

An African Hypothesis Regarding Fake News and Monotheists

By Parker English



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What cognitive psychologists call "confirmation bias" occurs when people overvalue relatively irrelevant evidence that strengthens their beliefs, while undervaluing relatively relevant evidence that weakens them. Their beliefs feel, to themselves, more or less infallible.

A thought-provoking hypothesis regarding this felt infallibility of beliefs about "the norms of conduct" for a given group of people is presented in several publications by one of Africa's most prominent philosophers, Kwasi Wiredu (1980, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). Wiredu presents the hypothesis with respect to his people in particular, the Akan of Ghana. Since the hypothesis has to do with Christians specifically and with monotheists generally, however, it is also relevant for many other people.

In short, Wiredu thinks monotheists are more than normally inclined to regard as infallible their own norms of conduct. The faith-based thinking of monotheism, he argues, enhances a person's latent confirmation bias in general, encouraging monotheists to regard their own secular norms of conduct as immune to criticism. In these

circumstances, "it becomes quite possible for policies which lead manifestly to human suffering to be advocated or pursued with a sense of piety and rectitude" (1980: 5).

The history of popular support for the United States' war in Vietnam is a case in point. When the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was authorized in 1964, 98% of Americans were monotheists (Gallup, 2020). They tolerated their government's fear-mongering about North Vietnam even after that fear-mongering had been publicized as deceptive. They did so by treating the warning publications as fake news. The case is all the more germane to the infallibilism hypothesis when we consider another piece of the context: immediately before and after Americans replaced the French in Vietnam, the American government had taken five different legislative steps to connect monotheistic themes to the idea of the United States.

Of course, a single case will not establish the infallibilism hypothesis. However, the case is both strikingly prominent and clearly illustrative of how well the hypothesis explains a kind of thinking that most monotheists,

indeed most Americans, would presumably want to avoid. It is the same kind of thinking that led Americans to accept the well-publicized deceptions that led to their country's creating the second American war in Iraq.

We will return to the case of Vietnam after looking at Wiredu's hypothesis in greater detail, then conclude by seeing how social science researchers have begun testing whether a specific group of people, monotheists for example, tends towards infallibilism.

The Infallibilism Hypothesis

The infallibilism hypothesis contrasts with what Wiredu thinks is the Akan view of ethics, and the hypothesis is best understood in that context.

Akan ethics, according to Wiredu, "defines morality purely in terms of human interests. [...] Morality, strictly conceived [...] concerns the harmonization of the interests of the individual with that of society on the principle of sympathetic impartiality" (1996a: 235, 237). Prohibitions against murder, theft, and lying are among Wiredu's examples of norms regarded as moral by Akans. He also observes that Akans consider norms regarded as moral as having "universal obligatoriness" (1995: 391). But their being obligatory is not because they are revealed or endorsed by the Supreme Being. Rather, "there is a natural basis for the harmony of interests sought after in moral thinking" (1996a: 241).

Akans acknowledge, Wiredu notes, that different communities employ different customary norms to supplement moral ones. Customarily, for example, Akans trace ancestry via a person's matrilineage, which can be regarded as normative because it can determine rights of inheritance.¹ But Akans acknowledge a community could exist and flourish while following a different practice—for example, tracing a person's ancestry patrilineally, as do the Efik communities in Nigeria. While certain moral norms are deemed universally obligatory for human and social well-being, according to Wiredu, Akans regard their customary norms as rules of "convenience" and "contingent preference" (1996a: 237).

Wiredu acknowledges some instances of norms that have, as it were, a divine sanction. For those Akans Wiredu identifies as "traditional," some customs are "taboos." They are viewed as introduced by "extra-human beings" via special avenues of communication with traditional Akan leaders. "A taboo is a prohibition expressing the dislike of some extra-human being. [...] The idea here is that what a taboo prohibits is *ipso facto* bad. [...] [I]t is regarded as bad solely because it is thus prohibited" (1995: 404). For example, sex in the bush is something "the earth goddess simply finds insupportable and will punish with soil infertility" (Wiredu, 1995: 404). While Wiredu thinks this taboo does have "a discoverable practical rationale... [that] protects lonely women from sexual invasion in an out-of-the-

way zone" (1996a: 238),² some part of its sway derives from belief in spiritual entities. The authority of traditional Akan leaders (chiefs, priests, and elders), especially those ruling before Western contact, is based in part on what are understood to be their special avenues of communication with extra-human entities, various gods and goddesses as well as the life-forces of departed ancestors.

This said, Wiredu maintains that an Akan leader's religiously based authority is irrelevant to normative principles construed as moral, the basic guides to individual actions understood as universally obligatory for human and social well-being. Since they are respected for their wisdom, leaders might of course provide advice about the historical importance of some norm that Akans typically view as universally obligatory. But they could not claim authoritative knowledge about the Supreme Being as having revealed or endorsed this norm to be universally obligatory. Not for Akans. And not for anyone else.

In contrast to this epistemological humility, Wiredu observes, claims of authoritative knowledge regarding certain norms as universally obligatory were precisely what many Christian evangelists presented while helping to colonize the Akan. Consider the Akan practice of polygynous marriage. Wiredu explains that polygyny is "a more reasonable connubial institution than monogamy" when "by some unanticipated combination of persisting causes

[slave raids, for example] women [...] outnumber men” (1995: 398-400).³ Nonetheless, many Christian evangelists sought to ban Akan polygyny on the ground that it is universally prohibited by their Scripture-based view of human well-being. The evangelists enforced the ban by requiring acquiescence from those applying for church-sponsored formal education, or seeking recommendations for jobs as well as advancement in colonial trade and administration.

Wiredu describes this approach as both “authoritarian” and “supernaturalistic.” It is authoritarian by imposing a norm on people without their consent and without any except a supernaturalistic justification. It is supernaturalistic in that it grounds the belief that this norm is universally obligatory on a particular view of the will of God.

[T]here is also in the West, in contrast to the situation in Akan thought, a highly influential tradition of ethical supernaturalism. Indeed, if you take account of popular as well as technical thought, it may justly be said that the dominant bent of Western ethics is non-humanistic.⁴ [...] [M]y thesis was that morality in the strict sense was conceived by the traditional Akans purely humanistically, and I contrasted this with the “orthodox” Christian procedure of defining morality in terms of the will of God, which is supernaturalistic. [...] In that case it becomes

quite possible for policies which lead manifestly to human suffering to be advocated or pursued with a sense of piety and rectitude. [...] This view of ethics is particularly popular, though not universal, among Christians. (1995: 393, 1996a: 237, 1980: 5, 1995: 394)

Wiredu also thinks this view of God leads to a sense of personal infallibility about one’s own normative beliefs, even those *not* viewed as directly revealed by the Supreme Being—beliefs regarding Western-style political bureaucracies, for example.⁵ Christians

easily gain a sense of infallibility (by association) in their own self-perception. Accordingly, their own norms of conduct are seen as ineluctable models of the right and the good in the sphere of all morals. The divergent ways of life of other individuals or peoples, except perhaps the most inconsequential, are therefore wrong, immoral, impermissible [...]. (1995: 398)

This sense of infallibility, Wiredu thinks, comes about “not by logical implication but by some kind of psychological tendency” involving “a certain faulty conception of the objectivity of truth” (1996a: 236). That is, according to Wiredu, simply by virtue of habitually viewing certain normative beliefs as objectively true because revealed by the Supreme Being, Christians tend to

gain a sense of personal infallibility regarding other normative beliefs as well, even those not viewed as so revealed. Christians tend to overvalue evidence obviously supporting their own normative beliefs while undervaluing evidence obviously weakening them. They regard as fake news well-grounded evidence that obviously weakens their normative beliefs. They ignore that poorly grounded evidence supporting their beliefs is regarded as fake news by specialists and experts concerning such evidence.

Wiredu focuses on Christianity in making this argument, but any reasonable version of an hypothesis regarding a sense of God-based infallibilism applies to monotheists generally, to Jews and to Muslims as well as to Christians. Just as for many Christians, after all, many Jews and many Muslims assume the Supreme Being has revealed various normative beliefs to be universally obligatory for humans. This consideration is highly pertinent for Ghanaians; while roughly 71% are Christian, roughly 18% are Muslim.⁶

Fake News, Monotheism, and Vietnam

President Lyndon B. Johnson justified the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution with two pieces of fear-mongering that were then narrowly and are now widely recognized as deceptive. First, Johnson falsely claimed a North Vietnamese naval attack against the United States destroyer *Maddox* on 2 August 1964 was “unprovoked” (1964a). Second, Johnson used obviously

inadequate evidence to falsely claim there had been a second naval attack during the night of 3-4 August (1964b).⁷ Thanks to Senator Wayne Morse's explanation in open Senate debate on 6 August, informed Americans knew that Johnson's first claim was suspect: "I think you are kidding the world if you try to give the impression that when the South Vietnamese naval boats bombarded two islands a short distance off the coast of North Vietnam we were not implicated" (Morse 1964).

As a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Morse knew the facts and implications of this bombardment from "information given in executive session by Secretaries [Dean] Rusk and [Robert] McNamara to a joint session of the Senate Committees on Foreign Relations and Armed Services" (Stone, 1964, which is recommended reading).⁸ To avoid further investigation before the resolution was to be congressionally endorsed on 7 August, Johnson had directed Rusk and McNamara to explain to members of the two committees how Johnson's public description of the 2 August Tonkin incident was deceptive about provocation. As he anticipated, only Morse among the members briefed by Rusk and McNamara exposed Johnson's deception. The other members treated Morse's factually accurate summary of the explanation by McNamara and Rusk as poorly grounded fake news. By failing to investigate the incident or the resolution beyond minimal reporting, the mainstream American press also

treated Morse's whistle-blowing as poorly grounded fake news: "The press, which dropped an Iron Curtain weeks ago on the anti-war speeches of Morse and [Senator Ernest] Gruening, ignored this one too" (Stone, 1964). Ordinary Americans interested in accuracy regarding this whistle-blowing relied on discussion by the independent press, including *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, *Ramparts*, and *The Nation*.

The government formalized a National Day of Prayer in 1952.

The infallibilism hypothesis helps explain why most Americans treated Morse's whistle-blowing as fake news. The hypothesis holds that the faith-based thinking of monotheism promotes a tendency towards infallibilism regarding even one's secular thoughts about the norms of conduct. The American government had been actively encouraging Americans to think monotheistically both immediately before and after they replaced the French in Vietnam. The government formalized a National Day of Prayer in 1952. On 14 June 1954, Congress added the phrase "under God" to the nation's pledge of allegiance. Ten days later, the U. S. Postal Service issued its first stamp with a religious reference, "In God We Trust." This phrase was adopted as the nation's official motto in 1956. Shortly thereafter, it began to appear on all of the nation's currency.

The general public response to these five measures, as described by Frank Lambert in a 2010 interview with PBS, was a feeling that the United States was "reclaiming this notion that we're a chosen people and that we were conceived under God. [...] It is evil versus good. It is godless communism versus a God-fearing America." The infallibilism hypothesis suggests that most Americans supported the American war in Vietnam partly because our holidays, our pledge of allegiance, our stamps, and even our currency, together with the previously existing stock of similar national symbols, encouraged them to think monotheistically, and hence infallibilistically, in support of their leader's (deceptive) claims about national defense.⁹

McNamara eventually acknowledged that American thinking about Vietnam, and particularly about the threat posed by North Vietnam, was infallibilistic; among the "major causes for our disaster in Vietnam," he observed, "we exaggerated the dangers to the United States of their [North Vietnamese] actions" (McNamara 1996). McNamara also acknowledged that Americans were infallibilistically blind regarding their likelihood of political success in Vietnam (1996; 1995: 322).¹⁰

In short, Americans exhibited infallibilistic support for their government's deceptive explanations for combat in Vietnam at the same time that they were more than usually exposed to monotheistic themes in the nation's self-presentation. To what extent were the two connected?

Testing the Infallibilism Hypothesis Regarding Monotheists

Kahan, et al. (2017) have recently demonstrated a form of research that might prove appropriate for testing the infallibilism hypothesis.

First, several well-established instruments measured the general “numeracy skills” of a nationally diverse sample of 1111 American adults. The participants supplied standard demographic data regarding “political affiliations and outlooks” (but not those concerning religion generally or monotheism specifically).

All subjects addressed a problem set-up that required them to disentangle the numerical evidence necessary in order to correctly interpret “data and causal inference” and solve the problem. For half the subjects, the problem concerned a non-political issue, a treatment for a skin rash. The data provided to half of this group supported the treatment, while the other half were provided data that opposed it. The set-up for the remaining subjects *did* concern a political issue: a ban on carrying concealed guns in public. Again, half the group were given data that supported the ban while the other half were given data that opposed it.

Interpreting the skin treatment conditions correctly depended straightforwardly on a subject's numeracy ability. This was not true regarding the gun control conditions. The “factor present in

the gun control conditions but not in the skin treatment conditions inhibits the contribution that numeracy makes to identifying the correct answer”—that factor being the political one (Kahan et al.). Specifically, “higher numeracy improved subjects’ performance in detecting covariance only in the ‘gun control’ condition in which the correct response was congenial to the subjects’ political outlooks. [. . .] [S]ubjects’ responses became politically polarized” when the gun control condition was not congenial to their political outlooks, and confirmation bias tended to result.

People often develop “identity-protective cognition.”

This research is relevant to our concern with monotheistically based infallibilism for two reasons. First, it involved subjects who were diverse demographically and politically but not identified as to monotheistic status. Second, it addresses the extent to which public controversy results from politically based confirmation bias. It shows that some of “the public’s capacity to comprehend scientific evidence” is “disabled by cultural and political conflict.” People often develop “identity-protective cognition” that diminishes their capacity “to ‘get the right answer’ from an empirical standpoint” regarding political problems. They

“attend to information [...] that promotes the formation of identity-congruent beliefs” (Kahan et al.).

This research could be easily modified for testing Wiredu’s infallibilism hypothesis. It would ask a similarly diverse group of subjects to solve similarly difficult problems, both political and non-political, that require the disentangling of relevant numerical evidence (both strengthening and weakening) from the irrelevant. As well as relating a correct or incorrect answer to a subject’s numeracy ability, however, the research would also relate it to the subject’s monotheistic status.

The findings of Kahan and his research partners should make us cautious. The ability of people, monotheistic or not, to reason correctly about evidence regarding a non-political issue can be significantly diminished when the same relevantly adjusted evidence is considered regarding a political issue. Caution about this possibility would presumably have reduced Americans’ tolerating their government’s deceptive fear-mongering about the second American war in Iraq after that fear-mongering was publicly shown to be deceptive by, among others, Hans Blix, Mohamed ElBaradei, Joseph Wilson, John McLaughlin, the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), Knight Ridder, the *Washington Post*. Explanatory details regarding these publications about deception are summarized by Stein and Dickinson (2006). Despite these warnings, 72% of Americans thought that invading Iraq was the “Right Decision”

when it began (Pew Research Center, 2008).

[T]he Bush Administration has consistently framed its war policy in religious language. [...] [S]upport for U.S. Iraq policy is partially an outcome of what we call “sacralization ideology,” as measured by the belief that religious and secular institutions should be more closely in collaboration. [...] We argue that the religious framing of U.S. foreign policy appeals to a certain religious type who is not fully Republican or conservative evangelical. (Froese and Mencken, 2009: 103)

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NOTES

¹ Owiredu provides this explanation:

An aetiological myth among the Akans of the French Ivory Coast [traditionally regarded as unified with the Akans of Ghana] shows that an ancestor of the Akans was one day caught in a flood with all his family. When they were in despair a sorcerer appeared and promised to rescue them if he were given a human sacrifice. The man asked his wife for their first born son but she refused. He sorrowfully asked his sister for her son; she agreed. The sorcerer took the offering and divided the waters in two and the family was saved. The ancestor swore a solemn vow that he would give all his inheritance to his nephews. (1959:161)

The main advantage of this principle, according to Owiredu, is that “as a method of tracing descent it is unerring” (163). That said, most Ghanaians now avoid the principle in determining rights of inheritance.

² Apparently, traditional Akans do not think the practical rationale for this norm extends universally to all societies, as would be true if they viewed it as a moral norm. Which seems odd if the norm is designed to prevent rape.

³ As traders all along Africa's west coast began to deliver captives, the excess of males delivered across the Atlantic led to a changed population structure in the homeland. Women exceeded men by a substantial proportion in West and Central Africa, with an average of 100 adult females for every 70 adult males. In areas such as Angola and the Bight of Benin, which includes Ghana, the ratio reached two adult women for every man (Manning, 1999: 1721). Wiredu also observes that “good sense” would recommend polyandry if “men come to outnumber women” (1995: 399).

⁴ Wiredu elsewhere provides a gloss on this term: “I hasten to point out that I use the word ‘non-humanistic’ as the strict contradictory of ‘humanistic’ in the sense just indicated. I do not mean ‘non-humanistic’ in the sense of wicked or anything like that. As for wickedness, I suspect that, by and large, it is evenly distributed among all the different tribes of humankind” (Wiredu, 1995: 394). Wiredu also recognizes the “Western intellectual situation is characterized by a great diversity of philosophic persuasions, and prudence dictates abstention from unqualified generalizations” (1996a: 235).

⁵ “The formal agencies transferred to African hands were [...] alien in derivation, functionally conceived, bureaucratically designed, authoritarian in nature and primarily concerned with issues of domination rather than legitimacy” (Chazan et al., 1988: 41).

⁶ According to Central Intelligence Agency (2019a), roughly 89% of Ghanaians are monotheists: “Christian 71.2% (Pentecostal/Charismatic 28.3%, Protestant 18.4%, Catholic 13.1%, other 11.4%), Muslim 17.6%, traditional 5.2%, other 0.8%, none 5.2% (2010 est.).”

By way of contrast, only 73% of Americans are monotheists: “Protestant 46.5%, Roman Catholic 20.8%, Jewish 1.9%, Mormon 1.6%, other Christian 0.9%, Muslim 0.9%, Jehovah's Witness 0.8%, Buddhist 0.7%, Hindu 0.7%, other 1.8%, unaffiliated 22.8%, don't know/refused 0.6% (2014 est.)” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019c).

⁷ According to the National Security Agency, “none of the information coming out of CINCPAC [Commander in Chief Pacific]

either before or in the hours following the execution order [on 5 August to bomb North Vietnamese naval and oil installations when finally authorized] was sufficiently persuasive to support such a momentous decision” (as quoted by the National Cryptologic School, 2005: 49). Indeed, no physical evidence of the attack reported for the night of 3-4 August was found on 4 August, or thereafter. Additionally, Commander (later, Vice Admiral) James Stockdale, who commanded air cover during the falsely reported encounter, observed that “I had the best seat in the house from which to detect boats—if there were any . . . [There was] nothing but black water and American firepower” (Stockdale and Stockdale, 1984: 18, 23).

According to the official memo of the White House staff meeting at 8 a.m. on 5 August, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy was questioned about the 3-4 August evidence for the proposed Tonkin Gulf Resolution. “Bundy, in reply, jokingly told him perhaps the matter should not be thought through too far. For his own part, he welcomed the recent events as justification for a resolution the Administration had wanted for some time” (as quoted by Prados [2004] from the memorandum for the record drafted by military aide William Y. Smith).

Stockdale later commented: “We were about to launch a war under false pretenses, in the face of the on-scene military commander's advice to the contrary [...]” (Stockdale and Stockdale, 1984: 25; Stockdale, 1998)

⁸ McNamara: I think I should also... explain this OPLAN 34-A, these covert operations. There's no question but what that had some bearing on it. On Friday night [30-31 July], as you probably know, we had four TP [sic] boats from Vietnam...attack two islands [Hon Me and Hon Ngu], and we expended, oh, 1,000 rounds of ammunition of one kind or another against them....And following twenty-four hours after that [2 August] with this destroyer [Maddox, which had supplied intelligence for the Friday night small-boat raid] in that same area undoubtedly led them to connect the two events.

Johnson: Well, say that to [Senate minority leader Everett] Dirksen... [and] get the Speaker [of the House John McCormick] and [Senate Majority Leader Mike] Mansfield to call a group of fifteen, twenty people together, from the Armed Services and Foreign Relations [Committees] tell them what happened.

(Johnson and McNamara, 1964)

Morse also knew of the bombardment from Vice-President Hubert Humphrey.

Johnson: "Humphrey said, 'Well, we have been carrying on some operations in that area, and we've been having some covert operations where we have been going in and knocking out roads and petroleum things, and so forth.' [...] And that is exactly what we have been doing. But the damned fool got it up, and now he's got Morse talking about it" (Johnson, 1964c).

⁹ Until January 1968, most Americans either supported the war or had no opinion about it (Gallup, 2000).

¹⁰ Another quotation from MacNamara further illustrates American over-confidence in our ability to understand the situation in Vietnam:

External military force cannot reconstruct a failed state, and [South] Vietnam, during much of that period, was a failed state politically. We didn't recognize it as such. [...] We underestimated the power of nationalism to motivate a people (in this case, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong) to fight and die for their beliefs and values. [...] Our misjudgments of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders.

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