

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, 1963-2007 A Personal Reflection

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I was in the Philosophy department at the University of Nairobi in the summer of 1994, meeting whoever I could, buying all the books I could find, generally just trying to find out what interested the philosophers there. I had come to Kenya for the summer, not my first visit and certainly not my last, to help my partner at the time with her development work in Western Kenya. I'd already run into Jay van Hook, who introduced me to H. Odera Oruka, and I'd met Fred Ochieng Odhiambo and many others as well.

One day, another visitor of Oruka's dropped by the department. Emmanuel Eze was making a tour of major philosophers in Africa. We quickly found out that we had a great deal in common, as far as our academic interests and background were concerned. We talked about our training, mine in Canada and his in what was at the time Zaire, and then also at Fordham in New York. We stayed in touch when we were back in North America. It became clear to me, the more I read and the more I thought about our discussions, that African philosophy was much richer than I'd realized. I learned from Emmanuel the way to look at African philosophy as something other than a sub-specialty of philosophy, a small area of interest only to those who were brought up on the continent or were part of the diaspora. My interest at the time, and to this day, was with the question of how philosophy related to the conditions of the production of its concepts, as I've come to think of it, its place. Emmanuel asked me to work some of these concerns out by contributing a paper to a volume he was editing. That volume became *Postcolonial African Philosophy*.

I saw in Emmanuel someone whose concern was to develop a field, to make it robust, active, and impossible to ignore. He was constantly talking to people about this, and he knew just about everyone in the field, and many people in related fields. This energy and vision bore fruit. He raised the issue of how difficult it was to find out about activities in African philosophy, and out of that AFRI-PHIL was born. It began its life at Bucknell University, where he was at the time, and Frank Wilson and I were the first listmasters. When Frank retired, Julie Maybee agreed to be a listmaster, and it moved to CUNY Lehman, where it resides to this day. Emmanuel began talking to me and others about the transitory nature of publishing in African philosophy, how journals came and went, and how difficult it was to find a place to publish work in more mainstream journals. Out of that came *African Philosophy* (at the time a collaborative effort with SAPINA), which eventually became *Philosophia Africana* (which until his death came out of DePaul Philosophy Department, and will be finding a new home shortly).

The driving force of these initiatives, and many more, was Emmanuel's vision for the field, and for Africa. He was a rare mix, of someone with real philosophical insight and ability, along with a kind of academic entrepreneurial spirit. He made things happen. But more than that, I think what I found so significant about him as a person was his gentle intelligence. He knew more than he said, always, and he had a way of challenging you that made you feel better, rather than worse about your ideas. He expected

the best from those around him, and from himself, and I always enjoyed rising to his level when we discussed ideas.

If there is one abiding intellectual passion that Emmanuel had, it concerned the nature of reason. You might have thought that I would say “race”, and that, indeed, was one important focus for him, but what made it a focus was the way in which reason became “coloured” (to quote the title of one of his best known essays, “The Colour of Reason”) throughout its formative period in the European Enlightenment and to the present. You can see it in most of his published work, but you can also see it in how he conducted himself. This is the gentle intelligence I saw in him. He was adept at shining a light in the dark places of Enlightenment philosophy, showing the racial assumptions in the supposedly universal pronouncements on reason. His *Race and the Enlightenment* will stand as an essential volume in modern philosophy, and his *Achieving Our Humanity* will only become more appreciated as time goes by, I believe. And, his posthumous *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* is his most ambitious and careful attempt yet to work through the issue of how diversity is necessarily at the root of all rational activity. All these, along with his papers and other anthologies, have been centrally concerned with reconstructing reason.

That reconstruction did not amount to an abandonment, nor did it mean that he wanted to fragment reason into hermetically sealed compartments. He once accused me of something that I think applied better to him. He said “At the core, you’re an Enlightenment philosopher”. Despite the thoroughgoing critique he made of the Enlightenment heritage, I believe he actually meant this as a compliment, and as something that he felt was fundamentally important for himself as well. Reason mattered to him; the problem was, how do we not be naïve about the ways in which it has been used for domination, exclusion, and control? Where could we see models within traditional African social and political structures for a form of reason that had not fallen prey to the blinders of the European Enlightenment? How have these blinders continued throughout the 20th century, both in anthropology as well as in writers such as Habermas? How might we reason about Africa, while recognizing that the disciplinary forms of that reason over the past two hundred years have served European interests, not African ones, and have served to prolong the privilege inherent in much of Enlightenment reason? How has reason systematically mis-categorized its objects of inquiry (in particular the way in which racial categories infiltrated supposedly “universal” reason), and what might be done about that? And, how does individual reason relate to social and, especially, political structures?

The last time I saw him was in Johannesburg in October 07. We were both at an excellent conference on the future of African philosophy, hosted by Gerard Walmsley and St. Augustine Seminary. Emmanuel did the opening keynote, and established the standard for the conference. What touched me at the time was the sheer grace he exhibited to everyone throughout the conference. He was there for everyone, me included. He told me after my paper that “if I were his brother, he’d have to kill me” – his very amusing way of putting a compliment in terms of brotherly rivalry. But the thing was, I realized that in some small way we were brothers. At least, we’d been through a lot together, and we shared a strong sense of the importance of philosophy in Africa and in the diaspora, first for Africans, but also for the world of philosophy. He didn’t know at that point that his liver was failing him, and I recall thinking at the

time that I was looking forward to a long and fruitful collaboration with him on future projects.

When I heard he was gone, after the denial had subsided (“No, it must be another Emmanuel Eze, he would have said something...”) for some reason all I could think of was Derrida’s comment at the death of Deleuze: “I’m going to have to wander all alone” (see, for this, the *Work of Mourning*, which came out of a conference at DePaul). But I also went back to a memorial that Emmanuel and I wrote for Derrida, in *Philosophia Africana* (8:1, March 2005, 79-82), a piece that carried the epigram “Uprooted African am I”. Here’s how we finished that short piece:

In fact, when he wrote about debt – especially debt to the dead – Derrida came closest to revealing a unique strain of the “Afro”: he thinks that the dead belongs to the living as much as the living belongs to the dead. Once again, on the subject of mourning a friend who had died, he mused, “When I say Roland Barthes it is certainly him whom I name, him beyond his name. But since he himself is now inaccessible to this appellation ... it is him in me that I name, toward him in me, in you, in us that I pass through his name.” This is how, without any metaphysical or functional guarantees, the dead becomes, for the living, ancestors or the living dead. The living-dead are alive because *their* words, their works, earn a life in the words and works of those still capable to live death.

Emmanuel may not have chosen the term for himself, but for me, he is now an ancestor. He surely “earned a life in the words and works of those still capable to live death.” We have lost an original and important thinker, and a friend, and I will mourn him and miss him always.