

REVIEW

Leonhard Praeg, *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy: A Philosophical Investigation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. Pp. xxxi + 322.

By Lansana Keita

Leonhard Praeg's *African Philosophy and the Quest for Autonomy* constitutes an attempt to discuss the function of African philosophy in the post-colonial era to redefine or represent Africa free of the distortions imposed on the idea of Africa before and during the colonial era. Praeg's question is this: can this attempt at re-presentation in the form of the transcendental question "What is African philosophy?" yield an autonomous African philosophy? Intellectual attempts at this *re-presentation* (Praeg's term) of Africa from African perspectives in recent times have sought to instantiate this effort in terms of notions such as "African Renaissance" out of which the idea of *ubuntu* or "African humanism" in the sense of "I am because we are," could be derived.

Praeg would argue, however, that attempts at establishing an autonomous African philosophy by way of ethnophilosophical formulation are doomed to failure. In Praeg's own formulations we have: 1) "Ethnophilosophical texts are widely recognized as some of the earliest attempts to present us with an African philosophy. Senghor's *negritude* and Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* are often considered as classics"(135). 2) "Ethnophilosophy represents an historical *intervention* in the discourse *on* Africa. At the same time it undertook the process of *re-invention* it also situated this attempt in the context of a meta-narrative of oppression and liberation conceived of in terms of re-established individuality and autonomy"(135). 3) "If we admit, as I think we should, to the fundamental undecidability[political, epistemological, and representational] of the debate on African philosophy then we admit, too, that there is no answer. That we have been deluded by the *re-* and the *de-* into thinking that there is an a final liberation at which will know *what it is*; the point at which, finally, knowledge about Africa will once again coincide with itself; a point at which it will be possible to enter 'the beyond'"(213).

On account of the undecidability concerning the question of African philosophy Praeg seeks to encourage African philosophy to focus more on the question "Where does African philosophy speak from?" (the ethical question) than exclusively on

“What is African philosophy?”(the epistemological question). As Praeg puts it: “This ethical dimension, this respect for the *other* demands that in addition to the transcendental question ‘What is African philosophy?’ we also ask the ethical question ‘Where is African philosophy?’, ‘Where do we situate it?’, and ‘why do we ask the question ‘What is African philosophy?’”(218).

This epistemological shift allows Praeg to introduce the idea of *ubuntu* defined as an African communitarian humanism(“I am because we are”) as central to the tasks of African philosophy. Praeg explores this ethical role for African philosophy in his final chapter “Truth and Reconciliation: a Social Contract.” In this chapter Praeg attempts to apply the concept of *ubuntu* to the Truth and Reconciliation public exercise in post-Apartheid South Africa.. I mentioned above that one of the several post-colonial discourses has been that of an “African Renaissance” as a way of seeking a reconfiguration of the idea of Africa. For Praeg this African Renaissance should be understood principally in terms consistent with the idea of an expanded *ubuntu*. Praeg writes: “In as much as Renaissance signifies a rebirth through return, it is a return or remembrance of those values that may perhaps contribute to the formulation of a truly African identity’(108).

Yet there are problems with Praeg’s interesting formulations. His implicit assumption is that African philosophy as discourse is faced with a dilemma: on the one hand African philosophy as ethnophilosophy is undecidable and on the other as modernist philosophy a la Hountondji and Towa is self-defeating (212-213). One senses further that Praeg reserves for African philosophy the essentially ethical task of serving as the foundations for a post-Apartheid social harmony. Implicit in his metaphorical point of departure for his treatise is the idea that claim of an African “disfigurement” as the result of colonialism is rendered moot on the grounds of the lack of evidence. Praeg expresses this as “ absence of *corpus delecti*”(viii-xxi, 301-308, *et pasim*). This probably explains his decision to begin his discourse with an analysis of the concept of the “social contract” with regard to Thomas Hobbes’s treatment of such in the *Leviathan*.

Praeg’s subtext here is as follows: the idea of an African Renaissance in terms of a re-presentation of the idea of Africa is a risky undertaking on the grounds that outside the imposed structures of colonialism African attempts at reconfiguration for purposes of autonomy by way of “return” to a supposedly precolonial world would be to risk embracing some form of a Hobbesian “state of nature”. But this is exactly what Eurocentric colonial discourse claimed as it sought to invent a workable definition of Africa for its own purposes. But Praeg’s interpretation of the idea of African Renaissance limits itself mainly to issue of how to implement the

idea of *ubuntu* as specifically African. But this cannot withstand anthropological scrutiny. Communitarian humanism with its regard for the other is not uniquely African given empirical evidence of its practice by Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders on first encounters with the European other. Furthermore, the general idea of “African Renaissance” should not limit itself in the African context to just a set ethical practices--- when one examines how and why the term “Renaissance” was first coined and applied.

The idea of “African Renaissance” in the case of Africa, it would seem, is merely an attempt at both normalization and a positive exceptionalism of Africa in world history. The term justifiably acquires meaningful content with recognition of the following confirmable facts. 1) Africa was the exclusive centre of world humanity for at least seventy percent of the time that *homo sapiens* existed on earth. The technological inventions necessary for the survival and advancement of humankind were nurtured and maintained for several thousands of years in Africa’s environments uniquely. 2) With the recognition that the crucial biological *differential* that separates humans from other biological organisms is the creative and abstractive capacities of the human brain one must note that the crucial first steps in human cultural and technological development all resulted from *independent* African initiative. One might consider examples of such: a) human language, b) writing, c) quantitative reasoning, d) protoscientific and scientific thought and activity, e) engineering, f) construction in stone, g) protomedical activity, etc.

After the foundations of human culture and civilization were established in Africa its subsequent seminal ideas exercised great impact on that continent’s hinterlands. Consider the examples of monotheism, crucial for the establishment of the three well-known monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the holistic metaphysics of Plotinus (a native Egyptian) and his intellectual North African descendant, Augustine. Without the ideas of these two thinkers theology might well have had a different configuration in Europe. One might also note that the intellectual centres of medieval Africa at Timbuktu (noted for scholars like Ahmed Baba) were an integral part of the intellectual conveyer belt that transported Graeco-Egyptian thought and concepts to Europe proper. North African born Ibn Khaldun is a well-known scholar in this regard. Africa provided the bridge for the intellectual transplants from the Graeco-Egyptian world to be presented to Europe in the form of the patently invented idea of an European Renaissance. A realist historian of ideas could more accurately describe the European Renaissance as the “European Assimilation” given how this phenomenon was actually engendered.

Recall that for the Greeks the peoples north and west of Greece were contemptuously dismissed as barbarians who shared no cultural commonalities with Greeks.

This is the idea implicit in the notion of “African Renaissance” : a normative appeal to Africa to seek to regain the significant position in human history that it occupied for most of the existence of *homo sapiens*. The invented “disfigurement” imposed on Africa during the last five hundred years is the source of the theoretical template that serves as the basis for the claimed and effected marginality of Africa in contemporary global affairs. The contingencies of human history have produced different civilizations with different phenomenologies. The basis for the idea for an African Renaissance may be found within this context. I am inclined to believe that those who argue for an African Renaissance have in mind a restoration of Africa’s historically documented aesthetic and technological creativity. One might contrast this with Europe’s historical skill at pragmatic, controlled, and effective assimilation of non-indigenous ideas whether in scientific thinking, metaphysics(as in religion and theology), and the aesthetic arts.

One of the central ideas in Praeg’s analysis is that the search for an autonomous and pristine pre-colonial African self culminating in “the recovery of a lost but *autonomous* body of thought” (303) was doomed to failure because there was no real evidence of such and that the search would be necessarily compromised because of the dyadic difficulty of separating the pre-colonial self from the post-colonial self. But the analysis above presents us with a surprising paradox: *for seventy percent of human history the African self was autonomous, and much more so than the European or Asian self. And the demands of the European other for proof of autonomy are indeed ironic when that self has always preferred an assimilationist pragmatism over cultural autonomy. Yet no demands are ever made for the European other to produce an authentic and autonomous body of European knowledge. No real attempts have been made to recover the relatively autonomous ethnophilosophies of the Gauls, Celts, Vandals, and Visigoths. Their belief systems developed over a period of at least forty thousand years were summarily jettisoned first for the transcribed rituals, beliefs and proscriptions of a Hebrew folklore of West Asian provenance then for the transplanted modes of thought and ontologies of Graeco-Egyptian provenance.* It is a surprising paradox that Africa can answer positively the autonomy question but Europe cannot.

Leonhard Praeg’s text is a useful one in that it boldly raises the question of the intellectual history of Africa and examines the epistemological tensions generated in attempting to answer that question. His creative though problematic claims about

Africa's intellectual past and possible futures by way of concepts such as "African Renaissance" and *ubuntu* are no doubt grist for contemporary epistemological mills. But what of the contemporary question about African philosophy and autonomy? Autonomy in African philosophy would be no more nor less than that of, say, contemporary Continental European philosophy or Anglo-American philosophy. Thus autonomy in African philosophy would arise only when there are established schools and paradigms of such at African universities and research centres.