PERSPECTIVES IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY:

An Anthology on "Problematics of an African Philosophy: Twenty Years After (1976-1996)"

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There is a declaration, almost ubiquitous, in documents and sermons by Africans in the diaspora seeking freedom from slavery and independence from colonial rule: “Ethiopia shall soon [shall yet] stretch out [reach forth] her hands unto God. (Psalm 68, Verse 31)”. “Ethiopia shall...” proclaims an expectation of spiritual salvation to come from God through the wellspring of Ethiopia and its theological tradition; a declaration that African people were in, and are of, the ancient religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Consequently, the declaration provides ecclesiastical evidence for the importance of an historic and ancient people as well as an evidence of their continuity – an unbroken line. The declaration was used to admonish members of the African diaspora to recall their anciently inherited intrinsic worth and use its power to be self-reliant and resilient in the face of the terror of slavery and colonialism; to recall that Africans have a theology to fulfill, one evidenced by a future stretching forth of Ethiopia’s arms to rescue its lost people as Ethiopia stretches forth its arms to God or reaches forth and is taken up or redeemed by God.

“Recalling” is a way of creating an image of a future glory and a past glory, no matter how unattached persons are to the glorious past of Ethiopia nor how far removed from contemporary Ethiopia. The recalling is both appealing to evidence and creating or inventing the importance of the evidence to fit a context. That is, the recalling admonishment was not simply a value neutral exegesis of pointing to Biblical predictions as evidence. The recalling also promoted an attitude intended to be sustenance for the adversarial needs of the oppressed. Those needs included having a sense of a teleological mission and belief in the possibility of success.

“Ethiopia shall...” was also a clarion call of self-announcement for
Ethiopians against Italians, the same sort of self-announcement used by the Khoe, Zulu, Masai and Akan against foreign invaders; a clarion call to recall an ancient intrinsic worth and entitlement of ancestral land. That is, such admonishments were often intended to revise tribal loyalty. However, in the face of new national identities forged in the early nineteenth century, including the identity of cohesive Africa, "Ethiopia shall..." was used to help create loyalty for new nations such as Ghana and Kenya as well as Pan-African hopes for a united Africa as, metaphorically, a rejuvenated Ethiopia. As Seme once put it, independence for "the Ethiopian type."

"Ethiopia shall..." has become a message much like messages in ancient inspirational music that use call and response techniques. The timeless word unspoken, unseen, unheard; the is-ness of the word. Both moments - call and response, sound like one continuous unbroken song. "Ethiopia shall..." creates an image of the future, and mutatis mutandis, a past glory. When used by the diaspora in search of liberation in a Western world of their creation along with numerous others, and when used by indigenous Africans in search of liberation from tribal, national, and foreign subjugation and boundaries, "Ethiopia shall..." has been a conductive image for motivation.²

I met Emperor Haile Selassie (Tafari Makonnen) in the summer of 1972 at an Organization of African Unity sponsored dinner. He looked surprised to see someone dressed in a dashiki at a formal black-tie dinner until someone told him that I was "an American." Then he seemed to understand. Remembering this event, I suspect he simply saw me as another lost soul trying to "identify" with Africa by wearing what I took to be African clothes. Returning in 1996 for the Pan-African Philosophy Conference, University of Addis Ababa, I took a moment to visit his grave. I also visited the Wabe Shebelle Hotel, where I met in 1972 Amilcar Cabral, then leader of anticolonial struggle in Guinea-Bissau, in the lounge. My good friend, Sheila and Mekonnen Mepesha, took me back to the Wabe Shabelle Hotel. I sat and cried, recalling all the years of revolutionary struggle by gallant people to forge a future - a future that was then sitting in, a soul from the diaspora returning again to the wellspring. Ethiopia had stretched forth her arms in an unexpected way - weaving another mystic cord of memory for use in the struggle to create universal human liberation.

Universal human liberation is freedom from the very boundaries of the names through which freedom is sought - the deafening boundaries of national and racial ideation separating Africans from one another, boundaries excluding Africans from peership in the human family, boundaries subordinating African inspired theologies and philosophies as emanating from an unholy or inferior source. The pursuit of universal human liberation always occurs through the struggles of particular communities.

The concepts of community held by Seme and Locke, I suggest, are analogously associated with each scholar's historical location - South Africa for Seme and America for Locke. The philosophic import of their competing conceptions of community, I argue, entail valuable points of agreement.

Alain Locke (1885-1954), noted philosopher, esthete of the Harlem Renaissance and promoter of adult education was a colleague of Fikile Kelsak Seme (1881-1951), noted lawyer, political activist, and inspirational founder of the African National Congress that shaped the course of universal human liberation beginning in the formative years of their lives. In particular, Seme organized the first meeting of the South African Native National Congress, January 8, 1912, Bloemfontein as well as the native Farmers' Association of Africa Limited, October 25, 1912. These became the African National Congress. In addition, he was instrumental in initiating the newspaper in 1912, Abantu-Bathi, the principal early organ of the liberation struggle. Locke's promotion of African American novels, art, music and dance became known as the Harlem Renaissance - an effort to foreground the self-respecting cultural products of African American life. With the help of such organizations as the Harman Foundation, Negro Society for Historical Research, and the American Negro Academy, Locke promoted African art in the Americas.

Locke and Seme began their relationship while Seme was in residence at Jesus College, Oxford and Locke was in residence at Harvard University. Locke won a Rhodes scholarship in 1907, granting him the right to be admitted to Oxford. It is likely that Seme learned of the numerous attacks on Locke in the United States because racist Americans derided the Rhodes Scholarship program for allowing a Negro to win. Seme sent his welcome to Locke, dated March 4th 1907.³

Locke was born in Philadelphia, the only child of Pliny Ishamael Locke, a Howard University educated lawyer, and Mary Hawkins Locke, a teacher and member of the Felix Adler Ethical Society. Locke was raised an Episcopalian. While in Europe, he also attended lectures at the University of Berlin (1910-1911), before returning to the United States and joining the Howard University faculty in 1912.

The Cosmopolitan Club at Oxford included not only Locke and Seme, but such notables as Hamil El Ali, future president of the Egyptian Society of England and Har Dayal from India, a future nationalist and Marxist author. Members of the Cosmopolitan Club between 1907-1909, the years Locke and Seme were jointly active in Oxford, usually became involved in national liberation struggles.⁴ Locke and Seme spent a great deal of time socializing around issues of appreciating British culture and making contact in an Edwardian world ruled by Victorian virtues.⁵ Locke had no intention of becoming a "race leader" when he went to Oxford. He, in fact, hoped to escape America's completely racialist world and melt into what he hoped was
England's race neutral world. Possibly, he thought, eventually working in England's consulate service. However, by the time he had faced the comprehensively racist world of Europe, he returned to America in 1911 and argued for the "Afro-Americans" to see themselves as representing a valiant race tradition extending and arriving from Africa. 5

The connection between Locke and Seme is far deeper than the cultural reality of being dandies and students. The historical period and the racial reality confronting blacks -- perceived as a common race across national, tribal, language and geographic boundaries -- supported, at least, in the case of Seme and Locke, similar inclinations to focus on the needs of what was understood as broad categories, e.g., Negroes, Africans, Ethiopians, Zulus, etc. Each author was intent, or would become intent, on representing some community of African people and forging universal human liberation. Yet, Locke and Seme held different conceptions of race and community.

In the following I explore their conceptual differences on the meaning of race and community and the importance of the difference.

Seme was aware of America's racial reality. In his youth, Seme attended Mount Hermon School for boys, Worthinfield, Massachusetts which was a Congregationalist supported school. He graduated from Columbia University, New York, in 1906, with a Bachelor of Arts degree; from 1906 to 1909 he was in residence at Jesus College, Oxford, he was called to the Bar, Middle Temple, 1909, returning to South Africa, 1910. 6 As early as 1903, Seme had spoken of the need to unite the racialized African Community to secure economic freedom, confront settler colonialism, and directly address tribalism. In 1906 Seme won the coveted George William Curtis Medal for oration from Columbia University for his presentation, "The Regeneration of Africa." 7

Seme wrote, in the "Regeneration of Africa": "I have chosen to speak to you on this occasion upon "The regeneration of Africa". I am an African, and I set my pride in my race over against a hostile public opinion." 8 In defending his race against Calhoun, the noted American slave apologist who claimed that he knew no intelligent blacks as demonstrated by their knowledge of Greek syntax, Seme contends that

I could show him among black men of pure African blood those who could repeat the Koran from memory, skilled in Latin, Greek and Hebrew -- Arabic and Chaldaic -- men great in wisdom and profound knowledge -- one professor of philosophy in a celebrated German university. 9

Seme considered the growth of civilization one that did not follow a linear line of development but arose in different places and climes, slowly advancing modernity. He claims, in this same article, that

The African people, although not a strictly homogenous race, possess a common fundamental sentiment which is everywhere manifest... The regeneration of Africa means that a new and unique civilization is soon to be added to the world. 10

Africans, for Seme, have a historical mission to represent their kind, place their kind on the historical stage by accomplishing national integrity and unity of the sort demonstrated by other racial/national groups.

Seme understood racial kinds as objective, given in the nature of things. Moreover, civilizations were understood as fairly homogenous groups with common sentiments. In the early twentieth century, this picture was most certainly the dominant picture of reality. It reflected the reality of apartheid dictating Seme’s world. In Seme’s historical call to Africans, the complexity of identity politics is clearly expressed:

"The demon of racialism, the aberration of the Xhosa-Fingo feud, the animosity that exists between the Zulus and the Tongas, between the Basutos and every other native must be buried and forgotten... We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and all our backwardness and ignorance today." 11

Seme appreciates the limitations of tribal identity and the terrible price of modernity -- a price that must be paid or face real extinction, continued degradation, and massive exploitation.

Universal human liberation, for Seme, was a function of particular groups contributing to a collective community; conversely, each community obtains liberation by living according to its own values. The latter, however, could in no way occur as long as African people lived under the vicious domination, exploitation, and exclusion of foreign forces. Nor could the latter occur so long as tribalism ruled, i.e., so long as one of the values associated with ethnic identity required tribal loyalty in juxtaposition to persons and ideas different from tribal realities.

Foreign invaders, as well as local settler colonialists, would often promote tribalism when it suited their interest to maintain or gain control of land, generate cheap labor for mining operations, or secure dedicated soldiers to rule over discontented populations. At the same time, those same invaders and settlers would seek to destroy tribal loyalties, understood as the source of primitive religious faith. The forces of modernity, e.g., roads, controlled water, irrigation, concrete buildings, international trade, universalized forms of keeping time, routinization of labor, specialization of labor skills and the use of world dominant language, forced destruction of many tribal
differentiation. In addition, the imposition of world religions, in particular, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam compelled traditional, nonproselytizing religions to constantly confront the lack of universalization of their theologies. As world religions gained control over land, jobs, and education, traditional religions had progressively less to offer their members. The dichotomy between universality and particularity, consequently, constantly strained Seme's desire for universal human liberation and ethnic group integrity.13

Seme, as the legal representative of Swaziland in an early assignment, found himself defending tribal authority using the methods of modernity, i.e., he sought to secure native rights of autonomy and authority by representing Swaziland in the courts of law in Britain. The absurdity of his position was not entirely lost to Seme. His tireless efforts to form native associations may be understood as his efforts to surmount the limitations of his absurd position. Community for Seme, from his early lectures that won him recognition and awards, continued to be relatively close associations. Freedom for such communities depended on autonomy and authority, both modes of empowerment that would allow the community to maintain itself as authentic kinds while progressing in and through modernity. That is, Seme tended to favor an "objectivist" view of community. A community existed, independent of our choices, by virtue of racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or national heritage. The nascent nation states of southern Africa, prevented from development by the incursion of settler colonizers, were relegated to the status of a "tribe". As such they were stigmatized, frozen, and incapable of justifying themselves as sources for independent nation state status. The identity of "Bantu", "native", "tribe", "Negro" or "African" was forced on groups that had never identified themselves as such. However, under an objectivist view of community, it was at least arguable that nascent and subjugated national/tribal/ethnic/racial groups had historic warrant even in the face of modernity and racialist expropriating of land and resources.

Community for Locke consisted of relatively open associated kinds requiring continual reformulation. Freedom, on Seme and Locke's account, depended on autonomy and authority -- which helps account for Locke's consistent support for nationalist movements in Africa, India, and the Middle East. However, Locke's sense of community as associations that constantly engage in internal revaluations, supported his rejection of American forms of nationalism and all forms of tribalism. Locke rejects the view that biological races that match the way we socially categorize races is cogent, i.e., biological races do not match socially constructed racial identities. Social races, for Locke, like all forms of association, are historical constructions that are not rooted in biological natures or naturally encoded inherent sentiments. Locke's support for the moral and pragmatic value of group autonomy and authority, particularly the history of colonial subjugation, allowed him to support

nationalist struggles for independence. Locke's constructivist view of community -- that communities are absolute entities and evolving modes of association and bonding -- shapes his approach to racial and ethnic identity.

I explore Locke's approach to race and community below.

Locke occasionally presented his ideas on race relations before the American Negro Historical Society and the Yonkers Negro Society for Historical Research. His most extensive presentation occurred in 1916 in a series of lectures sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), entitled "Race Contacts and Inter-racial Relations: A Study of the Theory and Practice of Race."14 Locke argued against the idea that races exist and were biologically determined to express cultural traits. Locke held that races were socially constructed, and cultures were the manifestation of stressed values, always subject to transvaluation and revaluation.

The years 1924-1925 were a major turning point in Locke's life. Locke edited a special edition of The Survey Graphics magazine on "The New Negro" in 1924. That edition became the source for his sentient work reflecting the conterminous nature of valuation and the classicism of African American culture -- The New Negro: An Interpretation of Negro Life.15 The New Negro was a collage of art by Winold Reiss, Aaron Douglas, and African artifacts, articles by J.A. Rogers, E. Franklin Frazier, Charles S. Johnson, Melville J. Herskovits, and W.E.B. Du Bois, poetry by Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Angelina Grimke as well as spirituals and bibliographies. The New Negro was intended as a work "by" rather than "about" African Americans: a text exuding pride, historical continuity, and a new spirit of self-respect not because a metamorphosis had occurred in the psychology of African Americans, "but because the Old Negro had long become more of a myth than a man."16 The New Negro also marked an effort by Locke to define what counted as essential to African American culture and the role cultural values shaped in race relations. Locke's view of race relations were encoded in his editorials, critical literary reviews, and social commentary. It was not until 1935, however, that he wrote his first extended article in philosophy, "Value and Imperatives". Locke, while favoring moral imperatives, constantly warns against treating ontological abstractions as if they were real, i.e., treating existing communities as if they were stable, objectively given, natural racial or ethnic kinds. Ontological abstractions are for Locke associated with illogical valuations: our tendency to use categories through which we organize our experiences as if they matched, comprehensively, objective social entities. Social groups, whether false constructions such as racial categories, materially based classes, or well formed nations, are ontologically ambiguous -- non
absolute. Consequently, Locke is critical of treating racial groups as static entities. Moreover, he is critical of instrumental reasoning because it too often avoids the importance of the affective or feeling domains of human valuation. In both cases, the subject is considered a valuing agent, reasoning through provisionally useful categories; however, transvaluation and revaluation are as definitive of the subject as living vicariously through categories.

Locke's argument, methods and ideas have been compared with John Dewey's version of pragmatism and Jaque Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. Locke's aesthetic views contrasted with those of the "Black Aesthetic Movement," and his value theory debated for its epistemological and ethical import. Locke's support for nationalist struggles, as instrumentally necessary in order to allow the colonized autonomy and authority over their historically expropriated material and aesthetic resources, was premised on a view of persons as agents constantly engaged in revaluation. Thus, African contributions to world civilization meant for Locke the universalization of African cultural and material goods.

Seme's objectivist conception of community and Locke's constructivist conception influenced the course of human liberation. The African National Congress has been successful in overthrowing the terror of apartheid, developing a deeply rooted sense of African identity, and diligently working to avoid the ethnocentric features of tribalism. The Harlem Renaissance, with its emphasis on the importance of art as a constantly evolving, yet fruitful repository for gaining regard for African people has been influential.

Seme and Locke also confronted the absurdity of arguing for the equality of the human family by providing examples of African accomplishments and abilities as examples of "Negro" humanity. Racists and racialists believe that there are inherent, inalterable, natural, and biologically inherited sentiments and traits. This is why ignorant, alcoholic, morally degraded, or physically handicapped members of a races' favored race do not count as an example of the favored races' inferiority. Thus, Seme and Locke occasionally used the contributions of African people as a bulwark against disparaging views of Africans. Yet, the use of African contributions and accomplishments seems to have been recognized as hardly adequate to defeat or significantly alter racism. Rather, each focused on the sources of power: ownership and control over material and aesthetic assets.

Possibly, the difference in national locations between Seme and Locke influenced their philosophies. In Seme's case, the racially segregated and tribalized colonial world of South Africa in which land and natural resources were expropriated from Black Africans -- an identity itself constructed out of the contours of transplanted European racialists -- arguably suggests that groups are stable racial/tribal/ethnic kinds. In the case of Locke, the racially segregated world of America, a world that lacked a significant tribal heritage and, at least for African Americans, fewer issues of historical land and resource confiscation, arguably suggests a constructivist view of community. However, independent of the origin of each conception of community, a pressing issue is embedded in the competing views: which view is defensible?

I argue that the commonly held views of Seme and Locke are of crucial importance for deciding on a preference. In particular, Seme and Locke favored a broad racial identity rather than localized, truncated, and tribalized identities. The common features of Africanity were esthetically and materially far more functional than limited and non-universalizable ideations. Moreover, Seme and Locke were in concert regarding the necessity of an African national struggle against opposing forces. That struggle included confrontation over material and aesthetic resources.

Seme and Locke confronted the central dilemma of modernity: universalized production and exchange while yet finding a role for particularity and tradition. The possibility of surmounting particularity, I believe, is contingent on a constructivist communal transition -- a transition into a cohesive African identity over and against an ethno-philosophy of life rooted in tribal conditions. Universal human liberation requires, as Seme and Locke fully appreciated, autonomy and authority in the material and aesthetic domains of life, goods that only occur within the context of family, friends, neighborhoods and bonds of trust and respect -- bonds formed within constantly evolving communities of agents fighting for liberation.

Notes.


3. Seme to Locke, 4 March 1907, Alain L. Locke Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.


