

LIVING TOGETHER : AFRICAN COMMUNITY-BASED VALUES IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison was born February 19, 1931 Chloe Anthony Wofford, in Lorain, Ohio, to George Wofford and Ramah Willis. Her parents had moved to the North to escape Southern racism. She spent her childhood in the Midwest. During this period, she learnt many folktales and black folk culture from her parents and also from the close black neighbourhood. Later, when she started her writing career, she drew from this background to probe inter/intra-racial relationships, as well as treat such themes as the individual versus the community.

In pre-colonial West Africa and in the slave communities the community overshadowed the individual because survival depended on group cohesion and solidarity. However, Morrison claims that the capitalistic thrust of recent decades is dispersing that sense of community. She deplors that state of things in her interview with Charles Ruas:

This civilisation of black people, which was underneath the white civilization was there with its everything. Everything of that civilization was not worth hanging on to; but some of it was and nothing has taken its place while it is being dismantled. There is a new capitalistic modern American black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration¹

Morrison's concern in her writings is mainly to show the richness of the past and its confrontation with new values. In her probing into the past, Morrison examines the traditional West African familial pattern and communal solidarity. The idea that various aspects of West African cultures survived in America is common knowledge today. So this paper does not have the sociological ambition of identifying more African survivals in Black Americans' way of life. We shall rather be concerned with Morrison's use of West African traditional communal values as an alternative to Black Americans' blind assimilation to or radical separation from western values in their search for identity in America. In our examination of those African communal values in the context of *Song of Solomon*, we shall first cast a look at the African familial pattern including the role of women in family organization. Then, we shall try and see the important role of African communal solidarity.

I- The African Family pattern

The African familial pattern conflicts with European norms because of its extended notion and the place accorded to women.

I.1- The notion of extended family

In his study of the black family in America, Andrew Billingsley distinguishes three types of families: nuclear, extended and augmented families.² Nuclear families only comprise the husband, his wife and their children. As for extended

families, they take into account the parents and the relatives of the two spouses. Augmented families include members who are not even related to the nuclear family but who share the same household with them.

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison rejects the nuclear familial type represented by the Deads and the Fosters. In Morrison's sense it is Pilate who has the best grasp of family relations. She lives with her daughter and her granddaughter. She introduces her nephew Milkman to her granddaughter Hagar calling him "her brother" rather than her "cousin". The argument that ensues shows the difference of views between Pilate and her daughter Reba. While Reba and Hagar define the notion of brotherhood in terms of the nuclear family Pilate focuses on affective relations. For her there is no difference between a brother and cousin because "you treat them both the same" (P.44).

Pilate's point calls to mind the African notion of brotherhood in the extended family. The African notion of family includes the whole lineage of the couple and their in-laws. Sometimes, people from the same village or the same region will call each other brothers and sisters. As a consequence, this notion of brotherhood or sisterhood reinforces the sense of community and solidarity in the village or the region.

Morrison adheres to the African notion of family. In her interview with Charles Ruas she expresses her scorn for the nuclear familial pattern which is more typical of western culture. She said:

I remember I had to read the bible to my grandmother when she was dying, and somebody assigned me to do that ... It is important that my children participate in that ... That's part of knowing who they are and where they come from. It enhances them in a particular way, and when they have children of their own it won't be this little nuclear you and me, babe³

In *Song of Solomon* Pilate tries to recreate that African family type. She lives in the same house as her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. Since Pilate knows the nurturing quality of the extended family she tries to reconnect with her brother Macon with whom she had lost touch for

years. That's why Pilate put an end to her wandering life and headed for Michigan where her brother lived. She knew that "the child, Hagar, needed family, people, a life very different from what she and Reba could offer" (P.151).

So, Pilate wanted to give Hagar a chance, which Macon's inhospitality denied her. Late in the novel when Hagar nearly goes out of her mind because her lover Milkman has abandoned her, the narrator notes that part of her misfortune stems from her alienation from the nurturing quality of the extended family and the community :

She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbours, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her-and the humor with which to live it (P.307).

The unavailability of such a structure favoured Hagar's psychological instability which led to her death. Even the love of her humane grandmother couldn't replace the need for the community. The all-importance of the community in children education is an offshoot of the West African extended family.

The West African family type is community-based. Even marriage is not a private affair. As example, Jean Marie Keletigui notes that among the Tangbana of Côte d'Ivoire marriage is viewed as an alliance between two families rather than between two people.⁴ As a consequence, the children who result from such a marriage are the children of the community. So, one's responsibility is to all the children of the community on account of the complex family ties which bind all the members of the group. Such a structure offers psychological support to the children because they are assured of the presence of a family member wherever they go. In this respect, there is an Igbo proverb that "The rearing of a child is not a job for one person, nor is a child a child for only one person."⁵

The African family type conflicts with the western nuclear type represented in the novel by the Deads and the Fosters. Doctor Foster lived with his wife and single daughter Ruth in the big mansion on Doctor Street. When her mother died Ruth

transferred all her love on her father to such an extent that their relation had incestuous overtones. (P.23). The lack of an extended family favoured these incestuous contacts for no one could check on the relationships between father and daughter once the big gates on Doctor Street were closed. In addition, the lack of relatives made Ruth consider her father as the center of the universe and when he died she had difficulty making it without him. Hence, her necrophiliac visits to Fairfield Cemetery to lie on her father's grave in order to "re-ignite" the affection that he had for her (P.124). Had Ruth benefited from the support of an extended family the loss of her father would have appeared less cruel.

Similarly, Macon Dead's family is restricted to its immediate members. There are no grandparents who might instruct the children in folk ways or tell them about the days of yore. As a consequence, First Corinthians and Magdalene become alienated from their culture. However, Milkman who was at first under the influence of his immediate family eventually discovers the family of his father's sister which functions as his extended family. And owing to Pilate, Milkman casts away his father's capitalistic and individualistic principles to embrace the communal values of black people.

I.2 - The Role of Women in the Family Organization

Scholars have lengthily discussed the effects of slavery on the black family organization. While some aspects of the African family organization were destroyed by slavery others resisted and were reinforced by the peculiar institution.

In the main, slavery reinforced the outstanding role of women in the family. As Herskovits rightly observed, in the matrilineal system of the Ashanti

of the Gold Coast for example the mother was the central figure; the children belonged to the family of the mother and could only inherit from their maternal uncle, not from their father. Even in the patrilineal family organization of the Yoruba of Nigeria or the tribes of Dahomey, Herskovits further notes, the polygamous system favoured the centrality of the mother's role because it was to her that the children's education was assigned. In the new world slavery reinforced the central position of the mother in the family organisation since families were split up most of the time with the mother staying with younger children. In addition, she had an important economic role. As Herskovits noted in his study of African and African-American cultures, the important economic role played by women in West Africa was reinforced under slavery because the plantation system did not discriminate between a male and female slave. Herskovits further noted that this economic independence of women led to their sexual independence because they no longer depended on their husbands.¹

Morrison's characterization of Pilate in *Song of Solomon* fits in with the West African image of womanhood. She is strong and imposing. Milkman noted that: "She was as tall as his father, head and shoulders taller than himself" (P.38). In addition, her economic independence which she gained from selling wine parallels the economic status of West African women. In this respect, Herskovits notes that in West Africa business is mostly in the hands of women who sell goods in the marketplace, and that economic independence gives them a position of authority in the family. Hence, they can break from their husbands whenever they desired because marriage is not seen as an everlasting contract. Herskovits further notes that it is this independence which is the major difference between the West African and the European notion of womanhood, for the European woman is wholly dependent on her husband.² True to his image, Pilate stands in sharp contrast with Ruth who seems to represent the European model of womanhood. The narrator captures Ruth's dominated position in the following passage:

¹ Charles Ruas. "Toni Morrison" in *Conversation with American Writers*. New-York: A. Knopf, 1985. P. 223

² Andrew Billinsley. *Black Families in White America*. New-Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1968. P.16

³ Charles Ruas. Op Cit. P. 229.

⁴ Jean-Marie Keletigui. *Le S noufo face au cosmos*. Abidjan, Dakar: NEA. 1978. P. 36.

⁵ Gay Wilentz. *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and in the Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992. P. 3.

Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear... Ruth began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it (P.10-11).

A shadowy figure, Ruth is wholly dependent on her husband Macon who lords it over her. Ruth's delicate frame, her submissiveness and dependence on her father and later on her husband make her a victim of her milieu in which she feels "pressed... small" (P.124). It is only on crucial occasions when she has no choice that Ruth shows her willpower. As an example, she is "energized" when she hears that Hagar is about to kill Milkman who represents "the last occasion she had been made love to" (P.134). Similarly she confronts Macon to get the necessary amount of money to organize decent funerals for Hagar.

Another trait of the African family organization pertains to people's attitude toward "illegally-born" children. In his study of African and black American cultures Herskovits notes that the black family differs from the European type with regard to the role assigned to women and the great number of illegally-born children.³ Morrison recreates this "pathological" family structure in *Song of Solomon*. Pilate has not married the father of Reba. Likewise, Reba has a daughter but no husband. Macon Dead II, who has the same prejudices as mainstream Americans is ashamed of the fact that "(His sister)... had a daughter but no husband and that daughter had a daughter but no husband" (P.20).

Macon's world view contrasts with the ideas widespread in Africa that a child, even born out of wedlock, is a blessing⁴. The West African attitude toward children born in extra marital relations may be explained by their concern for the continuity of the family lineage. This attitude can be seen in various parts of Africa. As an example, among the Mayombé of the Congo the bridegroom is required to get the bride pregnant before his marriage request is accepted. This precaution is taken to ascertain that the couple will be productive and bear many offspring.⁵ Thus, the great emphasis on childbearing overshadows the importance of the child's origin. In her study of African survivals in America, Joyce Ladner has found that this

conception of childbearing has survived in America, especially among rural Blacks who consider that "there is an inherent value that children cannot be illegally born".⁶

Just like her African sisters, Pilate does not feel ashamed in the least by her having a fatherless child. For her the continuity of the family lineage is of paramount importance. We can guess that from her efforts to trigger Milkman's birth on the grounds that Macon ought to have a son or "this be the end of us" (P.125).

In another respect, Pilate's refusal to marry Reba's father stemmed from her desire for freedom. She did not want to be dependent on a man like Ruth because she thought that she would suffer if Reba's father abandoned her on discovering that she had no navel.

II- The African community-based Solidarity

In traditional West Africa a wide range of proverbs and tales give expression to the importance accorded to community-based solidarity.

"Give me your pipe, and I will give you my matches"⁷, an Agni proverb says. And a Bambara proverb says: "What am I without the others? I came into the world in their hands and, in their hands I shall depart".⁸

A Songhaï proverb states: "both hands need each other to get clean".⁹

In the context of traditional West Africa, community-based solidarity pervaded every aspect of social life. The community was treated as a body and, as such, an offence committed by one individual could have far-reaching consequences on all the members of the community. In her study of the Agni societies of southern Côte d'Ivoire, Linda Stevenson noted that in the Agni group as well as in most West African societies, a great emphasis is laid on the group. As she remarked,

*The individual is only a part of the community configuration; he both reaps the benefits and shares in the misfortunes of others, and even in the guilt of their misdeeds*¹⁰

What Stevenson has witnessed among the Agni is illustrated by a proverb which has it that

“the lizard alone does not carry the burden of his own excrement”¹¹. A similar communal solidarity pervades the Igbo society of eastern Nigeria. In Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s killing of a member of his clan was viewed as an offence against the Earth goddess. His act might have damageable consequences for the whole tribe because the elders say that “if one finger brought oil, it soiled the others”¹². As a consequence, this sense of solidarity creates a feeling of security in the members of the group because they know that they might rely on the support of everybody in case of misfortune. Keletigui in his study of Senoufo Tagbana culture remarked that the first thought that comes to the mind of a Tagbana at the sight of an unfortunate person is “doesn’t he have people?”¹³

The West Africans’ sense of community stems to large extent from the belief in the unity of all the natural elements. Among the Bambara for instance, every natural disaster is thought to be the consequences of somebody’s violation of the sacred codes of nature, which creates an imbalance in the cosmic order.¹⁴ In such a system the individual is bound to pattern his behaviour on the prescription of the tradition because he knows that his misdeeds will affect the whole community, not himself alone. So, he somewhat feels responsible for the welfare of the group. This conception contrasts with the western worldview in which the accent is laid on the individual’s liberty and responsibility. In this respect Linda Stevenson comments: “Rugged individualism is a western notion while sharing is the essence of the West African tradition”¹⁵

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison urges the black community to return to their traditional sense of community and solidarity through the depiction of her model character Pilate. Pilate cares most about communal links. Her sense of solidarity is summed up in the following observation by her father: “If I got a home, you got one too”. (P.235). Unlike Macon who based his relationships on profit, Pilate made human relationships a paramount concern. As the narrator notes: “She never had a visitor to whom she did not offer food before one word of conversation – business or social – began”. (P.149)

Pilate’s sense of hospitality can be traced back into the West African tradition. In that tradition hospitality is a sacred duty. Hampaté Ba observed this custom among Malian and Senegalese tribes.¹ One would give water or cola nuts to visitors before asking them the motive for their visit. Hampaté Ba further explained that the roots of this custom lie in ancestor-worshipping: in the same way as one sprinkles water on the ground before asking the ancestors’ assistance or protection, one must give water to anyone who comes in for a visit before conversing with him. Keletigui noted the same sense of hospitality among the Tagbana, for people would deprive themselves in order to feed strangers because it is believed that any stranger who calls in might be “a messenger of God”.² Apart from her hospitability and solidarity Pilate appears as the messianic figure that will bring the protagonist from his individualistic perception of life to a deep sense of community by offering him her life as a model.

At the outset, when Pilate instigated Milkman’s birth her concern was about perpetuating the community and the Dead family lineage. She didn’t even care about her brother’s inhospitality. “He ought to have a son”, she declared, “or this be the end of us” (P.125). When the child was born, Pilate’s lessons were meant to lead him toward his African heritage. In this connection, her name was often mispronounced “Pilot”, thus alluding to “Piloting” role in Milkman’s life.

¹ Melville Herskovits. *L’héritage du Noir: mythe ou réalité*. Trans. Arnold Grémy. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1966. P. 88; P. 196.

² *Ibid.* P. 208.

³ *Ibid.* P. 208.

⁴ *Ibid.* P. 194.

⁵ N. De Cleene. “La famille dans l’organisation sociale du Mayombé”. *Africa Vol X*, n°1, (1937);

⁶ Joyce Ladner. *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow*. Qtd in *Binding Cultures*. P.70. Op. cit. New-York: Doubleday, 1972.

⁷ Linda Stevenson, “Agni Proverbs”. *African Arts Vol VI*, n°3 (spring 1973), P. 54.

⁸ Harris Memel Foté. *Le système politique des Adioukrous*. Unpublished paper presented for the doctoral degree at the University of Abidjan. November, 1969.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Linda Stevenson, Op. cit. P. 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.* P. 53

¹² Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, New-York: Fawcett Crest, 1959, P. 118-119.

¹³ Jean-Marie Keletigui, Op. Cit. PP. 43-44.

¹⁴ Amadou Hampate Ba, Op. Cit. P.136.

¹⁵ Linda Stevenson. Op. Cit. P. 53.

¹ Amadou Hampate Ba, Op. Cit. P. 118.

² Jean-Marie Keletigui. Op. Cit. P. 40.

From her father's posthumous messages Pilate knows that "a human life is precious. You shouldn't fly off and leave it" (P.208). However, Milkman's individualistic perception of life makes it impossible for him to digest Pilate's notions of community-based solidarity. He does not feel concerned by other people's problems. For instance, when his father tells him the troubles of his household, Milkman does not feel concerned by his story:

He felt curiously disassociated from all that he had heard. As though a stranger that he'd sat next to on a park bench had turned to him and begun to relate some intimacy (P.74).

Similarly, Milkman does not feel concerned about the racial problems affecting the black community; so his friend Guitar reproaches him with his lack of commitment: "If things ever got tough, you'd melt you're not a serious person, Milkman" (P.104).

Another indication of Milkman's lack of commitment is his desire to go for a solo flight. So, when he sets out for his gold hunt by plane Milkman thinks that commitment to other people prevents freedom:

In the air, away from real life; he felt free, but on the ground ...

The wings of all those other people's nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him (P.220).

Milkman's terming other people's desires "nightmares" is also indicative of his self-absorption. However, Milkman's first contacts with southern Black show his gradual interest in human relations. First in Danville when Reverend Cooper tells him that he knows his people, Milkman feels relieved because he thinks that he is going to locate the gold cave but he also ponders on the notion of "people" or kinship because, as he said, "he hadn't known what it meant: links" (P.293). However, late in the novel, after the cleansing ordeal of the hunt Milkman sees his connection with the Shalimar community:

He didn't feel close to them but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody (P.292-293).

At this stage Milkman is unaware of the fact that Shalimar is the soil of his ancestor Solomon, a man to whom all the Shalimar inhabitants claim kinship. However, the ring game played by the children sheds light on the mystery of his family history. Thus, after piecing together the bits of information that he gathered from Susan Byrd, a relative of his grandmother Sing, Milkman can easily guess the story of Solomon: Solomon was an African slave who fled one day like a bird to his African homeland leaving his wife Ryna and twenty one children in toil and trouble. He tried to take Milkman's grandfather with him but the child slipped and fell down. Jake was taken by an Indian woman named Heddy who raised him since Ryna had lost her mind by dint of crying. Having deciphered the story Milkman understands that Pilate had misunderstood her father's posthumous messages.

Nevertheless, when Milkman returns to Michigan with his new-found treasure he does not receive from Pilate the "warm embrace" that he expected. Instead, Pilate knocks him down and throws him into her cellar. Milkman guesses that Hagar died when he left. At this stage Milkman becomes aware of the real implication of Solomon's flight.

At the very beginning when Milkman heard the story of Solomon's flight he was overwhelmed by that incredible gift, partly because it was the realisation of his childhood desire to fly. But now Milkman understands that Solomon's flight is a negative pattern of flight. By considering it from the perspective of those Solomon left behind, Milkman sees its selfishness:

He left Ryna behind and twenty children... And Ryna had thrown herself all over the ground, lost her mind, and was still crying in a ditch. Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children! (P. 332).

Milkman understands that even if Solomon's flight means glory and escape from toil it also means desertion and denial of communal ties. By implication Milkman sees the selfishness in his desertion of Hagar but all that he can do now is accept responsibility for her death. So he accepts Pilate's "version of punishment" by taking a box filled with Hagar's hair as a token of guilt.

Milkman's acceptance of Hagar's hair is interesting in many ways: before dying, Hagar had told Pilate that Milkman did not love her because of her hair and her skin colour and her eyes. As she put it, Milkman preferred "silky hair the color of a penny ... lemon colored skin... gray-blue eyes and thin nose" (P.315-316). So, by accepting Hagar's hair Milkman accepts his own blackness. Now, Milkman's understanding of the importance of communal ties enables him to confront Guitar in the closing pages of the novel. After his failed attempt to kill Milkman in the Shalimar woods Guitar mistakenly shoots Pilate on the second attempt.

This episode reinforces our understanding of Pilate's love for her family and her community: mindless of the blood spurting from her neck, Pilate concerns herself with Reba's future by asking Milkman to take care of her. In addition, Pilate's legacy to the Shalimar population into which she had "blended" at her arrival is a message of love: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all" (P.336).

On account of Pilate's incredible capacity for love Milkman wishes that "there's got to be at least one more woman like her" (P.336).

This episode is also full of symbols. When the birds snatch the ear-ring containing Pilate's name they symbolically point to her ability to fly spiritually. In the same way, Milkman risks his life by flying toward Guitar out of love and commitment for the dead Pilate:

As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of

his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it (P.337).

Milkman's flight is not like Smith's flight; his is an affirmative flight illustrated by the lodestar imagery. In the same way as the lodestar is suspended in the sky Milkman is suspended in the air and so, he does not fall like Smith. Milkman flies both in the literal and symbolic sense because he is ready to die for his community. Both Milkman and Guitar are willing to die out of love and commitment for their ideals. So, their confrontation becomes the duel between two opposing loves and worldviews. However, there is hope and life in Milkman's love as echoed by the rocks in his final confrontation with Guitar: "Tar tar tar.../ Am am am.../ Life life life" (P.337).

This message invites the black community to emulate the values inherent in "tar" or blackness because of the life-affirming quality of African culture. And, by implication, it identifies Guitar's commitment to the Seven Days as distorted love which is doomed to death and destruction. However, the unachieved ending of the confrontation between Milkman and Guitar parallels the unresolved conflict between the two strategies in real life.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, Morrison's exploration of black Americans' West African-inherited values and traditions is meant to reveal the richness of black life. These values add a spiritual dimension to the sterility of modern life because they offer humanity and freedom. Just as they ensured the survival of the black communities throughout the indignities of slavery, the African community-based values are paramount to the building of a more integrated black life in America.

Although Morrison claims that it is in their own culture that black people can find their sense of identity, she does not idealize the old ways. Morrison's treatment of black people's African-inherited culture is mixed. Pilate was abandoned

by the pickers because they thought that she was "something God never made". In the same way, Freddie was abandoned by his people because he was born in odd circumstances. Although Morrison claims that black people don't suppress evil in the way of "tarring and killing", there is a hint that not all their deeds are life-affirming.

Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe raises a similar question in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. Obierika the friend of the novel's protagonist ponders on the odd facets of the tradition: "He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed".¹

Among the Igbo the birth of twins was considered an offense against the Earth goddess; so Obierika had to throw his children away for fear of calling the deity's wrath down upon the whole community.

For Morrison these traditions must be adapted. That's why Pilate her ideal figure is able to deal with modern life as well as traditional life. Pilate selects in the two ways of life what offers freedom and strength. In this respect, she enjoys book learning, especially Geography as her first days in school reveal (P.141) but she rejects empty notions like "table manners" (P.149).

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