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Book Reviews / Notes de lecture

Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization. By Messay Kebede. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004. 256 pp. Price: 52 euros, 70 USD.

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In this book, Messay Kebede attempts to unravel the fundamental problems of African philosophy by examining different trends in contemporary African philosophy. Walking us through the terrain of a rapidly growing field of study, Kebede's book uncovers, widens and enriches our understanding of African philosophy. He notes that European colonialists adopted the hierarchical notions of human races with its blunt promulgation of the superiority of the white race over all other peoples in order to justify slavery and colonialism. He persuasively demonstrates how the idea of the 'white man' was an invention, and the mental architecture of the post-colonial African the major cause of underdevelopment in Africa. He has a firm belief that philosophy has a role to play in understanding Africa and decolonising the African mind. According to Kebede,

[t]he rethinking of philosophical concepts in the direction of deconstruction for the purpose of achieving mental decolonization teams up modernization with philosophical questions. Nothing can be accomplished in the direction of overcoming marginality unless Africa repositions itself by means of philosophical premises free of Eurocentric conditionings. Decolonization is primarily a philosophical problem, given that the emancipation of the African mind from the debilitating ascendancy of Western *episteme* is its inaugural moment (p. xii).

Kebede thus makes a strong case for his view that freedom and development presuppose prior decolonisation of the African mind. He believes that decolonisation is unthinkable so long as we endorse Eurocentrism, that is, the conception that there is a unilinear history and that the West is the driving force of that history while other cultures are either lagging behind or frankly inferior or primitive. Mental liberation requires the radical dissipation of Western categories. 'What comes first is thus subjective libera-

tion, the decolonization of the mind. The gateway to liberation is the prior and complete deconstruction of the mental setup, not the adoption of a revolutionary theory, as African Marxists believed wrongly. Some such dismantling alone is liable to initiate an authentic, unspoiled comprehension of African traditionality' (Messay 2004:125).

Kebede suggests that we must come up with a pluralistic notion of history in which each culture finds its own meaning. This bans the ranking of cultures as advanced or backward. It is called deconstruction of Eurocentrism with the intent of centering African cultures. Only when native intellectuals assume this pluralistic perspective can they counter cultural marginalisation. Thus, as Kebede credibly argues, we must resist the temptation to apply a 'one size/shape fits all' model to human history.

According to Kebede, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and romanticism had already challenged the haughtiness of the West. In particular, the romantic inspiration has exercised its influence right up to the twentieth century. Kebede notes that Henri Bergson had already recognised the irreplaceable role of intuition, which alone can go beyond the limitations of rational knowledge. 'Another important trend is the existentialist protest against the dominance of rational thinking. From Søren Kierkegaard to Sartre, the protest insists on the extent to which reason has little to say concerning the important questions related to the meaning of life' (Messay 2004:14). In this connection, Kebede makes a persuasive case to show the importance of mysticism in Western and African philosophy. For him, '[b]oth Africans and Westerners draw their inspirations from a mystical source, which becomes philosophy as a result of rationalization' (Kebede 2004:35).

Kebede contends that the best way to get out of the African dilemma is '[t]he recognition of the concomitance of myth and rationality, of traditionality and modernity' (p. 208). This would enable Africa, he said, to recognise its difference without succumbing to otherness. Each culture assigns a specific task to rationality and the role of rationality differs from one culture to another. Following Bergson, Kebede claims that myth has the noteworthy and distinct function of empowering people. Amplifying the connection that Max Weber establishes between capitalism and Protestantism, he maintains that a mystical inspiration enabled Europe to colonise the world. Arguing that what is at stake in the conflict opposing ethnophilosophers to professional philosophers is the role of myth, he considers the dialogue between myth and rationality as the correct path toward a liberating African philosophy. He writes: '[t]he discovery that mythical thinking has a different function challenges Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's evolutionist reading, and establishes the complementarity of myth and reason and their equal coexistence in non-

Western as well as Western peoples' (p. 216). Rationality itself is, he said, inaccessible without some idealism (p. 218). He concludes: 'unless the power to believe is liberated, I maintain that Africa cannot have the will to rise above its marginal existence' (p. 219). Accordingly, the emancipation of the African power to believe from Western objectifications is required to liberate mental colonisation. Such an argument is intriguing, nay provocative, and breaks away from the Western conception of philosophy. *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* is one of the few recently published books that dares to recognise the existence of philosophy in Africa, not through the revival of non-rationality, as advocated by the thinkers of Negritude, but through the rational recapturing of traditional beliefs.

Even if Kebede raises important problems of African philosophy, some critical remarks are apposite. In the first place, Kebede lumped Tempels, the thinkers of negritude, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyerere together as ethnophilosophers without giving any explanation and justification. He did not clearly define ethnophilosophy and tell the readers why he did so although he stressed the opposition between ethnophilosophers and professional philosophers. The reader is not effectively armed with the tools to understand the difference between his views and the views of other philosophers. Henry Odera Orkua (1991) labeled African leaders as nationalist ideological philosophers. Parker English and Kibujjo Kalumba (1996) characterised them as liberation philosophers. Paulin Hountondji, the person who coined the term ethnophilosophy for the first time, did not consider liberation philosophers as ethnophilosophers.

On the other hand, Kebede shares the view that postmodernism has rediscovered the importance of 'difference' as a key value by denouncing Western universalism and the subsequent imposition of sameness. He also states that ethnophilosophy was given a strong backing by the discovery of relativism and pluralism. He believes that ethnophilosophy represents other way of knowing and being. Thus, he said, we should resist the characterisation of ethnophilosophy as an endorsement of colonial discourse (p. 21). Kebede criticised Hountondji for failing

to appreciate ethnophilosophers' disrespect for the Western canons of philosophy and their subsequent rejection of the exclusion of philosophy from non-Western cultures ... The claim to otherness denounces the illegitimacy of reducing the human essence to the Western model, and so pleads in favor of diversity by allowing peoples the right to define themselves as they think appropriate. The charge that ethnophilosophy is devoid of critical approach is thus not receivable (p. 90).

However, what Hountondji calls ethno-philosophers is different from what Kebede calls ethnophilosophers. Hountondji was referring to Tempels, Alexis Kagame, Makarakiza and others who claimed that all Africans have unanimous collective philosophy. It is not clear whether Kebede accepts the view that Tempels endorses the unanimous philosophy of the Bantu people. He did not criticise Tempels for doing so. In fact, I agree with Kebede that Hountondji and Marcien Towa favoured rationality and failed to acknowledge 'the considerable part mysticism and irrationality play in philosophical systems' (p.90).

On the other hand, Kebede endorsed Peter O Bodunrin's accusation of Odera Oruka. Bodunrin believes that Odera Oruka could not prove the existence of philosophic sagacity in Africa. Bodunrin doubts whether the method of interview and questionnaire can show the existence of sage philosophers. Its outcome involves the interpretative work of the interviewer and the ideas of the interviewee.

Odera Oruka had already responded to Bodunrin and other critics. According to Odera Oruka, a philosopher would in some ways help a sage to explicate or give birth to his/her otherwise implicit ideas by raising various questions. Thus, the philosopher and the sage can contribute to the articulation of the views of the sage. 'The trained philosopher, interviewing the sage, plays the role of philosophical provocation' (1991:51). In truth, all philosophy can be regarded as 'joint works with those philosophers who initially inspired or provoked them' (Odera Oruka 1991:51). It is in this manner that we should understand the philosophical content of 'philosophic sagacity.' Traditional wisdom or 'sagacity' is not in itself philosophy. Odera Oruka clarifies that sage research is aimed at looking for philosophy within sagacity rather than claiming, 'sagacity is, by definition, philosophy' (1991:41).

In spite of this, Kebede writes: 'Odera Oruka's use of Socrates, which is an important piece of his argument, hardly proves the point he is trying to make' (p. 93). Kebede implicitly suggests that writing is a necessary condition for the existence of philosophy.

Without skeptical thoughts being communicated across time and space by means of script, a critical tradition can scarcely exist. Still less can these thoughts accumulate and grow if they are constantly undone by the lack of systematic recording. Stated otherwise, the absence of script may have in fact prevented sages from becoming really philosophers, that is, from developing a systematic critical thinking (p. 93).

Kebede further asserts: '[t]he emergence of such philosophers is rendered all the more difficult by Odera Oruka's persistent portrayal of philosophic

sages as exceptional individuals entirely at odds with their culture' (p. 93). Kebede concludes,

[i]f a favorable social environment is thus necessary for the blooming of philosophers, then on top of repeating the colonial allegation of primitive Africa, the way Odera Oruka isolates the African thinker makes the appearance of philosophic sagacity extremely unlikely. Just as the antagonism between the individual thinker and the prevailing culture rules out the emergence of the sage philosopher from the traditional culture, neither does it allow the derivation of traditional beliefs from the critical thinking of individuals (p. 94).

This is a very bold conclusion that rules out the existence of philosophy in non-literate cultures. Unfortunately the author's conclusion about sage philosophy is based on one article by Odera Oruka 'Sagacity in African Philosophy' in Tsenay Serequeberhan's collection (1991). I doubt whether this work captures Odera Oruka's theory of sage philosophy. This in a way renders Kebede's study of sage philosophy incomplete and vulnerable to criticism. Odera Oruka developed his ideas and responds to his critics in various works (see Odera Oruka 1981, 1990, 1991, and 1997).

According to Odera Oruka (1991), there are two types of sage in Africa: folk and philosophic. Folk sages cannot go beyond the celebrated folk-wisdom. They don't have the ability to apply their own independent critical objection to folk beliefs. They are able to apply and interpret the wisdom of the community and apply it in unique circumstances, i.e. they are wise within the worldview's of their respective communities. On the other hand, philosophic sages are independent thinkers who can make an independent critical assessment of what the people take for granted. Thus, Odera Oruka labeled individualized critical reflection of sages as 'philosophic sagacity.'

As Odera Oruka and other scholars note, thoughts can be expressed in writings or as unwritten sayings and arguments associated with some individual(s). Thus, literacy is not a necessary condition for philosophical reflection and exposition and there is overwhelming evidence of a long tradition of critical independent thinkers who have guided their thought and judgments by the power of reason and inborn insight in Africa. The question today is how to bring various modern and written forms of philosophy together with non-written sources of philosophical insight in a way relevant to human development in the 21st century (see Kelbessa 2006).

Although Kebede used the title 'Stolen Legacy' (p.105), he did not refer to George G. M. James, Henry Orla, Martin Bernal (1987), Innocent C. Onyewuenyi (1993), and other Egyptologists who claimed that ancient Egypt had by far the greatest civilisation and culture, and served as the foundation

of Greek philosophy. He severely accused Cheikh Anta Diop of fabricating a non-existent theory. He writes: '[t]hese theoretical frictions together with the lack of factual supports assimilate Diop's work to a mythical enterprise' (p. 110). He considers Diop as the proponent of myth (p.150). Although Kebede identifies some of the weaknesses of Diop, he does not satisfactorily lay the basis for his critique. It should be noted that various scholars have attempted to show the African origin of Greek philosophy (see James 1954; Olela 1994; Onyewuenyi 1993; Obenga 2004).

Whilst I commend Kebede's appreciation of nonviolent resistance, what has been happening in the world cannot avoid making the picture more complex. In particular, Kebede doesn't accept the curative role that Fanon attributes to violence. He also writes,

[n]onviolent resistance has the clear impact of denouncing the barbarism of the colonizer, thereby drawing a clear demarcation line between the values of the oppressor and the ideals of liberation. In demystifying and rejecting violence, nonviolence graciously prepares a bright and democratic future, the very one where force will have no say. Whereas the myth of violence ends up by valorizing violence as a legitimate resource, Gandhi's nonviolent option banishes forever the use of force from human society. Not even against the colonizer was violence used: such is the norm that nonviolence establishes (Messay 2004:103).

This is not always true. Sometimes force is important to liberate oneself. Can we say that nonviolent resistance can help solve the current problem of Palestine, Somalia, Iraq, and so on? Sometimes, nonviolent struggle should be backed by violent struggle. However, I do understand that violence alone cannot be a cure for all ills in the world.

Kebede also argues that pan-Africanism endorsed the colonial discourse by promoting the idea that all Africans belong to the same race (p. 166). For Kebede, 'pan-Africanism as much as ethnic separatism flows from ethnophilosophy' (p. 167). I don't think that ethnophilosophy as conceptualised by Hountondji served as the source of pan-Africanism. Kebede also says that pan-Africanism encourages the rise of ethnic politics (p. 167). Thus, Kebede underestimates the significance of pan-Africanism. I decline to agree with Kebede. As Prah notes, '[t]he pan-Africanist ideal is premised on the notion that the emancipation of, development and prosperity of people of African descent can be achieved only through the unity of the people. As a democratic and emancipatory movement it shares a common inspiration with the rest of humanity in its historical drive towards freedom, justice and self-determination' (1999:57). In this regard, I strongly suggest that for Africa's voice to be clearly and forcefully heard, Africans should transcend the

psychology of ahistoricity that has been imposed by racist, Western historical models and theories, and form much broader and deeper forms of intra-African cooperation. Such cooperation will in turn enable the people of Africa to take their destiny into their own hands. This implies the pan-Africanist ideal.

These shortcomings aside, Kebede produced an informative and provocative book. He has a very bold and interesting thesis of a general scope which can attract the attention of many African scholars and entice them to undertake thorough and systematic research on African philosophy.

I have found *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* a rich source of penetrating, incisive and painstaking research that dealt with different aspects of African philosophy. The contribution of articles, book chapters and books by contemporary scholars is given its due place. Making his way through such an intricate printed material is a credit to Kebede. *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* is indeed a significant contribution to African philosophy. It is a lively and engaging book, one which points the way towards future research on African philosophy.

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The Military and 'Democratisation' in The Gambia: 1994–2003,
by Ebrima Jogomai Ceesay, Oxford: Trafford Publishing, 2006, Price
£19.00.

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Two observations come to mind on reading this book. First, this is one of the few comprehensive studies on any aspect of politics in The Gambia. Indeed, compared to most other West African countries, major full-length published works on the country are relatively scarce. More common are articles in academic journals and in magazines, especially by researchers associated with the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham.¹ From this *optique*, the book fills a huge gap and contributes significantly to the body of knowledge on Gambian politics.

The second observation relates to the domain of research, that is, the military and democratisation. The era of the dominance of military rule in Africa witnessed a massive volume of literature on diverse dimensions of the phenomenon. Equally on the specific sub-theme of the military and democratisation. Only three countries in West Africa did not experience military intervention since independence and by 1992 when the democratisation onslaught gained momentum only 18 out of the 47 Sub-Saharan states were not under some form of military governance. The end of the Cold War and the 'Prague Spring' of democratization and political liberalization of the period did not altogether result in a 'wishing away' of the subject. Empirical cases dwindled considerably but did not altogether disappear. As noted in the book under review: 'It was in the mid-1990s, when many African nations were moving away from military rule in a process of 'democratisation' that The Gambia, paradoxically, was catapulted into military dictatorship.' (p.xxiv). In the context of Huntington's 'third wave of democratization'² military rule in The Gambia is viewed by the author as 'paradoxical' and 'a huge paradigm shift', especially in that the pre-existing political order was universally touted as a paragon of democracy. A thorough study of the Gambian experience is therefore timely.

Against these pointers the reviewer would like to highlight the following selected issues which constitute the major preoccupations in the book. First, why is it that whilst other African states were veering away from military dictatorships and tending towards democracy The Gambia moved in the opposite direction. Here, the author identifies and examines in depth the

background conditions leading to and the causes of the military takeover in July 1994. This leads to his critical assessment of the democratic culture in the First Republic, particularly on such variables as socio-economic conditions, the corruption cancer, the politics of personality, the conduct of elections, factionalism and moribund opposition groupings, neo-patrimonialism, weak civil society, freedom of the media and human rights, independent judiciary and public service, accountability and transparency, the rule of law and constitutionalism, and nepotism and clientelism. On each of these the author concludes that commendable performance levels were attained in the First Republic, more so when juxtaposed against the records of other African governments. Nonetheless, there were deficits, sometimes very glaring and massive, which the 1981 attempted *coup* was poised to exploit and from which the successful 1994 putsch was to benefit immensely.

The second issue is that of the planning and execution of the coup d'état, including the emergence of the Gambia National Army as a political force, grievances of the military, background to the coup, the *déroulement* of the event, the intricacies of power distribution among the main instigators, and marketing an aberrant act domestically and internationally. Theories on external and internal causal factors for military coups are presented as a backdrop for a detailed explanation of why the Gambian take-over was successful.

Third, the author states the 'fundamental concern' of the book as 'to determine whether it is possible to democratise under "military" rule' (p.xi). In other words, what is the nature of democracy as practiced in The Gambia during military rule? On this the discussion mainly involves a critical assessment of the military regime from 1994 to 1996 and of the 'quasi-military' regime from 1996 to 2003, using Amos Perlmutter's three models of praetorianism (autocratic, oligarchic, and authoritarian) as the theoretical framework.³

The pivot on which Ceesay's analysis hangs are the transition programme, and presidential and parliamentary elections of 1996/1997 and 2001/2002 (Chapters 6 and 8). The discussions on these are very exhaustive and very revealing; the author brings to bear to his arguments a wide range of facts to which only an observer-participant like him has ready access. Also receiving sustained attention are the quasi-military style of governance, the nature and extent of corruption, and the performance of the government of the Second Republic on the same variables against which he evaluated the governments of the First Republic as summarized above. In these and related areas the author is piercingly condemnatory of the post-1994 regime. He is also unequivocal as to the criteria for assessing the democratic credentials

of the political class in the Second Republic, that is, a democratic audit of the post-1994 governments (pages 241–46). His verdict is that ‘it has not been possible to democratise under either “military” or “quasi-military” rule. The country is far from being democratic and the democratisation process has hardly begun’ (p.xii). And, ‘the evidence presented in this book demonstrates that The Gambia has a long way to go before meeting the requirements for a minimal democratic order.’ (p.305). For Ceesay also, the prospects for the future appear to be ‘bleak’ (318) and ‘it remains unlikely that a military or quasi-military government could ever initiate or lead a democratic transition or a democratisation process in the country’ (p.323).

Fourth, this introduces the question of the prospects for a re-democratisation of politics and society in The Gambia, that is, the future democratic trajectory. On this score Ceesay is categorically pessimistic – and he adduces a wealth of evidence to support his position. For him, the Gambian experience is also replete with lessons both for the country and other African countries. Of particular consequence are his recommendations on how to promote civilian control of the military and modalities for restoring the democratic process in his country.

Other issues germane to the discourse on the military and democratisation explored in the book are the forces at work, domestic and external, in favour of the transition to multi-party political systems, correlation between democracy and economic development and, more broadly, the military as an agent of development. The age-old subject of the African state as an obstacle to development is also discussed, albeit tangentially.

Given the case under study and the subject of the study, *The Military and ‘Democratisation’ in The Gambia: 1994–2003* should attract a wide readership. It is very well researched, in terms of empirical material, theoretical findings and comparative experiences within and outside Africa, even if the author sometimes goes for the overkill. The book is focused and does not deviate much from its main remit. Most important, it opens up new vistas for further research. The reviewer would, for example, be interested in more research on how the policy decision was reached to set up a Gambian army in 1984. Apparently, there were camps vehemently in opposition in both state and party organs, based on the lessons of experience of other African countries. What were the other policy options and practical arrangements considered by the Government of The Gambia in the context of policymaking on defence and security within the Senegambia region after the suppression of the 1981 coup? In this regard, the decision-making framework developed by Fatma Denton in her unpublished doctoral dissertation may be of relevance, even though it is designed more for foreign policy

analysis.⁴ Then also, given my own long-standing interest in regional integration I propose that further research be undertaken on the role of ECOWAS, especially in the light of its 1990 Protocol on Democracy. Interactions between the post-1994 regime in The Gambia and sub-regional governments are cited here and there in the book. Perhaps what is really needed is a separate study on ECOWAS and non-constitutional regime changes in West Africa, then and now.

Notes

1. The author is himself a product of the School of Historical Studies, University of Birmingham, and the book is a revised version of his doctoral dissertation submitted in October 2004.
2. Huntington, S.P., 1991, *The Third Wave of Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
3. Perlmutter, A., 1981, *Political Roles and Military Rulers*, London: Frank Cass, p.15.
4. Denton, F., 1998, *Foreign Policy Formulation in The Gambia, 1965-1994: Small Weak Developing States and their Foreign Policy Decisions and Choices*, University of Birmingham, unpublished.