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Review Article/Revues de livres

'Spectralizing Bergson and the Dilemmas of Decolonization'. A review of Messay Kebede, *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization*, 2004.

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It is sometimes amazing that decolonization continues to generate interests and debates in African philosophical circles. This is not to say the theme of decolonization is not important. Indeed it is a relevant preoccupation. However, what we need is a continuous problematization of the discourse of decolonization to reflect 1] the changing sociopolitical conditions within the African continent; 2] to include in our analyses global configurations within the contemporary moment and how they impact on the conditions in the African continent; 3] to meditate on the historical transformations in the discourse of decolonization itself in order to keep track of its turns and changes; 4] to reconceptualize the project and discourse of decolonization where and when necessary with a view to doing away with them altogether if old conceptual models fail to describe adequately present realities.

Messay Kebede, in his book, *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* (2004), clearly does not take the points just enumerated into account. He fails to define or clarify in a satisfactory manner what precisely he means by decolonization. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has done important conceptual labour on the discourse of decolonization but he is hardly mentioned. Even Kwasi Wiredu (1980, 1996), one of Africa's foremost philosophers and major theorists of conceptual decolonization is not treated on the basis of his work in this domain. Kebede's text commits a great number of fallacies in relation to ideas and important African philosophical figures. Some of these include, postmodernism, deconstruction, ethnophilosophy, negritude, Senghor, Mudimbe and Wiredu. And it is important to address some of these fallacies.

Even the choice of theoretical periods and models is often obsolete when not incongruous. For instance, Levy-Bruhl is adopted as a primary figure on whom to heap the blame of Eurocentric racism. Within the context of old-fashioned anthropology, Levy-Bruhl is a notable figure but we have

become used to beginning the critique and condemnation of Eurocentricism around the figures of Kant, Hegel and Hume (Gates Jr. 1992). None of these famous Western philosophical figures is discussed comprehensively in the important and continuous task of denouncing Eurocentricism and other related virulent forms of racism. Kebede points out that had the scourge of racism been absent global economic growth and development would have been much higher;

> some theories suggest that Europe could have obtained higher economic gains if it had avoided the cumbersome and inhuman practice of political and cultural subjugation and opted for the development of the continent through free economic exchanges' (2004:9).

However, none of these theories is mentioned and neither are the implications of this proposition exhaustively explored.

Messay's conceptualization of ethnophilosophy is also very problematic. He regards John Mbiti and Léopold Sédar Senghor as major proponents of ethnophilosophy. In order to put the discourse and counter-discourses of ethnophilosophy into proper perspective, it is important to turn to the work of Paulin J. Hountondji.

Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary, initiated the ethnophilosophical turn in philosophico-anthropological discourses in Africa with the publication of his pioneering text, *Bantu Philosophy in 1945*. Hountondji mentions that this text was written primarily for a European audience in which the Bantu subject is characterized as a mere anthropological cipher, a non-presence awaiting the attentions and ministrations of the European adventurist/ influence: missionary, administrator and soldier. In his words,

> it aims on the one hand at facilitating what it calls Europe's 'mission to civilize' (by which we understand: practical mastery by the colonizer of the black man's psychological wellsprings) and, on the other hand, at warning Europe itself against the abuses of its own technocratic and ultra-materialistic civilization, by offering her, at the cost of a few rash generalizations, an image of the fine spirituality of the primitive Bantu (1996:49).

Thus, an important injunction is made: the colonizer can 'civilize' the 'native' on the condition that she possesses the appropriate spiritual qualities.

Tempels' corpus provoked a few intellectual reactions from a Rwandan priest, Alexis Kagame. Kagame attempts to construct a universal ontology drawing from an Aristotelian philosophy of consciousness. Similarly, in incorporating Greek syntactical structures in relation to his mother tongue, his entire theoretical project fails in Hountondji's view:

> His critique, [...] is not a radical one. He should have renounced Tempels' whole project instead of accepting its dogmatic naiveté and carrying it out

> slightly differently. Kagame should not have been content to refute Tempels, he should have asked himself what the reasons were for his error. Then he might have noticed that Tempels' insistence on emphasizing the differences was part and parcel of the whole scheme, the reconstruction of the Bantu Weltanschauung, inasmuch as the scheme was not inscribed in the Weltanschauung itself but was external to it (Ibid:51).

Hountondji grants that Kagame has a powerful theoretical temperament but concludes all the same that his 'work simply perpetuates an ideological myth which is itself of non-African origin' (Ibid:44). Other prominent ethnophilosophers Hountondji mentions include Makarakiza, Lufuluabo, Mulago, Bahoken, Fouda and in some respects, William Abraham. This important historical background is absent in Kebede's discussion of this major African philosophical tendency. Other important assessments of ethnophilosophy within the canon of contemporary African philosophy are those by V. Y. Mudimbe (1988, 1991).

Kebede simply mischaracterizes ethnophilosophy: 'Ethnophilosophers come out strongly in favour of the existence of African philosophy because they find the colonial denial of African philosophy highly insulting and degrading' (2004:83). It should be recognized that even the project of ethnophilosophy can be defined in racial terms and this classification is needless to add quite important. There are both Western and African schools of ethnophilosophy which reinforce and antagonize one another. No mention is made of this crucial distinction. In fact, at a point, he terms Hountondji's method as 'critical ethnophilosophy' (2004:87). This characterization is very problematic. Does he mean to cast Hountondji as the ultimate anti-ethnophilosopher which indeed he is or to state that Hountondji advances a more critical project of ethnophilosophy which he does not? Hountondji's entire metaphilosophical programme has been dominated by a relentless attack on both the project and status of ethnophilosophy in whatever guise. This point cannot be over-emphasized.

There is an apparent confusion between Senghor's conception of negritude and ethnophilosophy. For instance this confusion (in not seizing the opportunity to differentiate the boundaries between the project of ethnophilosophy and negritude) becomes apparent in the following statement: 'Léopold Sédar Senghor's specification of emotion as an African speciality promotes the same idea of African irrationality with even greater strength' (2004:85). There is never a consistent attempt to differentiate negritude and ethnophilosophy, rather, there is the recurring tendency to formulate both as the same enterprise. In fact, Kebede makes a very sweeping and unduly damaging remark; 'Unable to rescue Africa, the glorification of the black essence by the negritude philosopher thus leads to nothing' (2004:60). Many

readings of Senghor have been undoubtedly critical usually on account of his identitarian essentializations. For example, famous criticisms of Senghor have been made by Wole Soyinka. He writes, 'Leopold Sedar Senghor is a priest- but a failed one' (1999:97). He argues that the main reason for the failure is that: 'Senghor appears compelled to query deep into the humanism of the oppressed to escape the undeniable pressure of history, counter its imperatives in the present with an excursion into pristine memory, and forge from within its parity and innocence, an ethos of generosity whose lyrical strength becomes its main justification' (1999:105). However, there are also complementary readings of Senghor.

Paul Gilroy writes of him in very favourable terms:

> Senghor is a convenient representative of the generation of colonial intellectuals who faced fascism on the battlefield and then used their confrontations with it to clarify their approaches to freedom and democracy, culture and identity. Senghor's work exhibits a similar pattern in which fervent humanism is combined with, but somehow not contradicted by, a romantic ethnic particularity and an appreciation for cultural syncretism and transcultural symbiosis. The Senegalese poet, statesman, resistance fighter, socialist, and influential theorist of Negritude, hybridity, and cultural intermixture ... (2000:91-92).

This sort of reading transforms the traditional image of Senghor as a proponent ethnic particularity and the cult of black inner rhythm with its anti-rationalist connotations. Soyinka's reservations in this light appear narrow-minded while the usual allegations of essentialisms in the face of a restated quality 'for cultural syncretism and transcultural symbiosis' now appear lame and untrue. Kebede's reading of Senghor is clearly based on presuppositions of essentialism and within the frame of an unreconstructed logic of what postcolonialism entails.

Kebede's primary concern, as we have to keep reminding ourselves since it forms the thrust of the title of his book, is decolonization. And yet as we have noted decolonization remains hardly theorized in the text. Wiredu on the other hand, has demonstrated why the project of conceptual decolonization should be a central concern in contemporary African philosophy. Accordingly, he argues that 'the agenda for contemporary African philosophy must include the critical and reconstructive treatment of the oral tradition and the exploitation of the literary scientific resources of the modern world in pursuit of a synthesis' (1996:112). Wiredu has proffered both definitions and elaborations of decolonization as it relates to contemporary African philosophy. One does not come across the same qualities regarding the topic in Kebede's text.

Similarly, there are attempts to stress the relevance of postmodernism as a conceptual approach for processes of agentialization in Africa. Most of these attempts, nonetheless, fall flat. Kebede subscribes to the only partially accurate view that postmodernism is overwhelmingly indebted to the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger. There are far more influences than this narrow view admits. He posits the opinion that 'what makes postmodernism crucial for Africa is that the theory rehabilitates Africa even as it suggests alternative ways of achieving modernity and development' (2004:140) and yet earlier, he had also expressed the view that 'the emergence of postmodernism from the womb of Western philosophy remains a mystery' (2004:126). Deconstruction crops up a few times in Kebede's text and he mentions V. Y. Mudimbe as belonging to the African school of deconstruction (surprisingly Achille Mbembe is hardly mentioned nor discussed in this regard). Yet this term is, as Derrida once very reluctantly called it, difficult and problematic. Deconstruction has as its central concerns 'the deconstruction of the metaphysics of the 'proper', of logocentricism, linguisticism, phonologism, the demystification or the de-sedimentation of the autonomic hegemony of language (a deconstruction in the course of which is elaborated another concept of the text or the trace, of their originary technization, of iterability, of the prosthetic supplement, but also of the proper and of what was given the name of exappropriation) (Derrida 1994:92). These clarifications are absent in Kebede's discussions of the topic.

Let us examine a few more of Kebede's preoccupations. On African historic religion he writes 'Mbiti defends traditional African religions on account of their closeness to the original, non-hellenized message of the Bible. What the West stigmatizes as primitive is the innocent human being, the one that remains loyal to the original wish of the Creator' (2004:76). The discourses on African traditional religions have long since moved beyond these kinds of jaded anthropological notions. Fanon is also discussed but as usual the picture of him that emerges from Kebede's reading is neither totally accurate nor completely agreeable. According to him, 'Frantz Fanon occupies a distinct place by the argument that only a philosophy of violence consummates the rejection of both otherness and the restoration of the past' (2004:94). He also makes the point that 'Fanon's resolution to convince the colonized that they have no other option than recourse to violence is at best exaggerated and highly restrictive' (2004:101). Indeed there are far more sophisticated readings of Fanon available. A most astute reading is offered by Homi Bhabha:

> It is not for the finitude of philosophical thinking nor for the finality of a political direction that we turn to Fanon. Heir to the ingenuity and artistry of Toussaint and Senghor, as well as the iconoclasm of Nietzsche, Freud and

> Sartre, Fanon is the purveyor of the transgressive and transitional truth' (1986:viii–ix).

Bhabha's analysis locates Fanon's importance in a multiplicity of discursive domains and not just as a theorist of colonial counter-violence or critic of ethnophilosophy as he is branded in Kebede's reading. Nigel Gibson on his part states that Fanon's '*Wretched of the Earth* is perhaps one of the most important pieces of engaged and critical transition literature available' (2004:1).

V. Y. Mudimbe is a theorist who crops up many times for mention. Again the discussions of Mudimbe are not altogether satisfactory. A remark such as 'in terms of deconstruction and relativization, what Mudimbe has achieved does not seem to surpass negritude' (2004:127) is simply very confusing. How 'does deconstruction and relativization' figure within this particular equation? Mudimbe's main project has been the Foucauldian deconstruction of the African subject (infrahumanity) and forms of subjectivity within the Western anthropological archive. His primary method in this regard is an archaeological focus on a wide range of disciplinary texts and domains: literary, linguistic, philosophical, religious and anthropological.

Kebede at crucial moments seeks to validate the political importance of his philosophical project, after all, any conception of decolonization ultimately has strong political implications. In this regard, a few passages are particularly striking; 'The recognition of the concomitance of myth and rationality, of traditionality and modernity, is the appropriate way to diffuse the African dilemma' (2004:208). Also, he writes, 'closely following the arguments of Bergson, I endorse the autonomous existence of the myth-making function together with the empowering purpose of the function, the understanding being that excessive valorization of rationality results in the complete asphyxia of the power of the mind' (2004:212). Two points are worth noting here; an easy acceptance of the influence of Bergson and the centrality of the poetic elements in the constitution of philosophical projects. How does this project differ in fact from the more accomplished projects of Senghor and Mudimbe who often come up for condemnation? The sudden espousal of poetry in the middle of the attempt to put up a front of philosophical respectability seems to be a weariness with the philosophical enterprise itself.

Kebede begins his discourse on decolonization on a very familiar terrain, a re-presentation of Levy-Bruhl's ascription of pre-logicality to the African subject. Levy-Bruhl's anachronistic anthropological project has been promptly criticized and stripped of any lasting intellectual value. In contemporary African philosophical discourse, the denigration of the African subject and the counter-discourses of that denigration obviously have more interesting

ontologies and intellectual frames of reference; for instance V. Y. Mudimbe's scholarly account of the mummification of the black subject in Greek antiquity or Wiredu's reconceptualizations of Akan traditional worldviews in the garb of analytic philosophy.

The recurring figures in his philosophical preoccupations are Levy-Bruhl, Tempels, Senghor, Bergson and sometimes Marx. Other figures are Hountondji, Mudimbe and, to a lesser extent, Wiredu. However, Kebede's engagement with other projects of decolonization together with his own conceptualization of decolonization is rather uneven. There are new genealogies of colonialism to be taken into consideration (read for instance, McClintock 1995 and Stoler 2002). Even the Fanonian theorization of colonial relations has been radically re-written and re-interpreted by contemporary theorists such as Bhabha, Gates Jr., and Gibson. Such radicalizations are necessary in order to ensure that meaning is not lost in the various processes and stages of decolonization. The inherent binarisms of the traditional colonial structure are always open to critique. Kebede's assumptions about that structure reinforce the same old stereotypes about colonial relations. In the present age of globalization, there is the necessity to reconsider the meaning and possibilities of decolonization within contemporary politics. New forms of colonization are occurring in which definitions of 'centre' and 'periphery' become quite problematic as what is regarded as the global gets colonized by its opposite in ways in which its character is radically transformed. Kebede's concept of decolonization excludes the important cultural, sociopolitical and economic configurations of contemporary globalization and it is based instead on the reinforcement of various primordialisms (within a certain understanding of the global); the nation-state, the old international and national identitarian politics. The new configurations (within the political economy of the global) that are occurring have obviously affected the trajectories of decolonization and the very meaning of the term. Kebede does not demonstrate an appreciation of this radical transformation and shows that he still operates within a pre-Fanonian mind-set. We have to rethink the notion and possibilities of decolonization and their various kinds of usefulness in the age of contemporary globalization.

Similarly, in Kebede's text, the project of decolonization is re-presented within an undeconstructed format which excludes the necessary and important categories of class, gender and sexuality. Indeed patriarchal nation-state structures in Africa need to be appropriately critiqued to demonstrate much of what they exclude. We have to learn to tell new stories not only within the old narrative frameworks but with new languages as well. Perhaps decolonization in the face of the contemporary politics of the global has

become obsolete as a conceptual category; and perhaps it now time to theorize the notion of de-agentialization within the context of the global.

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