

CONF: The Philosophy of Nimi Wariboko: Conference Report

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Locating Africinity: Elastic Nimi Wariboko in the Post-colonial and Pentecostal Incredibles

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I don't mean to disrespect anyone, and I don't think I would if I refer my readers interested in his profile and trajectory to Google-search the name Nimi Wariboko. That would be too much of a labor for the real reason of this exercise, which is already a cumbersome one that is hard to filter for the substance it weighs. Besides, some couple of weeks back, I wrote an op-ed where I extolled the contributions of this erudite figure. I have chosen to describe him as an erudite figure of intellectuality—a term which itself embodies an intricate web of structured realities—not because I'm not aware of his means of survival, but because of the pattern of his career growth as a scholar and knowledge production that exceeds the boundaries of any known academic culture. There is no way this eclectic impulse could elude anyone. Reiterating the submission of Professors Ebenezer Obadare and Olufemi Vaughan during the recent one-day conference organized in Wariboko's honor, I couldn't miss the lines that submit that Wariboko is one of the few scholars who could summon Soyinka, Achebe, Rousseau, Mbebe, Plato and other thinkers across disciplines and cultural locations in a single paragraph and get away with it. Coming from these stellar intellectuals, this speaks much to how widely my above description of him could not have been gainsaid.

To be sure, it is not really that no John and Johnny could bring this variety of reasoning together in a paragraph, a page, or full text, but for the gift in the ability to weave these knowledge structures seamlessly for the production of a new set of ideas that transcends time and space: If I were to be asked to describe Wariboko's scholarship, this explains it all for me. Now, enough of the preambles, let's get to the nitty-gritty of the discussion.

Sometime in the fall of 2017, after the shock of our academic culture and knowledge systems had struck me hard like a torpedo dropped on a ship, but in lieu of sinking with the drowning, I was rescued by the ideas of the likes of Wariboko. It occurred to me at this time that the paradigms of research and knowledge increasingly coming out of Africa, Nigeria especially, were losing focus on the micro aspect of our society to project onto the world and produce original thoughts, ideas, and theories. The unconscious drift of our social sciences into the immersion of African realities into western epistemologies was palpable in many of the theses, dissertations, journal articles and book manuscripts I happened to review at this time. Let me be clear that this is not a new issue in the (global) African academe; if anything, this structure was birthed in it and has been consistent in reversing this trend. What is, however, different at this time is that, it seems we were losing this latter tradition informed by the works of the likes of Kenneth Dike, Joe Alagoa, Bala Usman, Adiele

Afigbo, Ade Ajayi, Achille Mbebe, Kwasi Wiredu and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, just to mention a few these pioneers.

Consequently, I took two steps I considered important in, at least, ameliorating the situation: One was to initiate with the University of Cambridge Press a new Series on Identities. I also co-authored *The Yoruba Past and Present*. The other step was to begin to write on and celebrate important bodies of works and ideas on Africa by African scholars to be taken to classrooms. So, while the former step was to project the multi-layers of identities in Africa and how these identities shape the reality of the people in their peculiar locations, the latter step was to review the works of African scholars that have made impact and distill their fundamental ideas for budding scholars and established ones alike to draw their theories and methodologies. The continued decolonization process of our academic system just has to be sustained differently, I thought. As part of these efforts, I contacted Professor Wariboko to inform him I was going to write a book, not in his honor in a praise tradition, but as a reflection on his scholarship over the years—specifically what Wariboko has been saying, and what he has contributed to our understanding of post-coloniality in Africa.

The book, I told him, would be launched at a conference at the University of Texas at Austin meant to celebrate his years of philosophizing, theorizing, and crusading. Little did I know at this time that the project would take me three good years to complete and would come in the midst of uncertainties around the world. Well, while the years of completing the manuscript and eventual publication never distorted my initial plans, the new abnormality that has befallen humankind lately costs me the opportunity to celebrate this moment in the grand style I had intended. Consequently upon this, on the 21st of this month, the book titled, *The Philosophy of Nimi Wariboko: Social Ethics, Economy, and Religion*, was presented at a webinar with about 15 panels and over 40 presentations. Many would-be presenters had to be declined as there was just no time. It goes without saying that what the new normal took from the gathering, it replaced with the diversity of attendees and flexibility of their participation. One book will now lead to yet another.

It is quite humbling to note that in spite of the imbalances in time zones and the discomfort that comes with this, some participants stayed awake in the late hours of the night, at 2 AM in Nigeria, to be precise. For others, it was dawn—the time when they might have to pursue or prepare for other things of importance. Many more even stayed until late in the evening when the event came to an end, and I had to release them an hour short for them to enjoy their dinner. It was such an enormous sacrifice by all who attended the fascinating program.

The common bridge that links the discussions held at the event was Wariboko's idea of the intersection between the secular and the sacred. All presentations were informed by the idea that the unending dynamics of economics, politics, philosophy, ethics, arts and practices, as well as religion, define the image of a society. Building on Wariboko's core research, which deals with the Kalabari people of Izon (Ijo), a cultural extract group in the Niger Delta region of contemporary Nigerian state, presenters and other participants engaged in dialogue on what Wariboko described as the post-colonial and "Pentecostal Incredibles."

Although not in a particular order, the conversation at the conference included topics such as Wariboko's notion of the "Split God," the Africanization or Pentecostalization of religions in Africa, the foreignness or otherwise of the two dominant religions in Africa (Islam and Christianity), moving

Wariboko's philosophies and theories away from an academic to a practical exercise, along with the theory of power and invisibility in Africa. In his instructive keynote address, Professor Mark Lewis Taylor of the Princeton Theological Seminary at Princeton University, opened the discussion on the connotation of the frame, the Split God in Wariboko's political theology articulated in his book, *The Split God: Pentecostalism and Critical Theory*. The question arises as the distinguished Professor Taylor tried to understand how the Pentecostal Incredible worsens the outlandishness of the disruptive eruption of post-coloniality in Africa and other important issues that formed the basis of the philosophy of Wariboko and the fulcrum of his intellectual endeavors. Sighting the instances of the contradictions of religion and the state in Post-independent Africa, how the light supposedly brought by the Abrahamic faiths in the region has been overheated generating discomfort for the people, and the systemic formation of the society in ways to keep the people away from the reality of their condition through these institutions, Taylor asked how Wariboko's ideas of ethics, economics, politics, history, religion and spirituality (Political Theology), could be grated in one basket to produce a new social community for African transformation.

The enthusiasm generated by Taylor's presentation gave little room for Wariboko to respond to some of these questions as the Chair of the session, Professor Ruth Marshall, and other participants like Professors Samuel Zalanga and Timothy Longman, took up many of the issues raised by Taylor in his presentation. The submission, I would say, is best given in the succinct allusion made by the erudite Professor Zalanga from what could be described as the perspective of "Shareholders and the Christ Church." Paraphrasing him, if this were a corporation established by Jesus, Christ has lost this grip on his shareholders.

As if to buttress the foregoing, the panel that followed, "Understanding Religious Africa," was opened by a brilliant presentation that sparked another interesting debate, this time with a focus on the Nigerian state. Here, Benson Ohihon Igboin and Abimbola Adelokun, two budding stars, brought the controversial bill, Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 2019, into the discussion as they examined the question of accountability and transparency in the administration of Nigerian Pentecostal Churches. The question raised is simple: If the government is accountable to the people, at least in principle, who are the CEOs, styled General Overseers, or presidents, of Nigerian Pentecostal churches, accountable to? Is it the Congregation or God? Given the mighty dose of opium applicable in the process of practicing religion, are the people even interested in getting such accountability, and when they do, do they get a satisfying response other than the ego-driven one of building a successful enterprise from scratch. Why do we often allude to these religious leaders as if running a profit-making organization? And in the case of service to God, how can this be measured if we are not to deceive ourselves?

Further, in the face of present contradictions and mutual suspicion that characterize the Nigerian state, can the government be trusted to be deeply involved in the administration of these churches? In this place of abnormality where there is a thin line between possibility and impossibility, Igboin and Adelokun adopted Wariboko's "Logic of Invisibility" to interrogate the common imaginary space where politics and Pentecostalism reside in Nigeria. The implication of this is that the tool of invisibility that shrouds sovereignty in mystification, adopted and mastered by the two entities, have been responsible for the "Post-colonial Incredibles." If anything, is it not incredible that the government that would not want to be answerable to anyone, including those who have chosen its anchors, would want another entity equally in the invisibility trade to open its account and daily

activities to it under the pretense of regulations. All of these raise more questions than answers. And indeed, that is the kind of ambience often generated by the fusion of politics, economics, philosophy and ethics in a gathering of over two dozen established scholars from different fields and locations.

Another revealing moment of the event—and I have to fast-forward to the closing remarks due to space constraints—was the part where Professor Ngom Fallou, the leading preeminent Ajami scholar, asked on what possible ground can Sufi Islam and Pentecostal Christianity meet. This question sparked the conversation on the Africanization of foreign religions in Africa. Perhaps, not many are aware that, contrary to the assumption that a number of Nigerian Muslims are now adopting some of the Pentecostal practices, like the keeping of vigils, none of these practices is inherent in Christianity itself, but rather are results of the adoption and adulteration of practices, performances and rituals common to African Traditional Religions (ATRs). Wariboko, in his response, added at this point that, in fact, the very practice of keeping vigil had once been adopted by Nigerian Muslims long before its adoption by Pentecostal Christians. This tradition, it should be stressed, came from the belief in ATR that the middle of the night carries some spiritual forces and senses that one has to be properly positioned, through ritual practices, to deploy into one's use.

Lasting for about 15 hours, this international conference was such a revealing one, where ideas were shared and the hope of a better African future was rekindled in our minds through the philosophy and research of Professor Nimi Wariboko. Hopefully, in no distant time and at another event like this, the hanging glasses shall kiss as we make a toast to the intellectual fecundity of Nimi Wariboko.