

# African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 4  
Summer 2006

## BOOK REVIEW

**Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization. Messay Kebede. New York: Rodopi, 2004. 256 pp.**

Messay Kebede's *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* focuses on the liberation of the African mind from the shackles of Eurocentricism as a panacea to the problem of underdevelopment. In doing this, Kebede raises many questions. These include: Who is an African? Is it possible to safely affirm sameness or difference of the African with or from the West without running into the problem of evolutionism or relativism? Is the African essentially emotional and intuitive? Is mysticism, which is celebrated in traditional African Philosophy, compatible with 'universal' Philosophy? Can the African mind be decolonized, using Western paradigms and concepts?

To answer these time vexed questions, Kebede employs works, which are apt and very appropriate to his set agenda. These include Lucien Levy-Bruhl's *How Natives Think*, and *Primitive Mentality*, Henri Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* and *Creative Evolution* and the works of contemporary African scholars such as Placid Temples; Paulin Hountondji, Odera Oruka, Frantz Fanon, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Cheik Anta Diop, Kwasi Wiredu among others. In more ways than one, Kebede's book seems to be reacting to the works of Levy Bruhl, especially, *How Natives Think*. The rebuttal of Levy Bruhl's categorization of traditional African thought as prelogical, mystical and therefore, lacking in the universal rational characteristic of philosophy, is a major task Kebede sets for himself.

Using the debate method in the presentation of positions and temperaments, Kebede divides the book into nine chapters, which treat the different themes germane to his set goals. The book opens with the traditional exploration of Western discourses on Africa. Kebede draws inspiration from the works of Henri Bergson, Immanuel Kant, Kiekegaard, Heidegger, etc to demystify reason as exemplified by Levy Bruhl. In his effort to demystify the role of reason and affirm intuition, Kebede agrees with Schopenhauer on the power of intuition and maintains "the revelation of the power of intuition protests in advance against the hierarchy established by Levy-Bruhl: rational thinking is not the highest mental ability; intuition or feeling obtains a deeper view of reality, especially spiritual realities. This role of feeling endows art with a greater cognitive dimension than science and speculation" (p.14) This position implies the affirmation of cultural otherness, pluralism and thus strengthens ethno philosophy rather than the school of professional philosophers.

Making allusions to Western evolutionist approach, Kebede discusses the hierarchy of cultures in a manner akin to Temples' hierarchy of forces. Brandishing '*Bantu Philosophy*' Kebede demonstrates that African philosophy cannot be inferior to Western philosophy. "[T]he demonstration of the existence of African philosophy confirms the participation of Africans, notes Kebede, "in the same process of reasoning as the West"

To further show that similarity of experience may not necessarily mean identity in their interpretation, Kebede uses Senghor's concept of Negritude to affirm the otherness of Africans and African philosophy. Far from unwittingly accepting the inferiority of Africans, Negritude proclaims the "otherness" in such a manner that the universality of human ideals still remain. Just as in other cultures, there is always a need for modernization of Africa. As a prelude to this modernization, Kebede suggests a method of cultural adaptation, which he calls *Creative Synthesis*. This, is perhaps the greatest contribution of Kebede to the search for a philosophy of decolonization for Africa. Such a synthesis, according to Kebede avoids the mere borrowing of Western institutions and ideas by placing modernity as a continuity of the past. However, Kebede fails to show the disconnect between the past and the present in the dialectical game of explaining modernity.

A large chunk of the book is equally devoted to the analysis of well-known arguments about the canons/schools /approaches/ trends in African philosophy. However, Kebede's articulation of some of the basic arguments, either in support or against some of these trends is lucid, logical and incisive. An example is his dismissal of Oruka's distinction between ethno-philosophy and philosophic sagacity.

According to Kebede “the belief should be that the so called collective and uncritical beliefs owe their existence to critical inquiries, however scanty and faulty they may have been, for the simple reason that individual thinkers first initiated them” (p.85) In the same vein, he discards the philosophy of violence in the effort to rehabilitate and modernize Africa.

The tone of the book radically changes from chapter six. From here, Kebede concentrates on fundamental issues of reform, stability, modernity and progress. In a systematic manner, the author shows that there is no necessary conflict between tradition and modernity. Kebede’s position is that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with reviving the past as long as what is exhumed is of value and capable of bringing progress. One major factor hindering progress discussed by the author is ethnicity. Kebede rightly traces the origin of the ethnic conflicts in most African states to their artificiality. His position is that for effective state formation and peaceful co-existence in multi-ethnic states, mystic drive rather than rationality is required.

The dilemma of Africa’s underdevelopment can only be resolved, in Kebede’s view, by settling for what he calls “complimentarism”. By this he maintains that “the best way to get out of the African dilemma is neither to assert nor deny the African difference; it is not to look for an uncontaminated vision of the past essence either. The recognition of the concomitance of myth and rationality, of traditionality and modernity, is the appropriate way to diffuse the African dilemma”(p.208). The kernel of Kebede’s argument here is that the liberation of the African mind would be the foundation of an authentic and true decolonization.

No doubt, *Africa’s Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* is an in-depth study on the African personality. In a refreshing way, it provides an insight into the intellectual pre-requisites for the resolution of the problem of underdevelopment of Africa. However, Kebede’s resolve to avoid evolutionism at all costs prevents him from accepting the existence of a wide divide between myth and reason. It is important to note here that philosophy in the real sense of the word began only when a sharp line was drawn between myth and reason. The future of philosophy lies in the sustenance of this divide.

The book is a worthy contribution to the debate about the future of Africa, not only in philosophical terms, but also about the development problematic of the continent. The book will certainly be useful to both undergraduate and graduate students of philosophy, sociology, political science and anthropology. It should also serve as a guide to other academics and politicians interested in issues of emancipation and development, within and outside the African continent.

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