

When Worlds Collide: A Tale of Belonging and Un-Belonging

Book Review: Camara Laye, *L'enfant noir*, Plon, Paris, 1953, 256 pages

Josef Pieper, a twentieth-century expositor of Thomist thought, describes a world as the range of conscious relations a person has with the things and people outside the confines of his self.¹ The community is often a major constituent of any person's world. However, the nexus among the communities to which many Africans belong – among his and his spouse's tribes; between his rural home and his urban environment; among family, colleagues, different groups of friends and acquaintances – occasions the familiar conflict one experiences on finding oneself subject to divergent obligations to various groups of people. Sometimes, these clashes are easily resolvable; at other times, however, each demands his whole attention for itself with a jealous love, and to heed either is to distance oneself from the other. To belong to one group is to carve the other out of his heart.

In the autobiographical novel *L'enfant noir*, Camara Laye explores the dramatic tension between his family and native community on the one hand and the demands of urban life on the other. The protagonist's growth from early childhood to young manhood is accompanied by a parallel gradual increase in the opposition between his ties to his family in his village in Kouroussa (Guinea) and the siren song of the progressive world of Conakry (Guinea) and France. This trajectory mirrors the deepening profundity of his own experience of this painful rift. Each of the book's twelve chapters is a marvel of poetic, passionate, and vivid prose, interspersing the narration of events with lyrical reflections about a wide range of subjects: love, community, adulthood, friendship, paternity, and religion, to name a few.

It is hard to think of another book written so fluidly and with such profundity that addresses themes so prominent in the consciousness of Kenyan youths today. The child of the absentee or emotionally distant father; the urban youth struggling with a cultural separation from a people whom he or she wants to be able to call his own, but cannot; the desperate person who finds himself enslaved to pleasure at the cost of great harm to his loved ones – all these people will discover in this book a treasure trove of searing, beautiful insights.

Of all the ideas that shine forth in the narrative, belonging stands out most prominently. First, Laye shows that belonging has its source in the love that others have towards oneself. As a child, he receives the tender affection of his father and uncle, the deep love of his mother underlying her sharp rebukes, the love of women who treat him as their son because he is the grandson of a member of their community, and his reception by the men of that community who permit him to work with them and experience the identical pleasure of completing a common task together. All this love he receives from them willingly – belonging is a reciprocal action. It requires more than one subject.

¹ Pieper J, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2009, 93-108.

However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that the structure of belonging is *not* simply giver-recipient or lover-beloved. The protagonist's transition to adulthood occurs through a rite of circumcision. In a soaring intuition, Laye penetrates the ceremony to reveal its full significance: 'Life gushes forth from spilled blood!'.² This transition is the beginning of a new life, the same life of those who had loved him during the long years of his childhood, a life whose substance is self-sacrificing love. Only then would his belonging be complete. In the relationship of belonging, each person must be both giver *and* recipient, both lover *and* beloved. Each must bleed for the other.

Yet Laye makes his most profound reflections on belonging in connection not with communal life, but rather with family life. Indeed, the bonds among members of a community appear to be but an extension of the love that has its origin in the family. It is in relation to the frustrated love of a man for a woman (he gives to it the name of a love far deeper than mere sensual desire – he calls it 'friendship') that he elucidates most clearly the need we have of a love that freely gives itself:

When I sometimes think about this friendship, and I often think about it, I often dream about it – I always dream about it! – it seems to me that there was nothing in the course of these years that had surpassed it, nothing in these years of exile that had warmed my heart more. And it was not, as I have said, that I lacked affection; my aunts and uncles were then fully affectionate with me; but I was in that age when the heart is not satisfied until it has found something to cherish, and when it tolerates its discovery only in the absence of all constraint, except its own, more powerful, more imperious than all other constraints. But aren't we always a little bit in this age, aren't we always a little bit devoured by this craving? Yes, do we ever have a truly peaceful heart?³

And it is in relation to his separation from his parents that he asserts the identity of the lover and the object of his beloved, saying that 'I found myself as if torn apart from myself!'⁴ To belong is to become susceptible to a pain so intense and 'frightening'⁵ that only a belonging that lasts beyond death can allay the fear. Here, the author's reflections cease. Overcoming this pain is not a topic the author addresses – perhaps it was unaddressed in his life as well.

If feeling the richness of human love gives strength and fulfillment, the experience of its incompleteness and fragility is an unmistakable sign that one must either transcend the earthly and encounter an all-loving God or content oneself with a love incapable of justifying the suffering it leaves in its wake, a love that never completely satisfies our inner restlessness, a love only dimly reflected in the love of man and woman or the love of parent and child. But because these loves reflect the Love that truly fulfills, they, too, are valuable. One may even consider them a foretaste of the encounter with this undying Love, the love of an all-loving, omnipotent God. And because this Love is undying and omnipotent, it continues to exist even

² Laye C, *L'enfant noir*, Paris, Plon, 1953, 140 (translated by reviewer).

³ *ibid.*, 202 (translated by reviewer).

⁴ *ibid.*, 256 (translated by reviewer).

⁵ *ibid.*, 234 (translated by reviewer).

amid the pain of separation from earthly loves and gives a justification for this pain. Laye does not explore this dimension, but we may call his work a foretaste of it too.

These are truths that Kenyans of all ages need to rediscover. The fatherless child needs to discover the tenderness of a father's love and to know that there is a place where he can find it. The father needs to learn to love unreservedly, infusing, but not replacing, his masculine strength with affection. The youth who does not know his place in the world must learn to regard as brother and sister and mother and father all those to whom he is tied by kinship, citizenship, and shared humanity in common. And all need to learn that the face of love is sacrifice and that we find the strength to love, even though it means we have to suffer, because we know ourselves to be God's dearly beloved.