate their concerns that international scholars

[25] Oyewumi, Oyeronke. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 36

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must make more of an effort to listen to their African colleagues if some sort of positive dialogues are to ensue. It would not be an overstatement for me to say that my African colleagues are angry and frustrated that more progress has not been made in this regard. Last but far from least, I hope you also have been able to appreciate that these African scholars are doing more than merely 'looking inwards', in the sense that their single-minded concern is to focus solely on Africa's indigenous cultures. Rather, they want to contribute to the international debates on these topics, but from vantage points that are grounded on and draw upon their own intellectual heritage, which they see as something that should be important to us all.

Thank-you.

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