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*"I speak, holding up your heart …"**

Cosmopolitanism, Forgiveness and leaning towards Africa

*Lewis-Williams, J.D. (ed) 2000. *Stories that float from afar.* Cape Town: David Philip. p.58

1. INTRODUCTION AND JOURNEY MAP

Our journey begins with the narrative from where the quotation of our title comes. On the road we will be joined by Hannah Arendt, who has Socrates and Immanuel Kant in her bag. I invited her because, after the Holocaust, she had summonsed the foundations of Western philosophy to explain what went wrong with the western moral self. I hope to show you exactly in this process where an African consciousness could begin to differ from that which have formed a European consciousness.

Let me emphasize from the outset: I am not grafting African philosophy onto Western philosophy. I am trying to explain my experience of and reading about an African self through terminology that is familiar to you. I especially do not want to make an oppositional problem out of difference, or to turn difference into something exotic, but I want to treat African awareness as the norm and therefore normal.

In conclusion we will look at how this African awareness manifests in choices about forgiveness and hospitality.

2. WEIGHING IN

Sophie Oluwele, chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, says it "is not an understatement to say that the main area of African philosophy today remains basically *unsettled*. This is because there is no general agreement about the nature of African philosophy or about a specific worldview which is (generally) accepted as representative of African intellectual ideology." (1998:96) (my italics)

The first black Africans who defended African culture and world view against western intimidation were Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) Aimé Césaire (1912 -) and Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906). (1998:97). They were however accused by Wole Soyinka of formulating an African worldview simply in opposition and therefore in terms of a Western world view. (Soyinka, **)

According to Oluwele Rev Father Placide Tempels, with his book *Bantu Philosophy* (1959) can justifiably be regarded as the "father of ethno-philosophy, having postulated the existence of a single and primitive philosophy shared by at least every member of an African society." (1998:98)

Tempels had been responded to or sharply criticized by among others F. Crahay from Kinshasha, P. Hountondji, Henry Odera Oruka, Lucius Outlaw, S.B. Oluwele herself and Zulu Sofala.

Sophie Oluwele, as well as the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, suggests that oral texts provide an important entry into African consciousness. So we start with a Bushman narrative.

3. DEATH ON THE HUNTING GROUND

The full title says: "I speak, holding up your heart, so that you will really know what I have said."

There is an appeal from the speaker to the heart of the other: I'm holding up your heart, I want you to deeply and fully understand what I am saying to you.

These are the words of a wounded and dying Bushman to his wife.

The narrative itself begins with the following sentence: "A man kills another man, while they are shooting springbok." (Lewis-Williams, 2002:52)

This incident threw the small group of hunter-gatherers into a crisis. Not only the dying itself, but how to deal with it morally within a small nomadic community who desperately needed one another for survival.

As the wounded man tumbled to the ground, the one who shot him came over. With a few others they inspected the damage. The text said: "Weeping they stand over him."

The men asked: "What is this *thing* here which shoots our brother?" Note: the killer became a "thing", the dying hunter "our brother". The killer explained that it was not his intention to kill the man, but that he was simply shooting a springbok.

But the hunters were angry. They took him to task: he had been careless, he did not think of the man's children and should not have released an arrow when he couldn't see properly in the dust. But suddenly the wounded man intervened: it was he, the wounded, himself, who did not look carefully enough for a possible arrow.

The men around the wounded man, just like that, agreed that it was the dying man's fault.

A second group of men arrived at the wounded man. As they put their bows down, the wounded man told them: "You must not scold our friend; you must remember that it was the arrow's fault … the arrow hit me of its own accord."

Talk about passing the buck: from the killer to the wounded to the arrow and the killer has now become 'our friend'.

When they arrived home with the dying man, his wife started to cry. The other women reprimanded the men: "You others … you have shot your friend." Note how the women addressed the men as You Other and so turned them into a disgraced kind of group. But the men were ready:

"We did not do it on purpose," they said, "for it was a false shooting. A false shot's arrow it was. *You did not tell the children to play away from the house. That is why this man accidentally shot the other man.*" (my italics) (2002:55)

An old woman immediately affirmed this accusation: yes, my son was wounded because my daughter-in-law did not keep the children away from the hunting man's bed – if children played on his bed, so the Bushmen custom said, a hunter could just as well voluntarily fall into an arrow.

To change the retelling of the incident in a specific way every time, allowed the Bushmen to shift the blame neatly from one to the other. Blame moved from the most powerful to the most vulnerable.

Could one say that, for their survival, they ethically *needed* to remove the blame from the grownups in order to continue their mutual co-existence and dependence?

So, what we would regard today as an abdication of moral responsibility, could actually be explained as its opposite: an execution, a taking on of moral responsibility in the context of a hunter-gatherer society.

After her husband's death, the young wife took her children to go back to her own family. On the way they stopped at a water hole:

"She (the young widow) sees her younger brother's footprints by the water. She sees her mother's footprint by the water. She sees her brother's wife's spoor by the water." (2002:61)

She then tells her children: "(T)hey had been carrying dead springbok to the water so that people can drink on their way back with the game. … For the people's footprints were made today;" (2002:61)

Louis Liebenberg who studied the Bushmen in the Kalahari desert (Brown, 2006:24) distinguishes three levels of tracking: First, *simple* tracking that simply follows footprints. Second, *systematic* tracking involving the gathering of information from signs until a detailed indication is built up of the action. Third, *speculative* tracking that involves the creation of a working hypothesis on the basis of: (1.) the initial interpretation of signs, (2.)a knowledge of behaviour and (3.)a knowledge of the terrain. This involves a fundamentally new way of thinking. (2006:24)

According to Liebenberg these skills of tracking are akin to those of Western intellectual analysis, and he suggests that all science started with tracking. (2006:25)

You will remember that the young widow effortlessly did all three kinds of tracking. She identified the makers of the footprints, their coming and going, she established when they

were made and then put forward a hypothesis of what they were doing and where and how she would find her family that very day.

4. THE WESTERN SELF

After the Holocaust Hannah Arendt tried to understand how it happened that an ordinary human being could commit unspeakable atrocities to another human being. How somebody could be a Christian, read Immanuel Kant and Goethe, listen to Schubert, yet regularly gave orders for thousands of Jews to be killed in gas chambers.

Arendt found Christianity unhelpful because "the emphasis (in Christianity) shifted entirely from care for the world and the duties connected with it, to care for the soul" and its afterlife. (Arendt, 2003:152)

So she preferred Socrates's proposition: "It is better to suffer wrong, than to do wrong". But who makes that decision? The self. The Self decides; I will not do wrong. The self stands in the center of moral consideration of human conduct. (2003:Xx)

Even religious commands like 'Love thy neighbour as thyself', or 'Don't do unto others what you don't want done to yourself', couldn't get away from the Self. (2003:68)

But how will this Self know what is the right choice? Arendt picked up that Socrates said that it would be better for him that most men disagree with him, than for him to contradict himself.

Socrates said that he was arguing with himself. He was two within one. Arendt re-phrased it: "Though I am one, I am two-in-one and there can be harmony or disharmony with the self. … (but) I cannot walk away from myself … if I do wrong, I am condemned to live together with a wrongdoer in unbearable intimacy". (2003:90)

Arendt said the conversation with the Self was the beginning of thinking and knowing that would make a moral entity possible. (2003:91, 95,101,112, 162) She described the source of Adolf Eichman's behaviour as "a curious, quite authentic inability to think." (2003: 159)

Allow me to look at this Western Self from another angle. The cult of the individual is one of the most enduring modern Western myths. As in Robinson Crusoe, the Western imagination tries to create an individual who is not dependent on any community. Although Crusoe has to find a Man Friday to start a new community, the myth of the individual lives forth as the most important condition for progress. Without the individual there can be no development.

The French semiotic Dany-Robert Dufour, writes "In the present era of liberal democracy everything rests, in the final analysis, on the individual as subject – on his economic, legal, political and symbolic autonomy. Yet despite the most obsessive expressions of self-

affirmation, the attempt to be oneself is fraught with difficulty. A host of symptoms testify to the "impairment of the individual" in contemporary societies. Psychic disorders, cultural malaise, the increase in violence and widescale exploitation are all vectors of new forms of alienation and inequality.' (Dufour, 2001) He regards the modern individual not as free, but as lost and abandoned.

Susan Sontag's description of the ruins of man's thought ties in with the obsessional disregard for a community that is more than mere nationhood:

'The best of the intellectual and creative speculation carried in the "West" over the past hundred and fifty years seems incontestably the most energetic and *true* in the entire lifetime of man. And yet the equally incontestable result of all this genius is our sense of standing in the ruins of thought, and on the verge of the ruins of history and of man himself… the need for individual spiritual counsel has never seemed more acute.' (Sontag,1987:8)

5. THE AFRICAN SELF?

It is at this point, I suggest, that an African awareness would say: I am constituting the self in another way. Of course there is an I. Of course there should be the mind changing conversation. But the conversation that will create the moral entity is not with the self, but with the people around one, one's community. One's self awareness is not formed by splitting oneself into two, but by becoming one-in-many, dispersed as it were among those around one.

The fundamental point of departure between an African and Western worldview would be in the perspective of where and how the moral compass is formed : for Arendt it is formed in the self through conversations with the self. For African awareness it would be formed in the self, but through conversations with others.

The departure point for Arendt is inside the individual towards the *self*. The departure point for African awareness is also inside the individual, but towards the *community*.

This manifested in some of the testimonies before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission when people testified that it was the face of the victim just before he or she died, that was haunting them. It was not the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" that lay heavy on their consciousnesses, but the faces of those they killed or tortured. (For example: torturer and master of the wet-bag technique, Jeffrey Benzien as well as the askari in the documentary "A Long Night's Journey into Day").

Theologian Keith Ferdinando from Central Africa strengthens this idea when he says that doing wrong '… in many African cultures is defined not so much in terms of the nature of the act itself, but rather of its consequences … Thus to say that 'sin' disrupts harmony and causes

suffering is tautologous … An act that disrupts the harmony of the cosmos in a way harmful to the interests of man, is ipso facto evil; if no harmful consequences are entailed, it is therefore probably inaccurate to speak in terms of 'offence' or 'sin'. (Brand, 2002:83)

This means that an act which does not affect the community negatively, is not a wrong act. It also means that if something is good for the community it cannot be wrong, no matter how wrong according to religious or other commands.

Methodist Minister Gabriel Setiloane said: the greatest of all evils is to live in 'careless disregard of others'. (2002:98)

For an individual to do good, Arendt suggests that he should become completely selfless and then would have 'embarked upon the most lonely career there can be for man' with only God as company. (2003:117)

But according to African awareness it is precisely this moment of doing good towards others, that makes you a full human being; it is this working for others that gives you a soul. The self-er you get, the more self-focused, the less your awareness of your community and the more spiritually dead you become. (Comaroff**)

This is aptly illustrated in the vocabulary of one of South Africa's indigenous languages. In Setswana there are two words for work: the one is *bereka* which is derived from the Afrikaans word 'werk'. It means to do as little work as possible for as much money as possible. The word '*dira'* is a pre-colonial word that means to work so that everybody benefits - plant, harvest, cook, sow - work that feeds and sustains the community and its wholeness. (Comaroff ***:)

6. THE ETHICS OF CARE

The twentieth century taught Western thought that ethics was a pure, disinterested inquiry into timeless moral truths about individuals, available to individuals, by reflection and reasoning within individuals. (Urban Walker,1998:371)

In 1981 Lawrence Kohlberg claimed that he discovered through empirical psychological research that mature moral reasoning always involves appeals to moral notions of justice, fairness and rights. He found that the guiding principle for moral maturity was justice.

Two years later, psychologist Carol Gilligan, made the amazing discovery that the ways in which women think about morality and the moral domain, revealed a different, but equally mature and plausible, moral voice: one that relied primarily on the language of care, and on the notion of responsibility in caring relationships. The moral language of care and responsibility, Gilligan maintained, was rooted in a self-conception on which self and others were fundamentally interdependent. (Moody-Adams, 1998:261)

This was a radical new perspective on the moral subject. Before a human being could emerge as an individual with a mature moral capacity, he had already been raised within a community. Surely one should reject a conception of individuality which denied that individuals were always embedded in community contexts of some kind. (Herta Nagl-Docekal,1998:59)

The feminist philosophers describe the moral subject as a self-in-relation. The self in one had become the self-in-relation.

'It is incumbent on individuals to take responsibility for self and others. … Detachment from and indifference to people – failure to notice and respond to their vulnerabilities and needs – is an abrogation of responsibility." (Tietjens Meyers, 1998:381)

This morality is known as: an ethic of care (Maihofer, 1998:385) "One of the central truths of an ethic of care is its insistence on the possibility of different normative 'truths' and the corresponding recognition of several moralities" in contrast to the "traditional conception of justice (that) allow(s) only for one truth.' (1998:388)

Now. Is this ethic of care the same as the African awareness of the self? I would suggest that it largely dovetails in that the individual's moral capacity is formed through relationships with others. Second, the moral driving force emanates from the different relationships one has. But for me the biggest difference is that the community is much broader than the suggested variety of personal relationships and second, that this broader community dominates the ethic. This of course problematizes the notion of what constitutes the 'community' and what constitutes the 'best' for the community.

7. INTER-CONNECTEDNESS AS PART OF FORGIVENESS

I want to put forward the most coherent and deeply understood sense of interconnectedness that I know of. These words were said during the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by Mrs Cynthia Ngewu whose son, Christopher Piet was killed by the Security Police in 1986. In response to the plea of forgiveness from the man who killed her son, she said:

> "This thing called reconciliation …if I am
> understanding it correctly … if it means this
> perpetrator, this man who has killed
> Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes

human again, this man, so that I, so that all
of us, get our humanity back ... then I agree,
then I support it all." (Krog, 1998:22, translated from Xhosa)

Of all the definitions by important and learned people, this must count as one of the most perfect formulations of how African interconnectedness, based on the idiom **umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu** (a person is a person through other persons) are practically lived by ordinary people.

In the first place, Cynthia Ngewu implicated that she knew and accepted that, because the killer had lost all humanity, because he was no longer human, he would be able to kill her child. Second, she knew and accepted that to forgive him, would open up the possibility for *him* to regain his humanity. Third, she understood also that the loss of her son affected her own humanity; she herself had now to live within an affected humanity. Fourth and most importantly, she understood that if indeed the perpetrator felt himself driven by her forgiveness to regain his humanity, then it would open up for *her* the possibility to become fully human again.

This incredible formulation affirmed how a cleaning lady could so intimately understood ubuntu, or interconnectedness, that she could formulate it so succinctly. I would argue that this intuitive understanding and knowledge of inter-connectedness underpinned most of the testimonies delivered before the TRC and was largely responsible for the absence of revenge. In other words, the daily living of ubuntu was the determining factor of the tone of the hearings in stead of, as was suggested, the imposed "religious-redemptive" atmosphere. (Wilson, ***)

After the Second World War a particular way of dealing with the horror of the Holocaust was developed and became the most dominant, and later the only, way to address an unjust past. Certain concepts such as: one cannot forgive on behalf of the dead, one cannot forgive the unforgivable etc. became unquestionable fixities.

Reasons were put on the table by the end of the twentieth century by a South African interconnectedness of how one could forgive on behalf of the dead, because one was in touch with one's ancestors; how one could forgive the unforgivable precisely because one's interconnected self was striving towards a full humanity - only possible when the society was healed. Note that the victim takes the initiative. Note that the onus is now on the perpetrator to acknowledge the forgiveness by changing his life so that he could regain his humanity.

Let us go back to the First People of Southern Africa. Let us look at the Bushman narrative through interconnectedness.

Maybe the retelling of the wounding did not *remove* the blame, but *distribute* the blame. So the death became everybody's business. The narrative is saying: everybody is responsible when somebody dies; it affects us all. Note that the wounded took the initiative to forgive and distribute the blame.

To care about everybody who dies, to feel affected by every bit of blood spilt on this earth – would that not be the ultimate of moral living?

8. THE ROLE OF INTER-CONNECTEDNESS IN COSMOPOLITISM.

In one of his last papers "On Cosmopolitanism", Derrida focused on the past role of free cities where people could flee for refuge.

Through Kant, Derrida talked about the role of hospitality in cosmopolitanism. All human creatures, all finite beings endowed with reason, have received, in equal proportion, 'common possession of the surface of the earth'. Kant however granted only visiting rights to the stranger, but not the right of residence, because "no one individual had more right than another to live in any one particular spot."

The problem with this position for me is that it ignores a history of conquest, exploitation, dispossession, displacement and the imbalances of wealth and poverty. Behind every refugee or *gastarbeider* is another behind and behind that behind, another, and behind that one perhaps you.

Let me brief you, in short breaths, while we're climbing. During the time that Shaka was building his empire by attacking, killing and displacing millions of Africans, there was another king. In the mountains of Lesotho, Morena Moshoeshoe built a kingdom by welcoming people from various parts of the continent who fled the devastation brought about by Shaka's wars. King Moshoeshoe created a new community in which those strangers arriving, could maintain their language and culture, while forming part of a new inter-connectedness.

Njabulo Ndebele recently pointed out that King Moshoeshoe might have surmised that the refugees coming to live with him had survived dislocation elsewhere. They might easily reproduce in the new environment the culture of aggression engendered by the dislocation they had experienced. (2006)

Moshoeshoe realized that he needed to secure a new psycho-social space, and Ndebele describes this as part of "counter-intuitive leadership". When a leader assessed that the logical solution actually would compound the problem and then look at an improbable

scenario. It is in this “apparent improbability of the unlikely outcome” that its power lay, because this improbable scenario would soon “evolve its own complex solutions.” (2006)

I want to suggest that Moshoeshoe was counter-intuitive precisely because he put his inter-connectedness upfront. He realized that he could take by surprise those, who, through wars, cannibalism and Christian conversions, lost their sense of interconnectedness, by giving them material safety and spiritual freedom – the very things destroyed by Shaka and the whites. Through this he forged a loyalty now lasting nearly two centuries.

In 1860 the Xhosa intellectual, Tiyo Soga, lamented the loss of wholeness after the entry of Christianity into Southern Africa. He said that the converted lost their sense of hospitality and the pagan could no longer expect hospitality in the houses of Christian fellow Xhosa speakers (Sanders, 2002:17)

Nearly a hundred years later the writer of "The Wrath of the Ancestors" AC Jordan took this idea one step further by redefining 'ubuntu' in terms of African hospitality. He said ‘ubuntu’ was no longer merely what was expected of people within a community towards members of that community, but 'ubuntu' was what took place between the community and strangers. (2002:123- 125)

Jordan warned that if the disasters of the past were to be avoided, the figure of the stranger ought to be continually reinvented. By linking 'ubuntu' to hospita- lity, Jordan underlined the fact that there would al-ways be an outsider who ought to be remembered, or not-forgotten, who called into question the existence of the collectivity. Jordan seemed to insist on responsibility for the stranger as constitutive of collectivity itself. (2002:127-129)

Like Moshoeshoe before him, it was precisely by accommodating the stranger as part of his political strategy, that exemplified Nelson Mandela. He reached out to his jailers and Betsie Verwoerd because the core of his action was his belief that whites also constitute the wholeness of South Africa.

By counter-intuitively re-imagining the society the inclusion of the stranger opens up exiting possibilities. The “stranger” who threatens the stability of the society, who puts the society at risk, also provides the possibility of restoring and saving it. (2002:129)

9. CONCLUSION

I want to say that over the years it was the Dutch language that taught me the exhilaration of diversity. Through this language I accessed the languages of Europe and the East. Through the attitudes, conversations, texts and generosity of a variety of special Dutch friends, poets, writers, translators, journalists and organizers of literary festivals, I have learnt to finally

make peace with the part that is European in me, because, coming from apartheid, you have endowed being European for me with an intense interconnectedness healthily mixed with a dose of ironic humbleness.

But as your friend, allow me to say the following:

You have always been known for your irony. But it seems that you have moved from being romantic ironists to traditional irony. Traditional ironists harbour a slightly supercilious sense of moral and intellectual superiority. (Furst, 1984: 227.) But romantic irony is an irony of uncertainty, bent primarily on the perplexities of searching for answers. Alert to the plurality of all meaning and the relativity of all positions, the romantic ironist probes the open-ended series of contradictions. Romantic irony is an instrument for registering and accepting the stubborn contradictions of a universe in flux.(1984:229) Can't you become that again?

I have also noticed how in the past decade your debates have turned to sound more and more like our Afrikaner debates – all creaking around exclusivity.

I've noticed that, like in the old South Africa, some of the people walking in the streets, one never experience in restaurants, bars, theatres, bookshops and literary festivals. I hear a lot of talk about them, but little by themselves, those who do talk had already been ostracized by those very same communities they came from.

I notice also more and more something that can only be described as, and forgive me for this, resolute greed – a hanging on to what is yours, a defiant idea that what you have, you have worked hard for. What you have, is your due, ignoring that while Europe and America were prospering into First Worlds, things were happening in the places they were taking from. These places are now all with you.

I also noticed that strangers may live here, but on your conditions, your standards, your codes, your history, your enlightenment, and your ethics. You, who once were so versatile in how relative everything was, who knew how to survive surrounded by frenetic bombastic countries, are yourself becoming more and more smugly fixated on what you have and what you are, in stead of re-imagining strangers into a new community of wholeness. Charity you do, yes, lots of it. But you can only deal with us, the Third World, as charity and never as equals because you deeply believe: what you are, you have accomplished by your hardworking selves, and what we are, is because we keep on lazily failing ourselves. But you are stuck now, and leaning towards us could help.

Hannah Arendt once explained why she left for the United States: "what convinced me was the factual existence of a body politic, utterly unlike the European nation states with their homogenous populations, their organic sense of history, their more or less decisive division

into classes, and their sovereignty with its notion of raison d'etre … What influenced me when I came to the United States was precisely the freedom of becoming a citizen without having to pay *the price of assimilation*." (my italics)

Finally: both South Africa and the Netherlands had been and are brave countries. Both of them, at times, surprised the world. Both of them delivered leaders in different fields that the world will not forget. Both of them are now before the challenge of re-imagining themselves anew. Both deserve to succeed.

My wish is that South Africa will succeed and will reject the each-one-for-himself code; that we will find a way to make the interconnectedness and the accommodation of the stranger, part of our soul. My wish is that the Netherlands will succeed because it managed to move with moral imagination outside its European heritage and embrace the stranger with guts as its equal and to weave a strong new interconnectedness through an ethic of care.

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