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OUT OF AFRICA

REFLECTIONS OF A JESUIT PHILOSOPHER

The Case of the Missing Siguila

By Mark G. Henninger, S.J.

My interest in Africa and African philosophy began on a fateful day in Rome in the early 1990s, during a sabbatical leave from Loyola University Chicago, after a hard day deciphering medieval philosophical manuscripts under the delicately frescoed ceilings of the Vatican Library. My Jesuit superior from the States, a friend, was in town to see how things were going. During a dinner in a Roman restaurant, and after I had related my year in Rome, doing what I like, research, he paused and asked me, "What would you say about teaching philosophy in Africa?"

Dumbfounded I listened, then took an exploratory trip, Rome-Nairobi-Harare, and, on returning to the States, said (amazingly), "Fine with me." I ended up spending four years working in Zimbabwe, helping to found a new school, a school of philosophy for young men from all over English-speaking Africa who wanted to be Jesuits. We bought the land, chose the site, designed a curriculum for the African context, bought houses and off we went.

Today, over ten years after leaving Zimbabwe, I find

myself back in American academia in the philosophy department at Georgetown University, and I still keep alive my interest in Africa and African philosophy. And so I leapt at the opportunity last fall to attend the world premiere here in Washington of the play, *Sigui, Siguila, Siguiya*, by the noted author and critic from the Côte d'Ivoire, Amadou Koné, currently professor of French and African Studies at Georgetown.

In the play, situated in a fictitious francophone country in Africa, the long-reigning leader has died. The council of elders has met and chosen the new leader, a well-born son, who has spent years abroad in France, now returning with his French wife. But something is wrong. They can't seem to finalize and promulgate the decision, there is a lack of direction, something is wrong, something missing. They are caught in an impasse between mourning the past and embracing the future. And as the dancing begins in celebration of the upcoming inauguration, the Seer sees clearly that the dancing is not right, that the

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music, frenetic, has lost its rhythm. A center, something has vanished. The Seer pronounces: the Siguila is missing. Physically, the Siguila is a ceremonial chair, but it is much, much more...

Perhaps someone has stolen it? But who? The colonialists? But no, it was here when they left. It seems to have just disappeared. The French wife suggests that they just build a new one, but not even the official guardians of the traditions are any longer able to describe it correctly. The tension increases as leaders from the four parts of the country come together to discuss the future. They break out in arguing, recrimination and threats fill the air, the mood darkens. There is haranguing in the streets by a young student radical, pulling the country toward a socialist solution, while a young Western-educated economist laughs at the naïve slogans of the socialist and talks of the need for foreign investment. The cacophony swells as the drums of tribal civil war begin menacingly offstage...The Seer tells the council of elders that no solution is possible until the Siguila is found and restored to its rightful place in

the rituals of transition. Without it, the society of this fictitious country will remain forever in socio-political limbo.

As those who have followed the twists and turns of African literature in the post-colonial era may recognize, the underlying problem of the play is the loss of African identity. What is it to be African in the 21st century? This has all the minefields of other identity issues. Does it even make sense to talk of being "an African"? Is it not better to talk of being "a Zimbabwean"? Or better yet, of being a member of the two tribes making up Zimbabwe, a "Shona," a "Ndebele"? There are surely multiple identities, and however they are integrated or dissolved, the stark fact remains that all have been battered by a massive tidal wave of Westernization. (Again, what is meant by "the West"?) It is, in fact, a very pressing question after the tumultuous changes of the last fifty years in post-colonial Africa that have challenged and in many way undermined traditional ways of life on many levels, ethical, social, political, economic, and religious.

When I was in Zimbabwe in the 90s I saw this first-hand. A colleague of mine was teaching a course in African literature in our school, and one day he was discussing a traditional Nigerian folktale involving a hare and a lizard. Being a teacher of many years he said, "Why should I relate this story? One of the Nigerians in the class, you, why don't you tell it?" The reply: "What?! We don't know those old stories; only our parents and grandparents know those any more. I grew up in Lagos, not the villages!

Who cares about hares and lizards when you can watch Michael Jordan or Michael Jackson?" In one or two generations, much of the traditional life has been lost, the memory as faded as the sun-whitened trunk of a dusty old baobab tree.

Another example: one day while waxing the floor in the school, a noisy argument broke out over the radio, blaring away with Dolly Parton belting out another country and Western tune – a type of music enormously popular in Zimbabwe. A Zambian denounced her and those who listen to her as "not African", while a Zimbabwean shot back that he

"We don't know those old stories; only our parents and grandparents know them any more. I grew up in Lagos, not the villages! Who cares about hares and lizards when you can watch Michael Jordan or Michael Jackson?"

liked her, the music, and the lyrics. "What's wrong with Dolly Parton? She sings of real life!" A small incident, but illustrative of a larger truth. By now, much of the old traditional life is gone, at least in the cities, and people are experiencing an immense upheaval both personal and social. What to accept from the West and still be African? How can you maintain a traditional culture of respect for the elders and parents when the kids are watching "The Simpsons" on TV? The dancing isn't the same: something has vanished and the new is just a blur.

You find this theme not only in African plays, short stories and novels, but also in African philosophy, such as the writings of Kwame Gyekye in his book *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford, 1997), and Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford, 1992). Although both have written on a number of philosophical topics, one of their tasks has been to examine the problem of identity in post-colonial Africa. And, notably, both have chosen not to turn their backs on African traditional conceptual schemes; rather they are committed to examining critically and appreciating their African tradi-

tions. Could it be that these traditions have something to say today? A recurring theme of the play *Sigui, Siguila, Siguiya* is memory: to lose one's memory is to lose oneself. This is one of the motivations behind such books as Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Concept of Self* (Temple University Press, 1995) and *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Sankofa Publishing Co., 1996). Hence, Koné, Gyekye and Appiah all are concerned with the vexed problem of constructing an African identity in today's fast-paced, wired/wireless world.

In some ways, it seems a hopeless project: the number and vehemence of so many global forces, political, social and economic, the dire lack of resources and interest...in the face of all this, why dedicate time and energy trying to answer the strictly philosophical question, "Who am I?" or better in an African context, "Who are we? Who do we want to be?" But these writers all are old and wise enough to feel the loss, to sense something is not right. And a step forward is to become conscious of a lack and to point out that something has vanished. As Amadou Koné writes: "S'absenter pour être enfin là" ("Vanishing, to be there at last").

The top 10 philosophy departments in 2004, according to the Philosophical Gourmet Report, which ranks the top 50 in the country:

1. New York U.
2. Rutgers U. at New Brunswick
3. Princeton U.
4. U. of Michigan at Ann Arbor
- U. of Pittsburgh
6. Columbia U.
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Stanford U.
9. Harvard U.
- U. of California at Los Angeles

Inflation leaves Zimbabweans desperate
By HARRIS PHILLIPS
Harare, Zimbabwe

In the middle of February, 30-year-old Titus Dube went shopping for school shoes for his son. He found a decent pair for 25,000 Zimbabwean dollars (then about \$149 at the government-controlled exchange rate), and decided he would buy the shoes a week later, after he received his paycheck. When he returned, he learned the same shoes had a new price tag: 75,000 Zimbabwean dollars.

"What could I do? I had to buy the shoes or send my son to school barefooted," Dube told NCR. He said he earns about 100,000 Zimbabwean dollars a month.

His story is one of thousands here in Harare, Zimbabwe's biggest largest city, as the country's financial crisis, now in its eighth year, has decimated consumer spending. Economists in the capital, Harare, say inflation peaked above 2,000 percent in February. Prices rise weekly and daily, but incomes have stagnated.

After a series of nationwide work stoppages late last year, the government finally agreed to increase teachers' pay by 60 percent. That boosted rural teacher Daniel Marova's monthly salary to \$540,000. But he told NCR that by the time he receives the increase, it will be almost useless as spending power is eroded by voracious hyperinflation.

The quasi-governmental Consumer

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WHATEVER YOUR VIEWS ON ABORTION... YOU NEED TO HEAR THE SUBJECTS OF THIS FILM, IF ONLY TO BE ABLE TO FIGHT THEM MORE EFFECTIVELY.
-David Edelstein, New York Magazine

HOW THE PRO-LIFERS ARE WINNING

A joyful account of coming to Christianity
MAKE THIS BREAK-A RADICAL CONVERSION
By Sara Miles
Ballentine Issues 5:14 pages, \$24.95
Reviewed by BILL PROGAMENI

Progressive journalist Sara Miles is in a same-sex marriage. She attends an Episcopalian church where ministers don tie-dyed robes and offer Communion to the unrepentant. But don't tell the author of *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion* she's not in the mainstream of Christianity, that she's converted a theology tailored for her liberal San Francisco sensibilities.

"I don't feel like I'm making up something convenient. I feel quite rooted in the Christian tradition," she says in a phone interview.

And that's a great theme throughout this tightly crafted, joyful memoir of coming to believe that God doesn't discriminate and grace is for all. "As I

U.S. helicopters fly over Baghdad, Iraq, March 29

CRITIC'S CHOICE!

The American Context

As I came back to the States in the late 90s after four years in Zimbabwe, I saw some things in a new light. In American academia we tend to emphasize differences, but Africans, Americans — we're not really so different, and many problems are quite similar. I gradually began to see parallels between our situation and that of Africa. For instance, it takes only two or three generations at the outside to lose contact with a tradition going back hundreds of years. So also here in the States for many young people, with what's been called a general historical illiteracy.

One member of our department tells the story of his class on just war and his discussing World War II and the Vietnam war. Afterwards, a student came up to him and informed him, a bit indignantly, "All of these things happened *before* I was born." To which he replied, "*Most* things happened before you were born." You have surely seen such "vanishings" with many students who professedly are part of a religious tradition, but have little knowledge or interest in that tradition. "We live in the cities, DC, Chicago, LA; we don't know those old stories any more." Or as one student remarked candidly, "Catholicism just doesn't fit my lifestyle."

Let's shift our attention to our philosophy departments. Is it possible to see a parallel between the experience of post-colonial Africa of the past fifty years, starting in the 60s, and that of our universities and philosophy departments in those years? Perhaps few in our departments today will remember the days when the department was dominated by a tradition of scholastic/Thomist philosophy, both in the content of the individual courses and in the overall curriculum. It may seem as dead and gone today as traditional African life does to a city-dweller of Harare or Nairobi, caught up with making a living, on or off the streets, but leading as rushed and frenetic an existence as we do in our departments.

And we need not rehearse the changes that have taken place over the intervening years, the opening out to a diversity of methods and philosophical traditions, analytic, continental, applied ethics, multicultural perspectives, along with the increasing professionalization of the departments, and the national recognition that has followed a fuller participation in the life of the discipline at national and international levels. Each one of us can fill in the blanks of this description, and in many ways we can congratulate ourselves on how far we have come.

But in the midst of these whirlwind changes, I would like to raise a perhaps uncomfortable question: what has happened to our Siguila? I must say one of my criticisms of *Sigui, Siguila, Siguiya* is that there was no hint of an answer to this question of identity in the African context. Koné, the Seer himself, senses the problem and illustrates it beautifully through his play, though he does not offer a clean solution. Neither do I offer a clean solution, but let me try to name our Siguila: the Catholic intellectual tradition.

As soon as I put it in these terms, I can sense readers reacting at most ambivalently, or, if at some level of their being reacting sympathetically, seeing this as a "hopeless project," just as I'm sure many Africans see the project of Koné, Gyekye and Appiah. [Conversation starter: why do academics often feel more sympathy for projects far away, like that of forging a post-colonial African identity, than they do for a project that is much more part of their own tradition and actually touches their own lives and institutions more intimately?] Members of philosophy departments in Jesuit universities have wrestled (or not wrestled) with this problem in different ways. Let me recount briefly one way the department of philosophy at Georgetown faced it in October 1992.

It takes only two or three generations at the outside to lose contact with a tradition going back hundreds of years.

One Response

John Langan of the philosophy department had an experience similar to that of Amadou Koné, sensing that it would be good for all concerned if he wrote a letter to the department outlining his thoughts on the need to strengthen the department in the Catholic intellectual tradition. (You can read the entire memo at http://philosophy.georgetown.edu/Langan's_memo.PDF). Langan was certainly not advocating an all-embracing Thomism of the past, but on the other hand it did not seem right to allow this tradition to become a marginalized, neglected relic of the past. After an open and collegial discussion, the department, in fact, voted to maintain a key focus in the Catholic philosophical tradition which thus became one focus along with others agreed upon by the faculty.

In his memo, he begins by affirming that Georgetown is a Jesuit, Catholic university that, consequently, has a set of distinctive scholarly tasks it is called upon to fulfill. For example, he believes the



Loyola Marymount University.

University should make available the intellectual resources of the Catholic philosophical tradition as a way of contributing to an understanding and critique of contemporary American culture. In addition, it should express the concerns of American Catholicism to the wider church, as well as contribute to the resolution of issues currently controversial among Catholic scholars. Finally, it should provide philosophical support for Catholic beliefs, showing how those beliefs may be applied to solve practical and theoretical problems. Given Georgetown's identity, it is reasonable to expect that

This means that in describing and filling a position, the department must be committed to maintaining a key focus in the Catholic philosophical tradition.

there will be scholars capable of fulfilling these tasks and more generally of making a creative contribution to the development of the Catholic philosophical tradition. Hence, there should be a

'critical mass' of such scholars found not in any one department, but in the University as a whole.

Although each person would come up with his/her own list of what figures, subjects and approaches constitute the Catholic philosophical tradition, my own personal list includes the following: philosophy of religion from the many traditions and methods current today; medieval philosophy, especially St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, and the Franciscan tradition: Bonaventure, Scotus, and Ockham; Catholic philosophy: the analysis, defense, elaboration, and application of Catholic views which would include natural law and virtue theory

approaches to ethics; Neo-Thomism, especially transcendental Thomism and historical Thomism; and, importantly, Catholic social teaching and Catholic medical ethics.

We are all well aware of how difficult it is to maintain key areas of strengths in our departments, given the limited resources and the expected turnover (and unexpected departures) of colleagues. But Langan believes that a number of people whom we would consider as potential members of a department would be interested or competent in one of these areas, and some that are hired to meet other needs in a department may well be interested in one or other of these areas. And it should be admitted that some areas may simply be uncovered at various times, given budgetary constraints and other departmental priorities. But over the long haul, if the institution is not covering most of these areas in some way, there is a failure to meet our responsibilities as a Catholic university. This means that in describing and filling a position, the Department must be committed to maintaining a key focus in the Catholic philosophical tradition.

Since then, our department has hired three philosophers who are committed lay Catholics, one in philosophy of law, another in metaphysics and the philosophy of religion, and the third in ethics. In addition, I joined the faculty last year in medieval philosophy. A tradition need not dominate nor vanish into ashes: one explicit focus among others. I propose this as one response to the problem of finding and maintaining one's identity as an institution. And we are not alone. Many institutions and societies as diverse as Zimbabwe, India and many Arab countries are facing essentially the same problem: in the face of a fast-paced world, to find and maintain one's Siguila. ■