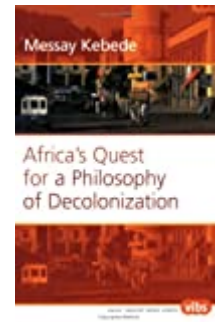


**Messay Kebede.** *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization.* New York: Rodopi, 2004. 256 pp. \$68.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-420-0810-6.



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## African Philosophy: Problems and Prospects

The conceptual tools of myth and rationality are used in all societies and cultural traditions in different combinations for different purposes. It would appear that societal development depends on how freely any society or culture combines these two in formulating blueprints for actions that address its needs. Messay Kebede's book, *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization*, sets out to demonstrate, through an intellectual tour of the important aspects of African philosophical discourse and with ethnophilosophy as reference point, that the problem at the core of Africa's many problems has to do with the loss of this freedom. Believing that philosophy is an important key to the understanding of Africa, the author attempts to locate where each of the African philosophical trends imprisons this freedom so that Africans can benefit from a more integrated philosophy in their various efforts to open up their societies for development. The question of what and whose standards are to be used to measure this development is a different matter.

It is important to first commend the author for distilling wide ranging and profound analyses of thought, African and European, into a lucid prose free of jargon.

This will make the book accessible to people without professional training in philosophy. Since, in the final analysis, the book is about how to decolonize the African mind, it begins in the first of the nine chapters by painstakingly showing the errors of the architects of colonization and originators of the myth of inferiority of the African. He shows why, like all myths, this is not to be equated with knowledge, but should be seen as an enabling myth for the colonial project. In chapter 2 we get a very sympathetic reading of Placide Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy*. It is difficult not to come away from the reading of the chapter with the feeling that the only thing wrong with Tempel's view of Africans is that as a Christian clergyman, he steered what was a profound and original thinking towards the ends of his Christian mission. In the same way, Kebede gives a very sympathetic ear to John Mbiti, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and his friend, Aime Cesaire, all constituting the school of ethnophilosophy, pointing out what he perceives as their strengths and weaknesses. On the critics of ethnophilosophy, whom he calls professional philosophers, it would seem that most people familiar with the works of Paulin Houtondji and Marcien Towa in particular would agree with Kebede's char-

acterization of their view of philosophy as “the ultimate incarnation of rationality,” “closing their eyes to the considerable part mysticism and irrationality play in philosophical systems” (p. 90). The one thinker who has attempted to provide an enabling myth for African renaissance, Cheikh Anta Diop, is rightly shown to be exhibiting, when the chips are down, “his allegiance to western norms” (p. 111). Kebede also makes judicious assessments of thinkers like Kwasi Wiredu and, of course, Frantz Fanon. The latter’s arguments for the healing virtue of violence in the colonial situation comes under a severe critical scrutiny.

When he comes to the contributions of V.Y. Mudimbe and Anthony Appiah, however, the philosophical terrain becomes a little slippery and he is not as sure-footed, clearly stumbling and clutching the air in a few places. It is difficult, for instance, to fit this view of Mudimbe’s work into the general tenor of the argument:

“The promise of an authentic discourse on Africa seems unable to secure a vision superior or better to the one suggested by negritude. Since the best qualities (rationality, science) are already taken by the west, what is left for African particularity if not the lower attributes of nonrationality? Add that relativism encourages the debunking of positive values under the pretext of uncovering western inventions ... what Mudimbe has achieved does not seem to surpass negritude” (p. 127). The same Mudimbe’s work had earlier been shown to “reiterate the absolute primacy of deconstruction,” since “what comes first is thus subjective liberation, the decolonization of the mind” and “talk about difference without hierarchy and opposition becomes possible only when western concepts are deconstructed” (pp. 124-125).

With the strong helping hand of Henri Bergson, Kebede comes to a firmer ground to forcefully establish the main thesis of his book, namely, “If modernity is equally a tributary of rationality and ideological representations, we need to understand the condition un-

der which rational thinking and ideological beliefs come to collaborate instead of impairing each other”(p. 211). Africans, in particular, need to understand how much decolonization of the mind is “a prerequisite to the rekindling of the mythical impulse suppressed by the fascination for western rationality, whose paradox is that it is itself inaccessible without some idealism”(p. 218). But before that, the author makes brilliant analyses of the problems of elitism, identity, and ethnicity in African societies.

Some readers may find unclear the distinction the author makes between myth and the Marxist notion of false consciousness. But more problematic questions may arise from Kebede’s notion of choice (p. 209). Choice may be a condition of freedom and self-reliance, but the question not addressed is why Africans made the choice they made. If what constitutes the “black essence” results from “an act of choice,” how was the decision arrived at by all Africans, if we are to avoid “racial, natural characteristics,” or “objective determinations” (p. 209)? The point is that if you adopt the “act of choice” argument, apart from the questions of how and when the choice was made, you run into problems of explaining the wisdom of any choice. The very possibility of wrong choices is a good reason to stick to the idea that there are different types of rationality and people of all races have the same potential abilities for developing them. If, as in the case of African peoples, a particular type is suppressed for historical reasons like the colonial impositions, what is required is to recuperate what has been suppressed, not “changing lanes”, but replacing what has been weakened in the engine (p. 209). This brings me to my final point. At the end of what is otherwise a good foreword, Joseph Kunkel hopes the study will “pave the way for a more pluralistic western attitudinal opening to our brothers and sisters in this emerging continent.” What is required is definitely more than an attitudinal opening, and Africa is not an emerging continent. It is the proper knowledge of Africa that is emerging. Kebede’s book has a lot to contribute to that knowledge.

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