

SECOND WORLD BLACK AND AFRICAN FESTIVAL OF ARTS AND CULTURE

LAGOS, NIGERIA

15 JANUARY - 12 FEBRUARY, 1977

COLLOQUIUM

MAIN THEME: BLACK CIVILIZATION AND EDUCATION

SUB-THEME: BLACK CIVILIZATION AND PHILOSOPHY

THE UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHICAL CONNOTATION OF SOME

MENDE PROVERBS

by G. M. Carew

Sierra Leone

English original

COPYRIGHT RESERVED: Not for publication without written  
permission from the author or through  
the International Secretariat.

THE UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHICAL CONNOTATION  
OF SOME MENDE PROVERBS

by G. M. CAREW

Proverbial utterances are generally witty statements, but they often also serve to reveal some underlying world view. Take, for instance, Heraclitus statement: It is not possible to step twice into the same river.<sup>1</sup> The underlying philosophical premise of this proverb is one to which both Heraclitus and Plato subscribe. It is the view that everything is in the state of flux. I shall not here explore the moral, epistemological or political positions consequent on this view. I intend to investigate instead some Mende proverbs with a view to establishing the philosophical underpinnings of the culture. Though this may sound ambitious, it is not an insurmountable task for the simple reason that each culture presupposes a philosophy. If this task appears complex now, it is because little has been done by way of articulating or systematizing traditional African philosophical ideas.

Several attempts have been made to explore the philosophical ideas in Africa. These attempts fall largely under three different types of approach to the problem. (1) The historical approach; (2) The anthropological approach; (3) The conceptual approach. The first two approaches are of dubious merit but the third shows considerable promise. A brief commentary on each approach is in order.

(1) The historical approach is the attempt to

provide a comprehensive survey of intellectual ideas held in various parts of Africa. This is largely the approach taken by Prof. Mbiti in his text on African Religions and Philosophy. The historical approach suffers from one serious defect, namely, it fails to present African thought as a coherent and systematized body of ideas, where some of the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions are fully answered. Indeed the historical approach is no more than a catalogue of intellectual ideas and this certainly does not warrant the name philosophy.

(2) The anthropological approach is popular among philosophers of the analytical school. According to western anthropologists, traditional African ideas correspond to a certain level of socio-economic development. These ideas are not therefore peculiar to Africa; traditional African ideas are usually ideas of a pre-scientific culture.

Some analytic philosophers who have accepted the conclusion of anthropologists that the primitive world view which is generally associated with traditional African life is non-scientific argue that it cannot therefore be philosophically oriented, because philosophy begins with the natural inquisitiveness which is associated with science. This view is certainly mistaken. Philosophy, except conceived in the narrow sense does not begin with the scientific exploration of nature.

The issues that were raised in pre-scientific culture and the answers provided there-to, were no less philosophical than the issues generated by a scientific

culture. Questions of morality and the nature and limits of human knowledge were fully treated in pre-scientific cultures.

I want to believe that the analytic philosopher does not wish to deny that pre-scientific cultures generated philosophical issues; but rather that the answers to these philosophical problems were not satisfactorily explanatory. This raises a significant question with respect to two traditions in epistemological ontology. Namely, the rationalist and empiricist traditions. The difference between the two traditions is revealed largely in explications. An African philosopher, Prof. Willie Abraham, provides a definitive view of the problem:

"In the rationalist traditions, for example, in order to explain one thing in terms of another, one must be able to establish an inference from one to the other. Mere invariant succession is inadequate, and so far from providing an explanation, would in a rationalist tradition be neither correct nor incorrect, but the wrong kind of thing to call an explanation at all. This kind of difference over the nature of explanation already indicates an acceptance of some general concepts and classification of experience."

What might constitute an adequate explanation will depend ultimately on one's ontological commitment. The metaphysical order of a pre-scientific culture, based as it usually is on a rationalist model is bound to generate a different type of philosophy. Thus the criteria of adequacy for both the nature of evidence and explanation cannot be extraneous to the rationalistic philosophical model. It is therefore poor logic to condemn certain modes of philosophising because they do not adhere to the empiricist tradition.



(3) I turn now to our third consideration, the conceptual approach. I cite Prof. Abraham's creditable work on "The Mind of Africa", as taking the conceptual approach to the formulation of philosophical ideas in Africa. In his treatment of the Akan culture in Ghana, he presents a conceptual framework for apperception of the world. Akan Metaphysics form the basis from which Ethics, Religion, Politics et cetera can be inferred.

I propose to adopt Prof. Abraham's approach in this paper. In exploring the philosophical aspects of some Mende proverbs I shall attempt first, to describe the general conceptual framework of Mende Society.

#### ONTOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

God is in the fundamental category in their essentially supernatural world view. He is by nature a spirit. The second category of being are the spirits of departed relatives. Human beings constitute the third category of being which cannot be strictly said to belong to the spiritual realm but to a kind of pseudo world, a world of mere appearances. The real world is spiritual, yet the world with which humans are acquainted is physical; a kind of three dimensional realm.

In both ontology and epistemology, the Mende view approximates some form of platonic idealism. Plato postulated two worlds: the real world and the world of mere appearances. According to Mende belief, true knowledge is unattainable in the physical world of mere appearances. Knowledge of the nature of things is possessed only by God and the Spirits which populate his spiritual republic. They know everything but God

alone has the power to direct all things. Human beings are considered in a state of spiritual infancy so long as they are in the physical form.

This point can be made clearer by means of an analogy. Take, for instance, a child, who, in his state of infancy, depends entirely on parental guidance. The extent to which that child sustains injuries is proportional to the degree of parental attention afforded it. The more parental attention, the less injury the child sustains. Thus, a child who receives adequate parental guidance has far less mishaps than one with inadequate or without parental guidance. In the same manner, human beings, in their state of spiritual infancy must be guided and directed by their ancestral spirits until such time they qualify for membership in the spiritual world. This view is crucial, for I shall refer to it later on when I discuss the issue of fatalism.

There are other significant aspects of the spiritual world that must not escape mentioning. The spiritual universe is essentially moral. God, who constitutes the basis of this universe is a good God, and we are all at once his children and subjects. He is both father and judge of all the universe. With this brief sketch of Mende world view, I shall now treat two philosophical problems consequent upon this world view:

(1) The problem of Individual Freedom;

(2) The problem of Liberal Individualism.

These two philosophical problems emerge in the study of two Mende Proverbs:

(a) Nje na bi wole e le bima; The water which belongs

to you will not pass you by. In other words, one's destiny is unalterable.

(b) Ngulu yela e wola; One tree does not make a forest.

The literary interpretation is, one man does not make a society.

(1) INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM

A prima facie examination of the Mende proverb "Nje na bi wole e le bima" (one's destiny cannot be altered) leaves one with the conclusion that Mendes are fatalists. Fatalism viewed generally, is the view that men are not free with regard to any of their actions. Thus a man cannot do otherwise than he actually does. If this view is true of Mende experience it will make morality impossible. No one can be blamed or praised for actions he had done. The Saint and Villain alike will be operating under some inscrutable and unavoidable compulsion.

Thus, if it were fated that Mr. Jones should become a teacher, the fatalist will claim that the fact that Mr. Jones has to study is an unavoidable precondition of the fated event. Mr. Jones cannot choose not to study and yet become a teacher. On the contrary, the fatalist will insist that it is equally fated that he engage in the necessary training for the teaching profession.

This interpretation is certainly not one Mendes will hold, because Mende World view is moralistic. Individuals have moral responsibilities to each other and to their ancestral spirits. They are therefore culpable. If individuals in Mende society do act



sometimes in ways that are inconsistent with their moral obligation, one may then ask how it is possible to reconcile the notion of fixed destiny we referred to earlier with what appears to be individual freedom.

The general stock of arguments usually designed to refute fatalism and to establish some form of determinism that is compatible with freewill is inapplicable to the Mende experience. The Metaphysical commitment of the Mende precludes any talk of a conceptual framework that is founded on an empirical tradition. Very little therefore will be gained by a discussion of causal necessity in a spatio-temporal realm. I elect instead to investigate a different type of necessity that is compatible with Mende ontology.

The necessity I have in mind is epistemic necessity. Epistemic necessity is the view that since the future as well as the past are real, they cannot be changed. Hence all statements about the future are true unless false. The difficulty with epistemic necessity is that if we believe some of our actions to be free we must hold that they were not real prior to their occurrence. But this is only a problem for a spatio-temporal conceptual framework. The ontological reference in Mende belief is to a conceptual framework dominated by spirits. This framework is neither spatial nor temporal. As a timeless order it does not admit of sub-divisions into present, past or future. There is just one eternal present, for want of a better name. In this spiritual universe, God and the Spirits are said to know everything. But what about Man?



I mentioned earlier that human beings are in a state of spiritual infancy as long as they remain in the physical form. Their experiences at this level of development are therefore illusory. Since human experience of a realm where events succeed each other, and where the time sequence is divided into past, present and future is non-real, God and the ancestral spirits who know the true nature of things must provide guidance and direction. That the Mendes are aware of their ignorance and total dependence on God is fully suggested by the following expressions:

- (1) Na leke ngewo keni ta a loma;

Nothing happens unless God agrees.

- (2) Hinda Gbi, ngewo le;

God permits everything.

- (3) A yaa, ngewo;

O God, I am confused (said with a sigh).

- (4) Ngewo Mia;

God permitted it (said with a sigh after an accident).

Now since nothing happens that God does not will and it is not the case that Man is conversant with God's will, how does Man know what to do?

It is through constant Communion with God and the ancestral spirits that Man's guidance is effected. For the Mendes this takes the form of worship, which is less an act of self-abasement and praise, and more an act of consultation and propitiation. If an individual fails to consult God or the ancestral spirits as a Medium, he becomes estranged and therefore naturally goes wrong. Unless he seeks reunion with the ancestral spirits, he

will permanently lose his sense of direction. I shall use an example to illustrate this point further.

A true story is told of a certain student of Mende background at the University of Sierra Leone who had met with a series of setbacks both in his school work and his private life. In his state of despondency, he received a letter from his uncle stating that his misfortune was due to the fact that he had been out of touch with his ancestral spirits. He had not visited his village for several months and his ancestral spirits feel neglected. His uncle therefore was urging him to come home and appease his ancestral spirits. As long as this harmony ~~exists~~ between the ancestral spirits and their relatives it is believed very little harm will come to them.

An entire cult of spiritual leaders is in existence to provide the means of reapproachment for individuals who had backslides. It is however true that this priestly function has been abused by spiritual merchants who are bent on enriching themselves. Such priests claim to have the power to intercede on one's behalf for purposes of altering one's destiny. But such a task is clearly beyond them. The unalterable destiny of all men is spiritual bliss; upon death, the individual attains this height.

It can be argued then that since the future or at least what is called the future is already ontologically real there cannot in fact be any real freedom of action. Yet in a world that is at best illusory one gets the feeling that one could change things, that one owes

a moral obligation to one's ancestors and that it is one's responsibility to keep the clan alive. These are all myths that no doubt make for a homogeneous tribal culture but they are in no way real.

In summary, I have argued that individual freedom in a world of fixed destiny cannot be made intelligible in the context of causal necessity in a spatio-temporal realm. A plausible case exists if we consider freedom in the context of epistemic necessity in a spiritual realm; for we could then interpret individual freedom as a mere illusion and not part of reality at all. The latter I believe is implicit in Mende philosophy.

#### THE PROBLEM OF LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

Classical liberal theory views the individual as being ontologically prior to society. Hence it is argued that society exists for the sake of the individual. Government must provide adequate security against the infringement of individual rights and property. This view no doubt reduces Government to an instrumental function. It presents a system of rights whereby individuals make competing claims on each other. This liberal democratic view is at variance with traditional Mende belief on the nature and function of Government. This point is most significant in light of the fact that contemporary African political systems derive their justification from liberal democratic assumptions.

The Mendes view political organization as an invitation, a copy of the prototype which is in the spiritual world. The chief who is the head of the political



organization is not there for the sole purpose of dispensing rights. His function, which is analogous to that of God himself, is as father-protector. Professor Harry Sawyer on a similar point suggests that in Mende belief, God's Sovereignty and his fatherhood merge into one. In his dual role as Judge and Father He sees to it that justice is done and that the health and welfare of His children are preserved.

It is perhaps within this context that we must seek to understand the proverb "Ngulu yela e wola," one tree does not make a forest; in other words, one man does not make a society. The implication of this **view is that** one cannot make claims to rights and property that are antecedent to political society. One finds in John Locke and the Jeffersonians a position quite antithetical to the Mende view. For both Locke and Jefferson the individual possesses certain inalienable rights that precede even his membership in society. Society itself comes into being for the sole purpose of protecting these pre-established rights. From this it should be clear, that the state's function is limited to that of a police function; the state is to see that property and other rights are not infringed. The health and welfare though of the individual is largely his own concern and not that of the state's.

It is of the essence of Mende communal life that the health and welfare of every citizen be considered a public responsibility. There is no room for self-interested persons. Everyone has an obligation not so much to an abstract entity called "Society" but to an ever expanding

clan which engulfs not only this present generation of living people, but the dead ancestors and the unborn children. This fact is crucial in that it depicts the Individual in Mende Society as having a singular interest in maintaining the bonds of communal good-will and cordiality that extends all the way from the past into the future. We see then that the Individual's duty, which is to preserve this bond, coincides with his interest. If there is talk then of some distinct interest which a particular individual possesses it can only be thought of as mistaken; and of course the Individual can be reminded that he alone does not constitute the clan. The individual must view his interest in light of the interest of the whole clan, and this means that he will take into consideration not only what is of interest to the living, but what is also of interest to his ancestors.

F O O T N O T E S

1. Heraclitus in Philosophical Classics, ed. by Walter Kaufman (Englewood Cliffs in N. J. Prentice - Hall Inc. 1961) p. 15.
2. John Mbiti: African Religions and Philosophy (New York. Double-day and Company, Inc.) 1970.
3. Willie Abraham, The Mind of Africa p. 105-6 (Chicago 37 The University of Chicago Press) 1962.
4. See Robert Young, "Fatalism and Freedom" in an African Journal Second Order Vol. II 1973 p. 41.
5. Harry Sawyer, "God: Ancestor or Creator" aspects of traditional belief in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. p. 67 (London, Longman, 1970).