

Kwame Anthony Appiah's 'Cosmopolitanism': -A Review

By Dapo Ladimeji

African-Century - April 2016

This is a curious book and in the inordinate reception it has received seems on a level with Malcolm Gladwell. On the face of it this author is a superior sort of thinker. At least that is where one might perhaps ought to start. However the first and most powerful impression that strikes one is how this book is more witty conversation than serious philosophy. In this Appiah appears to be following the footsteps of his mentor Bernard Williams – a person of the most profound triviality. (Note 1).

Even as witty conversation the level of sloppiness is quite remarkable.

'The positivist holds that with facts, when we disagree, one of us has the truth...' (p.44) This is of course incredibly sloppy writing as we can both be wrong. 'I am a philosopher. I believe in reason.' (p.84) This is a meaningless statement as one cannot 'believe' in reason. 'Once not so long ago...He or she could come face to face with people who were completely unknown.' (p.13) What can this possibly mean? Unknown to whom? Almost all societies have migration stories so that they believe they travelled across other peoples. Does he mean unknown to Europeans? Think of the phrase common in England in 1950's that certain communities had never seen a Black person before. Then enter the geneticists who find sickle cell trait among them and one clue leads to another and voila we find there has been a 'mass forgetting'. This is clearly a careless phrase belonging to witty conversation not scholarship. He later writes that "Nkrumah ... created a nationalist mass movement.." (p.79) which is clearly absurd. Nkrumah **led** a nationalist mass movement.

Elsewhere he writes: 'Of course, there are certain acts that you can't imagine thinking are good ... say, snatching food from a starving child' (p.46) Here we have an extra ordinary lack of imagination. When US troops liberated concentration camps towards the end of WW2 the soldiers gave food to the starving inmates who promptly died. Anyone who had snatched that food from them, some of whom were children, would have saved their lives. This is an example of the triviality rather than seriousness of the conversation.

He writes: '.. one characteristic of European cosmopolitanism, especially since the Enlightenment, has been a receptiveness to art and literature from other places .' (p.4) This is extraordinarily false. Prior to the Enlightenment Europe had been through phases of deep respect for Arab/Islamic scholars and then a period where particularly in France a great interest arose in things Chinese, misunderstandings of Chinese gardens led to what is now known as the English Garden! For a scholar connected with Africa we can only be astonished when he writes: '..it was terribly wrong that slaves were worked to death building the pyramids – or for that matter, in building the United States..' (p.166) when we know that neither slaves nor Jews built the pyramids (note 2). Let us consider the Shoah, does this same argument apply? If the Nazis had won the war would Appiah say

the shoah was regrettable but lets move on? I ask this because he then says ‘..it is not therefore terrible that ...this nation ..exists.’

He talks about Ghanaian belief in ‘witchcraft’ (p.34) without hesitating to ponder the way this term is severely loaded. One man’s witchcraft is another’s standard belief in saints, spirits and exorcisms which are part of the faith of Buddhists, Jews, Christian and Moslems. If a Christian prays that terrorists be brought to harm they are seeking the aid of spirits to achieve ends ‘without using everyday means.’ (p.35) Is it neutral to talk about the Catholic Church’s idolatrous decorations of its places of worship as from a Jewish and Moslem point of view pictures of G-d are just that! Far worse of course is that he has made no attempt to speak with those who could have explained in a philosophically coherent way the underlying justification of Ghanaian beliefs i.e. the guardians of the tradition. Gnosis was born in Africa and is a complex set of beliefs which in the hands of laymen can be highly simplified and which is also subject to cultural degradation like all cultural institutions. (note 3) There are of course many scientists/medical researchers with deep religious faith such as Ben Carson but this not addressed.

Relying solely and uncritically on old colonial Western anthropologists he has accepted a conceptual entity to be called ‘witchcraft’ as a pre-Christian belief system (‘traditional’) which has to be distinguished from Christianity even though the Salem events and witchcraft hysteria in England were all under the rubric of Christianity. But these sloppy statements have a common thread in that they each bolster and support common Western prejudices (cliches du jour) against Africans, and often subliminally subvert major African political projects or self-images. For example the false reference to pyramids and slaves is of course a subtle (perhaps not too subtle?) attempt at refutation of the claims for reparations. In this he positions himself on a plane similar to Malcolm Gladwell.

One matter that is hard to explain is how Appiah, having African ancestry, can promote Hume and Kant as models of cosmopolitanism without addressing their extremely racist views about Africans:

Hume wrote:

‘I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptom of ingenuity; tho’ low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but ’tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.’ (Note 4)

If one can make such statements and still be a ‘cosmopolitan’ hero what would a villain say?

Then there is Kant. Ryan Very summarises Kant’s views on race as follows:

‘In addition to claiming that Africans are vain and stupid, Kant argued that they are only capable of trifling feelings, incapable of any form of education other than learning how to be a slave,

and lack a “drive to activity” and “mental capacities to be self-motivated and successful.” Quoting Hume, Kant wrote that no Negroes have ever shown talents or presented anything of praiseworthy quality in art or science. Kant discouraged interracial reproduction, discussed the best way to whip Moors, and claimed that blacks are “so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.

In three separate works Kant claimed that the Negro is, in most respects, the lowest of all races. He also referred to blacks as the “bad race” and whites as “the goodrace,” argued that the white race contains “all incentives and talents,” and felt that whites were the “only ones who always progress toward perfection.” To my knowledge, Kant never repudiated any of these explicitly racist claims.’

Further in relation to Kant's universalism Very states:

‘Kant never expressly specifies that his universalist claims are meant to include all races ‘ (Note 5)

Let us look more closely at the three main areas of this book – a description of Kumasi, a discussion of the moral idealism and a discussion of globalisation.

KUMASI

Appiah comes to Africa via England, via English colonial reporters in a way most ‘native’ Africans would shun. You have to imagine a Jew referring to Nazi sources for description of Jewish life in Poland or an English person referring to a Berlitz book to justify his use of English words. Something not quite right there. But in coming to Africa through the colonialist reporters Appiah brings them credibility wittingly or unwittingly. It reveals Appiah's lack of any internal metronome of what Africa and African culture is or was. In fact Appiah has to claim Burton and Rattray understood Africa correctly otherwise he himself would have no understanding as his understanding is mediated through English rapportage.

The main purpose of Appiah's soliloquy on Kumasi is to show how much it is part of a new and common world that you and I (Westerners) can easily understand. But his understanding is seriously vitiated by a lack of personal engagement or understanding. It is hard to think of any African who would make his own home town the sole representative of Africa. One would be ashamed to do this. So this is Appiah's descent into gross fiction. As with families each individual is unique even as they reveal themselves members of a family. Each African town has its unique character. Ibadan is different from Abeokuta and both from Kumasi or Nairobi or Tshwane but all are African cities. To discuss Kumasi without seeking to understand how Kumasi is unique and how it is similar to others is appalling. But then Appiah has nothing else to go on. This is clearly the equivalent of someone explaining Englishness by a constant reference to Tunbridge Wells.

Appiah writes of a ceremony: ‘..some of them have one shoulder covered, toga-style, so we know they are higher in rank..’ Who is the ‘we’ here? Locals or foreigners or just Appiah himself? This is important as the reference to ‘toga-style’ deflates and renders imitative. Actually the single bared shoulder may be less important than the bearing of the people, just as the extra star on the shoulder makes sense when the bearing of the soldier coincides. The extra star does not make the general. If a junior officer wore the coat there would be a disconnect between his bearing and his apparent ‘rank’.

Actually Appiah's 'voice' becomes understandable once we realise he is putting himself in the role of the visiting anthropologist and his Ghanaian family and Kumasi play the role of his ethnographic field work assignment. In that light one can see the inevitability of his failure to engage, his inability to see from a truly Ghanaian point of view, his reliance on colonial sources etc, his objective 'distance'.

But Appiah's Africa is the English middle class Africa, not even the upper class English Africa. It is the Africa of Livingstone's image not the Africa of the European and American big game hunters that Livingstone cadged a lift from in his 'explorations'. It is an Africa that has never been seen before, an Africa that was formerly a dark continent, an exotic place and Appiah will be your modern interpreter. He writes: 'But you will also find everywhere – and this is something new – many intimate connections with places far away: Washington, Moscow, Mexico City, Beijing'. This is so wrong, so absurd I could cry. Almost all across the West African coast are areas reserved for 'returnees', Agudas, for those who perhaps escaped the slave trade and slavery and sought a return to Africa, the most numerous being Brazilians but also Cubans etc. Liberia was established by returnees from U.S. with extensive intimate connections with US. There had been engagements with Europe long before the slave trade and there were engagements with India and China (the famous gift of a giraffe to the Emperor of China), there was the role of the great university at Timbuctu and the influence of West African Islam on Spain, there was Wordsworth poem to a beautiful African princess escaping the terrors of revolutionary France. More recently there was the engagement with Russia, Cuba, Nasser's Egypt and Eastern Europe during the wars of national liberation. One surprising omission given that Appiah teaches philosophy is any mention that Nkrumah did post graduate studies in philosophy with A J Ayer in London. Only a person entirely disengaged from Africa could believe that something new had occurred.

What Appiah identifies as a new geographic dispersion is not so. According to Appiah the African diaspora is a recent phenomena. This is just not so. A mere recounting of Africans at Oxford, Cambridge and the Paris Ecoles would have shown the absurdity of Appiah's views. The African diaspora was wide and extensive, but to the white middle class not particularly visible, one might even suggest largely invisible. If anything the main difference today has been the increased rank and therefore visibility of the diaspora. Now that members of the diaspora have become ceo's of world class banks, ceo's of great US corporations, members of UK and French cabinets and President of USA their visibility to the white middle class is significant.

Ghanaians have burst out laughing at Appiah's tale of surprise at seeing his Ghanaian peers using cell phones. They asked what was he expecting - that they use talking drums!

We can be more specific about Appiah's misunderstandings: He writes: 'I feasted in Ramadan throughout my childhood, but I learned what it meant only when I read about it for myself as an adult.' (p.149) This is meant to confirm 'in Ghana ...religions live side by side, accepting each other's different ways without expressing much curiosity about them.' All we in fact know is that Appiah never expressed any curiosity about them but what he cannot say is that his lack of curiosity was universal without checking with his siblings and others. I was brought up in similar environment in Nigeria and no one ever explained the different customs UNTIL I ASKED! Then I was given a full explanation.

Even when it comes to the Independence movement Appiah's perspective is an entirely colonial one. He adopts the well worn view that it was the western educated elites that led the struggle for independence. He writes: 'who in Ghana excoriated the British and built the movement for

independence? Not the farmers and the peasants. Not the Chiefs. It was the Western-educated bourgeoisie.' (p.79) Note Appiah use of the colonial terminology of 'chiefs'. This is so wrong headed. Firstly, the practice of indirect rule involved replacing local chiefs with ones who were 'agents' of the colonial administration and removing any who stepped out of line. While the Chiefs/local rulers may have led the resistance to colonialism their carefully selected replacements would not be the likely source of trouble. In terms of education let us look closer. There were many who went abroad to study but only a small minority choose to oppose the colonial administration. The majority were accommodating and seeking to improve their and their family's lives. These students were often carefully watched for signs of 'trouble'. (Even while Appiah and I were at Cambridge British security services requested from certain fellows secret reports on individual African students – one of them, Dr Patrick Cole, told me.) If 100 Ghanaian students went abroad to study and 85 returned home to work happily with the colonial administration, and 15 returned to struggle either openly or secretly for independence it is somewhat odd to suggest that it was the Western education that caused this. Rather one suspects these students arrived abroad with that inclination. Invariably the majority went abroad to further themselves (with stern cautions from family members not to cause any trouble!) and, like Appiah himself, accommodated themselves to the existing power structure. Mandela did not create the resistance to apartheid but was chosen to lead – and came from a royal/chiefly family.

There was also a technical problem – a local ruler represented a local constituency and it became clear that the resistance to Colonialism had to be above sectional levels so the new generation of leaders had to eschew that basis of power. Any reliance on old institutions of power would have led to quick destruction by the 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial administration. For Appiah all this is foreign territory to be read in books by Europeans.

MORAL IDEALISM

Appiah turns to a disquisition on the 'golden rule'. He begins by choosing a version as described by the King James Version even though later translations are quite different. The KJV can be read as a positive version i.e. do to others what you would wish them to do to you, whereas Confucius and almost everyone else has the negative version i.e. do not do to others what you would not wish done to yourself. Since the evidence is that the KJV is a mistranslation if we compare it to more modern translations, it is odd to make a philosophical mountain out of a possibly poor translation.

He believes he has found serious fault with the golden rule because one can misdescribe one's actions. But actually the golden rule is not about others but about oneself and Appiah has merely trivialised it. By making the golden rule positively prescriptive he manages to completely trivialise it i.e. I make all my decisions based on what I think others would like me to do. He poses the well worn cases of Jehovah's Witness (JW) and blood transfusions - should a doctor give a blood transfusion to a Jehovah's Witness and save their life even though the person would object. This is not a problem for the golden rule correctly understood. JW is no different from anyone who does not wish their life to be saved or to be saved in a certain manner. Much of medical practice requires positive patient consent and we have living wills.

One could equally consider that if person P were caught in possession of drugs by a DEA officer what he would wish the officer to do would be to overlook the drugs and set him free. However if one is not to reduce this all to utter triviality, one could ask what does the drug dealer think the correct thing for the DEA officer to do is? Even if I am a Jehovah Witness I may be willing to accept that the doctor has a moral and professional obligation to seek to save my life and that if I do not wish him to so act I must discharge myself from his jurisdiction or take other specific steps. If I am unconscious and not in a position to discharge myself the doctor may follow his moral and

professional obligation to try and save my life. In a similar situation the Jehovah's Witness would almost certainly act that way for another patient who objects to say organ transplants or the use of certain drugs but whose specific opinion/consent cannot be obtained. Further as a doctor and a Jehovah's Witness I may give blood transfusions but refuse one myself. If a person wishes to have assisted suicide he may have to accept that he needs to exit the local hospital system. Once one imports into the discussion what is morally correct much of the paradox disappears. I would like to be upgraded by an attendant who went to school with me, it does not follow that I think it is 'right'.

Actual life is full of more complex transactions. If I give to charity, or give to a homeless person, I do not expect him/her to do the same to me. If I visit the sick in hospital I may neither expect nor wish them to do the same for me. If I give pro bono advice to the poor I may have no wish to ever receive pro bono advice in general or from the recipients in particular. I may help a colleague at work in away and at a scale that I never expect to be reciprocated. So I may do for others MORE than I expect or wish in return. I may admit that in their position I would be too proud to accept help but I am willing to give it to those willing to accept it. I may always wish to rely solely on my own resources but do not wish to impose such a rule on others so that I am willing to help anyone who asks. This is why the negative makes better sense than the positive. It is always open to me to do more. Certainly for those of a spiritual interest may believe the divine rewards those acts that exceed all possible obligation such as the widow's mite etc. In these situations there is no requirement for consistency and if I did this yesterday I do not have to do it today even if the circumstances are exactly the same.

Appiah writes: 'The idea behind the Golden Rule is that we should take other people's interests seriously ...' this is a much degraded understanding as the rule is about MY behaviour and my regard. It is not to behave to others as they would like you to behave as that way lies immorality. I should behave to others as I would think right if I were on the receiving end, if that makes a difference. It is a maxim in difficulty not a substitution for all moral thought. If as an officer I arrest a person in possession I hardly need the golden rule. Where there is some doubt, I know his neighbour just ran quickly away and may have planted the evidence to frame him but I am not sure, then if I were the target (who does not know what I know about his neighbour) I might feel it correct for the police officer to act with circumspection and perhaps seek additional information or a confession before revealing the evidence so that more information is available.

For Appiah to reduce the golden rule to an immoral code is surprising and disappointing. The golden rule does not require others to agree with you. If I need to know 'how the act will strike those others' I may never be able to come to a decision and that is absurd. A member of the KKK may sincerely wish me to arrest a Black person on false information, an anti-semitic might wish me to act prejudicially to a Jew, none of this is relevant to the golden rule as long as it refers to my behaviour and my values.

On the golden rule Appiah slips into a trough of triviality so well dug by Bernard Williams. It had not occurred to me that the Buddha needed a few words with Appiah and that would have set him straight.

GLOBALISATION

Here Appiah's discussions can be quickly dealt with. The level of triviality and misunderstanding can be relatively easily demonstrated. Appiah writes that the threat of homogeneity is over stated

and that despite globalisation local identities persist. To confirm this he writes: 'When people talk of the homogeneity produced by globalisation, what they are talking about is this ...(in small out of the way villages you will) .. find a bottle of Guinness or Coca Cola (as well as Star or Club, Ghana's own delicious lagers).' (p.102) What Appiah did not choose to discover was that Guinness and Star were produced by the same multinational company Diageo and Club by the multinational SABMiller. Given that his discussion is so ill informed it is unnecessary to get into further specifics.

For Appiah the possibility of free riders or defaulters is a fundamental issue for mass co-operation. His unfamiliarity with policy work is showing here as this problem has been resolved ages ago. Banks, governments and other institutions use statistical models to budget for defaulters and add an increment on the collective dues/taxes/interest charges to cover for this. This reveals why he is ignorant of the issue of multi national companies affecting local tastes to their advantage and to the disadvantage of local culture/producers etc. The issue of the power of mnc's to affect behaviour is one that exercises the EU Commissioners and all other competition authorities.

There is additionally a sterile discussion of the logic of extreme giving, a question which had been dealt with centuries ago. In a Buddhist parable it is recounted how a monk saw a tiger caught in a trap and starving to death. Feeling compassion for the tiger the monk threw himself into the trap for the tiger to feed upon. The Buddhist sages felt no need for further comment so I shall follow them.

CONCLUSIONS

A key lacunae in this work is any discussion of the difference between homelessness and cosmopolitanism. This was a criticism that used to be levelled against Jewish intellectuals – they were so internationalists because they had no home/country of their own. But there is another kind of internationalism that comes out of deeply loving one's own country and so understanding the needs of others, just as one might say because I love my own children so much I appreciate the needs of other children as opposed to saying all children are equally important to me. Here one cannot avoid being a little personal: Appiah whom I have known from a young age was never at home in England despite his claims to an illustrious English ancestry. As they say: 'he doth protest too much!' At Cambridge Appiah never stopped referring to his ancient English connections (which most other English students with equal or greater claims declined to do) and yet many of my English colleagues reported that his English family did not know what to make of him! In many ways I always felt Appiah was less English than myself. To love a country is to be able to argue with it, to take sides, to love this and hate that, to praise this and decry that as one might with family members. That was not Appiah's England. His England was a claim to snobbery, a fan, not a love of the Downs, of Wordsworth's Lake District, a dislike of English provincialism, or a deep affection for the English eccentric and a sorrow for the decline of the gentleman publisher who was both idiosyncratic and generally a poor businessman but who nevertheless kept the arts and literature alive. Not at home in Ghana, not at home in England and apparently not at home in the US he declares himself a citizen of the world. I beg to disagree.

There is a deception in this book that claims to promote cosmopolitanism whereas under the skin it is a paen to universalism, a form of universalism one might call universalism lite. This much Appiah himself admits - 'cosmopolitanism is, in a slogan, universality plus difference.' (p.151)

Appiah is not above using the straw men tactic. He describes his opponents as typically the 'bogies du jour' – Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao Tse Tung, Islamic Radicals, Tim Veigh, Christian Fundamentalists. To disagree with Appiah is to be in this company. I think not.

If one looks over the detritus of this work one can note that somewhere philosophy as the love of wisdom has been replaced by the love of logic, and as Hegel explained logic is empty. One reviewer obviously had difficult understanding why this work was so well received and she felt unable to comment more than obliquely. Yasmin Alibai-Brown in a masterful understatement said of Appiah: 'But a savant he is not'. (Note 6)

In this work Appiah achieves the ultimate in triviality – complete irrelevance.

NOTES:

1. Bernard Williams, formerly Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge University – I recall attending one of his lectures where he said he did not want to go to Heaven as he would be bored stiff. Someone should have suggested (with a due bow to Hamlet) that he might try the other place as we understand there is more excitement there!
2. Pyramids: not built by slaves – for example:
<http://harvardmagazine.com/2003/07/who-built-the-pyramids-html>
3. If one asked most lay men about evolutionary theory one would hear some appalling simplifications and misrepresentations. One would need to seek a source better than the layman and similarly with African beliefs. It is of course an anthropological common place to ask the local equivalent of 'the man on the Clapham omnibus' even though if one wished to understand Anglicanism that way one would end up with a complete mess.
4. David Hume 'Of National Characters'
5. Ryan Very: 'Kant's Racism' https://www.academia.edu/1802951/Kants_Racism
6. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's review of Cosmopolitanism
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/cosmopolitanism-ethics-in-a-world-of-strangers-by-kwame-anthony-appiah-410408.html>