

The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy

*The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy:
Horizon and Discourse.*

by Tsenay Serequeberhan.

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'African philosophy' has recently been the subject of a minor academic boom. Part of the explanation is probably that the debate over whether there even was such a thing as 'African Philosophy', or whether anything deserving that name was *possible*, has largely given way to more direct attempts to contribute to African problems in a philosophical manner. This suggestion is borne out by the 'advance praise' for Serequeberhan's book which includes remarks by Lucius Outlaw to the effect that *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* leaves the question of the existence of African philosophy behind and goes on to 'more interesting and revealing issues, and more difficult ones'.

Outlaw is entirely correct, since the work under review tackles a number of deep and complex issues with genuine boldness and energy. In what follows I offer an outline of Serequeberhan's argument accompanied by some relatively minor criticisms, then discuss a number of more pressing objections and reservations, and finally conclude with a few remarks on the unique opportunity represented by the growing debate on and within African Philosophy.

The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy divides neatly into four chapters of similar length. The first two chapters are concerned mainly with issues of method and orientation. Here Serequeberhan explains and defends his hermeneutic approach, and attempts to describe and disqualify what he sees as the main philosophical opposition. The final two chapters are more devoted to problems of application, and offer analyses of colonial and anti-colonial violence, and of the status and emancipatory possibilities of the 'liberation struggle'.

Chapter one, 'Philosophy and Post-colonial Africa: Historicity and Thought' argues, with gestures at the sketchily drawn figures of Gadamer

and Heidegger, that philosophical discourse always originates in and is related to concrete conditions of existence and ways of acting and being. Serequeberhan also contends that the common horizon of all Africans is the post-colonial condition, and hence that it is against and in response to this historical backdrop that the discourse of African philosophy should be articulated. Thus:

... to interpretatively engage the present situation in terms of what Africa 'has been'—both in its ambiguous pre-colonial 'greatness' as well as in its colonial and neocolonial demise—is the proper hermeneutical task of African philosophical thought (p. 19).

Serequeberhan's argument here is ultimately rather thin, but is probably sufficient for its purposes. This reviewer is, in any event, inclined to be sympathetic with his approach.

That said, though, even if Fanon is correct to point out that the struggle with colonialism is 'metaphysical', (p. 6) a judgement Serequeberhan takes on board without argument, it surely does *not* follow that to resist colonial oppression is an intrinsically metaphysical act, let alone that all involved are active or conscious metaphysicians. I also think that Serequeberhan is guilty of pessimistically overemphasising the extent and depth of European control over Africa even during the height of the colonial period, and also of the extent and co-ordination of contemporary external influence and control. It is simply not the case that the United States 'rules the world' (p. 15) or that Europe exercises 'hegemonic political and cultural control' over Africa (p. 21). At these points Serequeberhan seems to presuppose exactly the alleged African passivity he so rightly condemns elsewhere.

Chapter two, 'African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse' develops on the analysis of the first chapter, but pays more specific attention to African philosophy and philosophers. Here it becomes clear that Serequeberhan considers himself to be the (self-appointed) heir to the tradition of Fanon and Cabral, which he more than once describes as 'historically astute', and the opponent of what he sees as the double menace of negritude and Marxist-Leninism. He casts Senghor as an unrepentant racist and Nkrumah and Hountondji as European-style socialists, and then lines up ethnophilosophy and so-called 'African professional philosophy' with these two figures.

This classification is both crude, and most unhermeneutically unfair to both Senghor and Nkrumah. (It is worth noting that Serequeberhan has edited a collection called *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings* which omits both thinkers.) Nonetheless the contrasts Serequeberhan establishes on

the basis of his analysis allow him to articulate his own position more clearly, and enables the reader to follow his version of the history of African thought, which is interestingly devoid of Pan-Africanism or any indication of an African appropriation of postmodernism¹⁷. Serequeberhan's main conclusion is that an appropriate hermeneutics for Africa should set out to reject and transcend the racist categories which dominated European thinking on Africa rather than using them as implicit or explicit starting points, which seems reasonable enough. In this regard it is worth recalling, for example, that Hegel thought history did not happen in Africa¹⁸, which he said was the land of 'gold' and of 'childhood', and Hume, that the one and only educated black person he had heard of was probably 'admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly'¹⁹.

Chapter three, 'Colonialism and the Colonised: Violence and Counter-violence' contains Serequeberhan's version of Fanon's defence of violence as a response to colonialism. Fanon's position²⁰ is reasonably well known, and all I need to say here is that Serequeberhan reproduces several of its defects. It may indeed be true that any resistance (even so called 'passive' resistance and civil disobedience) may be seen as a form of violence:

In this context a 'nonviolent' resistance is a contradiction in terms precisely because any self-assertive act of the colonized is bound to violate—hence do violence to—the rule and standard or norm of subjugation and domination on which the colonial relation is grounded (p. 74).

Even so, it surely does *not* follow that a single analysis of violence will cover all examples, and even less that the paradigm example of 'armed combat' will help us understand a protest march or a stayaway, or even the many possible tactical and moral variations on the theme of combat itself. One is also inclined to suspect that Serequeberhan made up his mind on this issue well in advance, especially in the light of the dedication of his book to the 'Eritrean People's Liberation Front'.

Finally, chapter four, 'The Liberation Struggle: Existence and Histori-

¹⁷ For both a vigorous and up-to-date appeal for Pan-Africanism and a critical engagement with postmodernism see, e.g. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* by Appiah, A (1992) and published by Oxford University Press, Oxford.

¹⁸ See *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* by Hegel, G.W.F. (1975), translated by B.H. Nisbet and published by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 174f.

¹⁹ See 'Hume's Racism' by Popkin, R.H. (1977/8) in *The Philosophical Forum* 9,2/3.

²⁰ See 'Concerning Violence' in *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon, F (1967), translated by C. Farrington and published by Penguin, London.

city' draws together what has gone before and offers an account of how the overcoming of the neo-colonial situation could establish the widespread 'practice of freedom' in Africa. It is clear that many lessons about democracy remain to be learned on the African continent (and for that matter all over the world), and that what goes under that name is often little more than one-party neo-colonialism, effectively based on the maxim that the transition from colonial to perpetual legitimate rule requires only one election. Serequeberhan's assault on this problem area, though, is undoubtedly the weakest aspect of his argument.

Without offering any substantial theory of what society is, how it is continuously generated, how it effects people or how social transformation might be effected, he details a scenario where urban dissidents flee the centres of neo-colonial government and discover a ready mass of politicised proto-revolutionaries in the rural districts, from whom the urban intellectuals learn, and with whom social transformation is forced ahead towards the institution of popular democracy. In all this there is no criticism of nationalism, and none of the remarkably strict dichotomy between rural and urban life which informs the argument of the chapter. (Serequeberhan is quite emphatic that the rural revolution is the '*sine qua non*' of the transition to genuine democracy.) The remaining content of the chapter consists largely in the articulation of a rather idiosyncratic neo-Hegelian theory of history.

At one point in the chapter, Serequeberhan (again following Fanon without any criticism) more or less accuses Senghor of becoming a neo-colonial dictator. These unfortunate remarks show more than intellectual petulance and low standards of factual accuracy and it is significant that Senghor's own political career amounts to a counter-example to the Fanonist argument Serequeberhan develops here: Senghor's most reliable source of votes in his five successful presidential elections was the rural population of Senegal.

Turning to more general issues, I think it is fair to say that there are two particularly glaring failings in this book. The first, and lesser, is the absence of any suggestions as to how the violence the second part of the book so emphatically endorses could be abandoned once its original objectives (the overthrow of the colonial or neo-colonial dispensation) are satisfied, or of how violence within and between emancipatory groups can be contained or mediated in the interim. This criticism stands even though in Serequeberhan's defence it must be conceded that there is clearly something fundamentally valid about Fanon's existential analysis of the colonial condition and the related endorsement of the empowering and therapeutic potential of violent resistance.

The second and greater failing is the lack of any useful analysis of the category of race. Serequeberhan claims to take his 'methodological cue'

from Fanon, and 'the various attitudes that the Negro [African] adopts in contact with white civilisation' (p. 11). For Serequeberhan, then, to be African is to be Negro, and the problem facing Africa is 'methodologically' white. This is surely most unhermeneutical: the proper opposition to racism is anti-racism, not some symmetrically opposed counter-racism²¹. The 'methodological cue' also sits rather uneasily with Serequeberhan's often vitriolic criticism of Senghor's alleged racism.

(As an aside on this point, it is unclear quite what one has to do to count as an 'African' author in the intellectual culture which sustains contemporary African Philosophy. Being of African origin, or birth, is a good start and authors which can properly claim this tend to do so quite pointedly. Being of Afro-diasporic extraction is also acceptable. No matter where you are born, it is an unstated but definite disadvantage to be white. Now, while philosophy may take identity-politics as its *subject*, it is surely a mistake to allow such manoeuvring to warp its *practice*.)

The various debates proceeding under the banner of African philosophy constitute a potentially useful force in the contemporary intellectual scene. In the main, African philosophy resists the crude divisions that still separate much 'analytic' from 'continental' work elsewhere. It is generally less susceptible to ingenuous claims of political neutrality and also to the odious appeal of pragmatism. Perhaps most interestingly it is also the site of a tremendous opportunity for African intellectuals: to involve themselves in steering and transforming a continental appropriation of modernity which, even if it is inevitable, and even though Africa remains a major victim of European modernity, can learn from the mistakes of its historical precedents.

Fanon said that 'The colonial world is a Manichean world'²². In the end, the most severe limitation in Serequeberhan's analysis and prescriptions alike is his inability to get beyond this aspect of the thinker who he holds in most esteem. Nonetheless, the post-colonial world calls for altogether more subtle and nuanced moral thinking, situated in the terrain 'beyond good and evil'. The efforts of such philosophers as Appiah, who attempts to articulate a non-racist Pan-Africanism which is sensitive to the contemporary politics of difference and the post-modernisation of culture, and Mudimbe, who painstakingly traces the path of the many representations of Africa²³ and

²¹ The first four chapters of *In My Father's House* by Appiah are especially worthwhile on this topic.

²² See Fanon (1967:31).

²³ See *The Idea of Africa* by Mudimbe, V. (1994), published by James Currey, London and Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

sympathetically considers the value of traditional thought without falling into ethnophilosophy²⁴, indicate what is possible here, and it is in comparison to their work that Serequeberhan's must be judged. Despite its flaws, though, it is a valuable contribution which raises the level of the debate in various ways.

Words that Circle Words

Words that Circle Words. A Choice of South African Oral Poetry

edited by Jeff Opland

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To some extent the texts in this collection—or, more specifically, the way in which Jeff Opland assembles and presents them—would seem to herald, or at least coincide with, some of the concerns of post-apartheid South Africa. Not, however, for any particular ideological *engagement* they may be thought to display. At the time Opland puts together this collection (1989—the date mentioned in the *Preface*), the question of artistic (and academic) involvement in the struggle against white hegemony is arguably much more of an issue than it is in this, the aftermath of 1994, but Opland is unambiguous in his desire to prevent his own political convictions from interfering with the selections included in the anthology (p. 29). Oppression of black by white is a strong theme, particularly in the sections on work and political songs (the pass laws are a notable topic) and—more generally—in the praise poetry (the ‘modern performances’ at the end of the collection directly address issues like homeland independence, forced resettlement and worker solidarity). By and large however, the poems and songs ‘produced by South Africans at leisure, in love, working, grieving, praying, travelling, fighting and dancing’ (to quote the backflap) function at a remove from the nitty-gritty of struggle politics. Besides, as Opland remarks (p. 29):

²⁴ See *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* by Mudimbe, V. (1994) and published by Indiana University Press, Bloomington.