

Identity in Africa / African identity!

Book Review

Bloom, L (1998) **Identity and ethnic relations in Africa**. Aldershot: Ashgate.
ISBN 1-84014-529-3.

*Kevin Durrheim
University of Natal
Pietermaritzburg*

I am probably not the best person to review Len Bloom's collection of essays. Although I share with him an interest in identity and social relations in Africa, we come from different worlds: geographically, theoretically, and generationally. At times I was astounded by the vigour of Bloom's political commitment to freedom and the manner in which he translated this politics into his everyday life. I found a companion social psychologist who insists on a political and politicised psychology. At the same time, I found myself baulking at some of his arguments, whose humanism and universalism seemed to be of a previous age.

The book consists of a collection of essays addressing diverse topics. The first two chapters consider what a relevant psychology in the "Third world" would look like. Bloom argues that such a psychology should rest on the universality of human emotional and cognitive processes, which are implicated in universal psychosocial problems, including alienation, aggression, sexuality, learned helplessness, and authoritarian political tendencies. On the basis of this universality, psychologists can bridge cultural and other differences between people by striving for "empathetic understanding", while being guided by a psychodynamic understanding of the good and healthy. In so doing psychology can play a crucial political role in probing "powerful ideologies that appear to be uncontrollable because they have deep emotional roots" (p21), thereby freeing people, individually and collectively, to deal rationally with their world. To be relevant, social scientists and the professions need to ask themselves "whose side are we on?" (p53), and engage in the "essential task. . . to remind governments and administrators of basic human needs and wants and of the many ways in which they can be harmed" (p45).

Chapters 3 through 5 develop the case for the relevance of psychoanalytic psychology for Africa. The argument proceeds in three stages. First, psychotherapy is argued to be universally applicable, not a culturally-specific "white man's *juju*". In presenting brief case studies, Bloom draws from over 20 years of experience as a psychotherapist in West, East and South Africa, as well as in Britain, to show that psychotherapy works in basically the same way everywhere. Rather than being a particular cultural

phenomenon, psychotherapy becomes a means to achieving “a full understanding of culture” by examining “the defence mechanisms, sublimations and patterns of repression by which individuals deal with the tensions and anxieties of becoming ‘civilised’” (p65). The aim of the therapy is to help “patients ... liberate themselves from irrational and unconscious obstacles to freedom” (p85). Second, Bloom argues that cultural fragmentation in Africa has resulted in heightened mental and emotional distress, which should be understood to have psychodynamic causes and consequences. The causes are variously identified as anomie, authoritarianism, aggression, and changing and contradictory norms and values, which in Bloom’s opinion have resulted (in Nigeria, at least) in an Eriksonian lack of trust, narcissism and infantile fixation. Third, Bloom interprets African (and other) ethnicities and nationalisms as forms of collective narcissism which psychoanalytic psychology could presumably resolve by informing policy which encourages “emotionally satisfying” relations between people. This would involve nurturing a sociality based on spontaneous, competent, trusting and creative “true selves” in place of compliant and conforming “false selves” that submit to the phantasy of the nation of ethnic group. This is not some racist argument about an essential Africanness, but is an historically situated account of collective identity which has been formed as a “political construction, or a weapon in political warfare” (p106). In the context of oppression, where “a people are forced to deny their history by a dominating group”, they may engage in denial by retreating “into a phantasy collective identity, and will construct an historical myth to justify it” (p112). In all three arguments, psychodynamic psychology is relevant to Africa both as a cure and a means of understanding.

The final four chapters of the book deal with the emotional costs and damage of apartheid, and consider ways in which these can be solved. The focus is mainly (predictably) on children who have been traumatized and depersonalized by apartheid, by distant, authoritarian and inadequate parenting, and by violent role models. The consequences of growing up in such a context include emotional insecurity and identity confusion. Repairing this emotional damage implies nothing less than “recreating individuals and their relationships with society” (p124). Bloom suggests that this can be done through education which stimulates independence, self-confidence, self-esteem, and basic skills, and recommends that teachers be trained to encourage freedom. He also proposes institutional changes where “issues that concern the lives of children should be removed from the control of the police, courts and other personnel whose training and emotional allegiance is to the penal system rather than to the children” (p136).

Radical intervention is required, and this is what Len Bloom has undertaken in his personal life. In chapter 8 of the book he tells the tale of his quasi-family: how he took in three black “street children” in 1992 while staying in a “conservative cathedral town” in South Africa. In addition to providing for the material needs of these young boys, the family became a “quasi-therapeutic group” “where we are free to express our feelings to each other and the boys are developing a positive sense of self, in which their confidence, self-esteem, independence and ability to give and take love, give them a realistic expectation that they will survive their futures” (p177). From this experience, which prompted Bloom to reconsider his own prejudices, he concludes that cultural and social differences between groups are not insurmountable obstacles to empathy and understanding. Moreover, the intense transference and counter transference relations

within this family suggests that psychodynamic psychotherapy is possible and effective across culture divides. Although the book ends with brief reflections on the TRC as a medium for collective therapy, the personal narrative of chapter is a most engaging and convincing highlight of the book.

There is much that could be said in critique of the book, but this would be dry theoretical, political and methodological reflection which cannot really do justice to the passion for mental health and freedom that Bloom expresses in this book. I will limit myself to four brief observations. First, I am less convinced by the universality of human psychological processes than Bloom. He seems to gloss over or ignore counter arguments which show that universalism has been the means by which Eurocentric and sexist accounts of the normal have been imposed on others. Also, besides anecdotal evidence from a few case studies, the book provides no evidence for universals in psychodynamic and developmental processes. In any case, claims such as “An African’s depression feels the same as a non-African’s, a woman’s feels the same as a man’s (p73), are indefensible (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953). Second, throughout the text, stark contrasts are drawn between illusory beliefs (myth or phantasy) and those beliefs that are grounded in and correspond with reality (cf. p83). The aim of social transformation should be to “replace phantasy thinking with realistic thinking” (p135). Such self assured distinctions between myth and reality and correspondence theory of truth seem somewhat anachronistic, and certainly require critical reflection and defence. Thirdly, there are uncomfortable slippages between individual and collective levels on analysis, as processes of individual pathology and adjustment are transposed, without theoretical modification, onto collectives, and the focus of social psychology is limited to “how individuals respond as individuals to their experiences of power” (pxi). Thus, when discussing the “colonial mentality”, it is argued that “to remain fixated in the past is to remain fixated in infancy and to refuse to grow up” (p98). This may be true of (some) individuals, but the insight transports to societies and collectives with great difficulty. Finally, it is possible to find in the book traces of crypto-racism which Bloom accuses others of. This is a consequence of the three issues raised above, which allow the author to position himself, at times, as an aloof external observer and judge. For example, I don’t think it is correct to describe South Africa as “an intensely cramped narcissistic society and culture” (p124), nor would I agree that in Africa (or elsewhere) “culture” “appears to carry no noticeably deep pride nor sense of belonging, nor is it accompanied by any sensitivity to discriminating rubbish from the worthwhile” (p99).

Is the book worth reading? Certainly. It made me stop and question many basic assumptions that I hold about the politics and practice of psychology in Africa; and showed me alternative models of intellectual struggle. This is a text that psychological practitioners and students in Africa should read. However, I am still not convinced that the psychodynamic orientation is the cornerstone of a relevant psychology in Africa.

REFERENCE.

Wittgenstein, L (1953) **Philosophical investigations.** (Trans. G EM Anscombe). Oxford: Blackwell.