

Sifting the Situated Self: Serequeberhan's Radical African Hermeneutics as a Methodology for Philosophical Counselling

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Abstract

Philosophical counselling proposes to examine life through philosophical frameworks and concepts. When practiced and actualised in postcolonial African contexts, however, this commitment encounters a specific challenge: the counselee who arrives at the session is not a neutral, universal, or ahistorical subject. They are a *situated self*, constituted through their relations to community, a living past, and a historical horizon shaped by the particular tensions of the postcolonial present. This paper argues that Tsenay Serequeberhan's radical African hermeneutics, and specifically his double task of African philosophy accompanied by three processes, offers a methodology suitable for this task. It constitutes a hermeneutical orientation that operates on three levels: the philosophical counsellor's epistemological stance before they enter a session, the collaborative movement within the session, and the goal toward which the session moves. Demonstrating this orientation, the paper offers a situated hermeneutic re-reading of an existing philosophical counselling case study.

Keywords: Tsenay Serequeberhan; African hermeneutics; philosophical counselling; double task; sifting; fertilization

Introduction

The counselee (guest/conversational partner) arrives at the philosophical counselling session always already situated, embedded within a specific historical, cultural, and political *horizon* shaped by what African philosopher Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994) calls the experiential horizon of a specific lifeworld. The counselee's horizon is not merely a static backdrop of their concerns but constitutive of them: the concepts they use to make sense of their lifeworld are sedimentations of a living history that the counselee inhabits, and through which they speak even before reflection starts (SEREQUEBERHAN 2015; 2024; cf., OKERE 1983; COLOMBETTI & BOGOTÁ 2024). Moreover, the *situated self*, that is, the situated counselee, is rarely isolated or self-contained as they are constituted through relations, the community, the living past, and the horizon of meaning from which its questions and concerns arise (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994; ADAMS 2018; COLOMBETTI & BOGOTÁ 2024). The philosophical counsellor consequently engages the counselee as historically constituted, as being part of a web of interconnected relations within which that reasoning is always already embedded. The task that is demanded from the philosophical counsellor in this encounter is what I want to refer to, following Serequeberhan, as a *sifting*: the

careful examination of what is present in the counselee's horizon, where it comes from, what is living and what is not, and what can be built (fertilised) from what remains.

Philosophical counselling, especially as envisioned by the likes of Gerd Achenbach (2024) and Shlomit Schuster (1995), significantly contributes to the value of living a more examined life and addressing everyday problems with the help of all that philosophy has to offer. This paper, however, argues that when philosophical counselling is practiced within postcolonial African contexts, the situated counselee demands a corresponding situated methodology. That is, what is required is a methodology that adequately addresses the specific historical depth of the horizon from which the counselee speaks. I argue that Serequeberhan's radical African hermeneutics, and specifically his double task of African philosophy with its three accompanying processes, offers just such a methodology. What emerges is a potentially richer philosophical counselling practice that addresses the counselee's situation at the level of historicity itself. Demonstrating this in practice, the paper offers a re-reading of an existing case study from within the philosophical counselling literature, explicitly asking what Serequeberhan's methodology surfaces that the original reading did not pursue.

I proceed as follows. In the first section of this paper, I establish through Serequeberhan's reading of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer why the historical constitution of the counselee's horizon belongs at the centre of the philosophical counselling session. In the second section, I develop Serequeberhan's double task and its three processes as a methodology for philosophical counselling. In the third section, I illustrate this methodology in practice by re-reading a case study from Schuster's influential early work on philosophical counselling, demonstrating what a situated hermeneutic approach reveals in her case study. In doing so, the paper argues that a philosophical counselling session committed to its own hermeneutical approach, wherever it is practiced, cannot treat the historical constitution of the counselee's horizon as peripheral, especially not in African postcolonial contexts. In the final section, I briefly discuss potential limitations to this approach, stemming partly from the scarcity of case studies in postcolonial African contexts.

Allowing History to Enter the Counselling Room

Proponents of philosophical counselling maintain to some extent that its practice can bring the counselee into contact with all that philosophy has to offer, with the philosophical counsellor living their philosophy, or in some instances *being philosophy incarnated* (SCHUSTER 1995; RAABE 2001; WALSH 2005; ACHENBACH 2024). In a very concrete sense, then, philosophical counselling has helped many counselees and even philosophical counsellors to lead more philosophical ways of living, taking philosophy out of the ivory tower and bringing it back to the general public – the agora, the marketplace of ideas, or what some African philosophers refer to as the *philosophical village* (CHIMAKONAM 2018). This is a worthwhile commitment and one that I do not challenge in this paper. The question this paper raises, however, is whether the concepts brought to bear in philosophical counselling sessions are themselves adequately examined for

their own situatedness. More explicitly, *what happens when the philosophical concepts and ideas brought into the counselling room are themselves products of a horizon foreign to the counselee?* In addressing this question and thinking through its implications, I turn to the radical African hermeneutics of Serequeberhan.

The primary objective of Serequeberhan's hermeneutical approach is to critically examine the significance of situated experiences from within an African horizon or lifeworld (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994). While my primary focus remains on Serequeberhan, Theophilus Okere's (1983) seminal hermeneutic work notably pre-dates Serequeberhan's and is generally understood to be the first of its kind. For both Okere (1983) and Serequeberhan (1994), then, presuppositions embedded within one's historical and cultural horizon are laid bare and at the same time questioned. The concept of *horizon* is central to this approach: it is the specific lifeworld or experiential background in which the philosophical counsellor, but also the counselee, is situated (OKERE 1983; SEREQUEBERHAN 1994). Horizon here thus becomes a dynamic hermeneutic engagement that fundamentally shapes the philosophical pursuits within the context of the philosophical counsellor and counselee's respective historical-politico-cultural environments. This subsequently becomes a fundamentally *situated practice* which is notably influenced by the period within which one is located. This includes the historical period into which the philosophical counsellor and counselee are born; the geographical, cultural, and social milieu of their origin and current dwelling; and the political considerations and their symbolic constraint springing forth from their specific contexts (SEREQUEBERHAN 2019; ADAMS 2018; COLOMBETTI & BOGOTÁ 2024).

The philosophical questions and challenges lie within the horizon or the lived experiences of the philosophical counsellor and the counselee (cf. SEREQUEBERHAN 1991c; 1994). Crucially, the *horizon* is thus always *implied* in, and *shaping*, the *discourse*. The philosophical counsellor cannot evade or entirely move beyond their horizon or leave it behind, and they cannot maintain a position that suggests that the counselee can do this. Some philosophical counsellors suggest that they can set aside or *unclothe* their prejudices and assumptions – that the philosophical counsellor should not impose anything onto the counselee (LAHAV 2016; SCHUSTER 1999). Serequeberhan's (2015) framework reveals this both as philosophically naïve and practically counterproductive because this logic merely mimics and reproduces what it tries to escape, leading to an inverted version of the same exclusionary practices. The horizon in this context is thus not a limiting factor, or something fixed in place. Instead, it becomes the fertile soil from which philosophical discourse erupts, continually moving along with one's dwelling and moving about (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994; cf., VAN PEURSEN 1972). The counselee's problems, issues, and the concepts they use to understand them (or to make them visible) do not arrive as free-floating and separate from themselves. Instead, they arrive as *discourse* already shaped by their *horizon* (cf., COLOMBETTI & BOGOTÁ 2024). In treating it otherwise, there is a fundamental misreading of the situation from the outset. The philosophical counsellor and counselee's respective horizons serve as origin or bedrock for their collaborative philosophical endeavours, establishing the significance of a specific *historical contextual*

awareness (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994; 2021). It is essentially from where they speak, furnishing both how and to what they respond, and infusing both questions and answers.

Understanding in this context is never neutral or disembodied, but always shaped by “effects of effective-history,” the organic “lived self-awareness” of a historically situated being (SEREQUEBERHAN 2015, 83). As Gadamer (2013, 311) himself makes clear, when we try to understand something, “we are always already affected by history.” For both Serequeberhan and Gadamer, the interpreter (or in our case the philosophical counsellor) does not simply arrive with knowledge already present. They can also not create concepts or ask questions without coming from somewhere, drawing on that heritage, history, or past. Understanding, interpretation, and the creation of new concepts and questions are thus always situated and embedded within a historical-existential horizon. And this is important for Serequeberhan (2015, 83), as he argues it must always be approached not through neutrality but through “an engaged active-passivity that is alert to what tradition or aspects of the past, and/or Other traditions, have to say and in this is critically open to and concurrently questioning of its own presuppositions and prejudices.”

Horizon thus understood as “preunderstanding” consists largely of what went *before*. This includes the life of the individual and their community, and what has been thought and expressed before. Crucially, this points to the situated self being embodied – with the body containing its past within it (COLOMBETTI & BOGOTÁ 2024). Through a responsiveness to *this embodied history*, new understandings become possible. What makes this contribution particularly relevant to philosophical counselling, is Serequeberhan’s development of what he calls the *dead-past*. According to Serequeberhan, Gadamer does not explicitly consider the possibility of a history that fails to remain open to renewed interpretation. Serequeberhan (2015) explicitly names this a dead-past, one that is closed off and unaware of the influence of prejudices. This past is consequently *rendered mute*. This dead-past always threatens to return; “‘effective-history’ always affirms and sustains itself in an ongoing contestation with and against a residual *dead-past* or *dead-history* that threatens to resurface and reassert itself” (SEREQUEBERHAN 2015, 124 endnote 9; emphasis mine).

Moreover, and crucially, this threat does not exclusively belong to, in Serequeberhan’s context, the colonised. It is the other side of the coin of a working or effective-history, which threatens everyone equally. A dead-past or dead-history therefore manifests for Serequeberhan (1994) as an ossified and reified past and which does not include meaningful dialogue with the present. Rather than enabling understanding, it functions as a constraining, sterilising, and paralysing force. It threatens to foreclose future possibilities and reimpose outdated frameworks that have little if any relevance to the present and future. Colonialism, as discussed by Serequeberhan in this context, converts a living past into a dead one by severing the colonised from participating in their own historicity. Without this access to their own heritage and cultural resources, to participating in their own historicity, Africans for Serequeberhan are trapped in a precarious position. Their philosophical contributions are always already delegitimised by the very criteria

used to judge them. Serequeberhan (1994, 80) states that:

A noncolonized society grows, transforms, and, in all of this, constantly evaluates and re-evaluates its past in light of the future exigencies of its existence. [...] [I]t is only in view of a future that a past is fruitfully appropriated. Colonized society, on the other hand, is not free to evaluate its past in terms of a possible future. *It is a society without a future precisely because this is what colonialism negates and grounds itself on.* (Emphasis mine)

The colonisers in this instance *froze* the history of the colonised. The present is *sucked dry* of its significance by lacking a past to draw on and the capacity to imagine a future, that is, a future different from the one imposed onto them by the coloniser. This loss of sense-making is especially problematic from the vantage point of the postcolonial African present in which this reality remains as a significant *residue* in most aspects of everyday life. The previously colonised thus finds themselves in a condition that Serequeberhan (2000) calls paradoxical: it is situated in-between the former state of being formally colonised and the future state of being mentally or cognitively free from the distortions and limitations of colonial logic. The “felt experience” thereof, the “not-yet”, the liberation yet to come, is one marked by a duality (SEREQUEBERHAN 2000, 2). Situated within philosophical counselling, the counselee who arrives, for example, uncertain about how to live and torn between obligations, or unable to project themselves confidently into a future, may be inhabiting a similar structural in-between-ness.

In this context, counselees in postcolonial African contexts projecting themselves into the future, that is, revealing alternative ways of becoming for themselves, are entwined with mostly non-African modes of being. Becoming, desire, and striving within these dominant narratives are thus associated with a history that is not allowed to organically unfold. Serequeberhan refers especially to Frantz Fanon (2008, xiv), who notes that “there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white.” A counselee’s problems or issues might therefore be, at a deeper level, a fractured relationship to their own living past, pointing to the problem residing at the level of historicity itself. For the philosophical counsellor working in postcolonial African contexts, Serequeberhan’s radical hermeneutics is thus not a merely useful supplement to existing philosophical counselling methodologies. This necessary reorientation is also not suggestive of replacing existing philosophical counselling methodologies. Instead, I suggest that Serequeberhan’s intervention transforms but at the same time enriches them.

Radical African Hermeneutics as Methodology: The Double Task of African Philosophy and Its Three Processes

Serequeberhan’s (2009, 46) double task of contemporary African philosophy is imperative to what he calls a “practice of resistance” to colonial logic and the imposition of its historicity. The double task of African philosophy consists of what one might refer to as two *movements*: a critical-negative and destructive element, and a positive-creative and (re-)constructive element. The critical-negative and destructive challenge or task of African philosophy for

Serequeberhan entails a systematic critique of Western/Eurocentrism – that is, the assumed superiority and universalisation of the West's own particularity and its imposition on and displacement of, African lifeworlds. This is negative in the sense of a critical, confrontational attitude directed and aimed at uncovering and dismantling the residues of colonial logic, especially in the form of the internalisation and acceptance of Western superiority by Africans (SEREQUEBERHAN 2010). In doing so, the process of opening or clearing constitutes a radical practice of resistance through theory itself (SEREQUEBERHAN 2009).

The positive-creative and (re-)constructive element for Serequeberhan (1994) aligns with Fanon's (1963, 316) call to "turn over a new leaf" and to "work out new concepts." The aim is to create fresh and new concepts and frameworks that enable the articulation, promotion, living, affirmation and, crucially, enunciation of one's own historicity. It also entails the interrogation of existence from within one's own time-and-place, solidified by a breakage of non-African historicity (SEREQUEBERHAN 1991a). The impetus for this constructive element arises from the necessity and obligation to imagine and open alternative ways of life on the African continent. It also seeks to create a new theoretical space for African voices to independently address "African problems and concerns that are felt and lived," signifying that African issues merit focused and sustained intellectual attention (SEREQUEBERHAN 1991b, xviii). This novel framework, which pertains to a new past and history, can only emerge, as Serequeberhan (2000, 11) argues, *through* the "creative praxis of the colonised."

The double task is accompanied by three distinct processes: (i) an organic indigenisation and appropriation; (ii) a sifting and sieving or a cultural filtration and fertilisation; (iii) and a return to the source. Importantly, the two movements of the double task should not be read as sequential stages; they become mutually creative *moments* in the ongoing task of African philosophical practice. For the purposes of applying this framework to philosophical counselling sessions the three processes should be understood as operating on three distinct levels. The first concerns the philosophical counsellor's own epistemological stance *before* the philosophical counselling sessions begins; the second constitutes the movement of the session itself, and the third articulates the goal or outcome toward which the session moves.

The Philosophical Counsellor's Stance: An Organic Indigenisation and Appropriation

The process of an organic appropriation and indigenisation, or what Serequeberhan (2015, 101) calls a "moulding," a "shaping," or a "pressing", is central to the critical-negative and destructive task of African philosophy. Organically appropriating and indigenising a philosophy across different contexts suggests avoiding uncritical reproductions, undue abstractions, and decontextualisations, and foregrounding of the assumptions and prejudices that shaped a philosophy. Take, for example, Serequeberhan's continual engagement with Martin Heidegger. The consequence of an organic indigenisation and appropriation is not simply the wholesale reproduction of Heidegger's ideas, but

an active attempt to first foreground its contextual failures through an adoption of a hermeneutic of suspicion. For this practice to be successful, then, the central differences and shortcomings of the original work must be identified. More importantly, this hermeneutic of suspicion means to critically think about “the historicity and presence of [one’s] situatedness” and “to concretely query the contradictions of our post-colonial and ‘independent’ Africa” (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994, 8). This not only resists ontological erasure of African historicity, but it also reorients philosophy toward an African lifeworld. Serequeberhan (1994, 4) consequently claims that Heidegger “failed to actualize the veracity” of the claim that philosophy is the “courage” to question one’s own presuppositions and goals “in his own actions and political involvement.” Serequeberhan nevertheless persists, saying that “what we hope to do is to mold and/or shape [...] ‘Our Heidegger,’ so as to press [him] into service in engaging the contemporary African situation” (SEREQUEBERHAN, 2015, 101).

The philosophical counsellor in postcolonial African contexts cannot bring non-African concepts and ideas into a philosophical counselling session without this ongoing and active critical reflective practice or stance. In Serequeberhan’s (2015) vocabulary, the philosophical counsellor will have to continually mould and press into service different philosophical concepts and ideas in relation to the horizon from which they speak, but just as important, from where the counselee brings their issues and concerns. This process, or reorientation, happens *before* the philosophical counselling session begins. It is a prerequisite, a cultivated disposition, or a way of being. The philosophical counsellor who has not examined their historical situatedness of their philosophical concepts and ideas in this manner runs the very real risk of importing and imposing the very horizon they should be helping the counselee to critically examine. This first process in philosophical counselling thus translates to the philosophical counsellor’s preparation but also their disposition, their way of being and relating to philosophy. The second process is consequently what happens when the philosophical counsellor and the counselee meet and engage in a session.

The Movement Within a Philosophical Counselling Session: A Filtration and Fertilisation

The critical-negative and destructive component of African philosophy also requires a sifting and sieving or a cultural filtration and fertilisation process (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994; 2021). For Serequeberhan, this can be likened to the making of a theoretical inventory, involving a discerning yet respectful examination of both the past and the possible future – history, heritage, and potentialities that may arise from engagement with an effective-history or a living history (SEREQUEBERHAN 2000; 2010). The process entails the real and hard work of decolonisation through the making of an inventory or following a *stock-taking* process, that is, a (re-)construction after the destruction wrought by a colonialism that sought, in some cases, to erase all traces of indigenous knowledges and ways of living. This archival impulse is not arbitrary; as fellow hermeneutic philosopher Okonda Okolo maintains, tradition possesses a fundamentally forward-looking orientation. He notes that “[d]estiny is thus an

implacable given of a people and of an individual, but it is also a task of the future for a people and for an individual [...] [i]t is the thread of tradition and of interpretations” (OKOLO 1991, 203). Even if the philosopher, particularly in Serequeberhan’s conception, listens to the past to become a kind of guardian of a tradition moving forward, this thread has been violently disrupted. Okolo (1991, 208) addresses this historical wound directly, noting that the hermeneutical situation is “that of the formerly colonized, the oppressed, that of the underdeveloped, struggling for more justice and equality.”

Nonetheless, for the purposes of this article, the terms sifting, sieving, and filtration are largely interchangeable – each illustrating the critical process of reading and reinterpreting one’s own heritage. Fertilisation, however, operates more figuratively as a gesture toward the creative possibilities that emerge when the past is engaged not as a fixed inheritance, but as something dynamic and continually unfolding. As soon as the past is approached critically and creatively – rather than as a simple static given or a mute and dead-past – it becomes clear that there is always more to uncover within it, and it is then in a sense broken open so that its seeds and compost may *fertilise* the present. That is, the past – which contains a wealth of ways of becoming that precede and exceed the current moment – allows for the consideration of alternative ways of relating to the present “in view of a desirable future” (SEREQUEBERHAN 2024, 275).

Making an inventory thus necessitates a critical yet respectful attitude toward one’s own living past or history – through a sifting and sieving, filtration and fertilisation, of inter alia texts and thinkers – and the insights gained from organically indigenising and appropriating ideas emerging from different lifeworlds to one’s own (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994). The same principle applies to indigenous knowledges. Their uncritical embrace is discouraged, just as with non-local imported thought, in favour of a careful sifting that discerns what helps with liberation and what does not (SEREQUEBERHAN 2010). The resulting hybridity or synthesis – the absorption of relevant and emancipatory ways of being and knowing from other traditions and lifeworlds, in the service of a careful and discerning embrace of indigenous historicity – emerges from the combined processes of sifting, sieving, filtration, and fertilisation, emphasising pragmatic utility towards African intellectual emancipation (SEREQUEBERHAN 2012; 2015).

This disposition of critical openness to both the philosopher’s own heritage and to concepts from other traditions, is precisely what the philosophical counselling session, understood through this framework, aims to cultivate. In practice, filtration and fertilisation sets in motion a collaborative moment between philosophical counsellor and counselee: together, they examine the genealogy of the concepts and ideas the counselee brings to the session. They might ask after the history of, for example, a counselee’s guilt – where it comes from, whose standard it measures against – or identify whether a particular desire is a counselee’s own or an internalised norm absorbed from a surrounding cultural environment. These questions and interrogations constitute the *sifting moment actualised*. Subsequently, fertilisation refers to what becomes possible *after the hard work of sifting*: the creative reconstructing of frameworks for living from the

viable elements that survived the critical and negative task. This is not a wholesale adoption of external concepts and ideas, nor an uncritical return to tradition, but a hybrid or synthesis that is adequate to interpret the counselee's particular situated life.

The Goal: A Return to the Source

For the philosophical counselling session, the reconstructive moment articulates the direction toward which the entire session moves, specifically not as a resolution imposed from the outside, but a telos or course that emerges from within the counselee's own sifted historicity. The concept of *a return to the source*, promoted by Amílcar Cabral (2022) and developed further by Serequeberhan (1994), is crucial here. Importantly, this does not imply a return to a static source or an uncontaminated pre-colonial past or origin, what I referred to above as a mute or dead-past, as this would be both impossible and undesirable (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994). Instead, *the source* represents the "vigor, vitality (life), and ebullience of African existence," a living historicity that has not been frozen by the imposition of another's historical narrative (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994, 126).

The return to the source is better understood as a two-way process: a rejection of that which is unhelpful for liberation, and simultaneously the creative and difficult work of constructing a better future with the liberatory elements that remain. It is therefore "to make possible the autonomous and thus authentic self-standing historicity of African existence in the context of the modern world" (SEREQUEBERHAN 1994, 38). It is the lived reality of a people, articulated in and through resistance to "domination as a whole" (CABRAL [1973] 2022, 127). Linked with the inventory or effective-history, radically new ways of thinking can be created and excavated from the past. The vigour required for this, that is, what Serequeberhan demands of the philosopher and what this framework demands of the counselee, is precisely the capacity to engage the postcolonial present without being paralysed by it. This ensures that a dead-past does not "return" and that the residue of coloniality is properly discarded. It is thus not only that the philosopher can transform their engagement with the present, but that the present itself can provoke productive, fertile, and life-giving reinterpretations of the past and the future. Serequeberhan (2022, 11) captures this when he notes that the return to the source is "tailored to specific forms of struggle," conceived, in his terms, as a form of re-Africanisation. In the philosophical counselling encounter, to return to the source is very concretely to help the counselee arrive at something genuinely their own through the process of working through the tension between a living heritage and critical modernity. The counselee is not provided a solution by the philosophical counsellor. What the process aims for is something both more modest and more profound: a restored capacity to project oneself into a future that is the counselee's own, or what we might call, following Serequeberhan, a *historically actualised self*.

Taken together, these three processes constitute a hermeneutical orientation, a way of being present to the counselee that can adequately facilitate the historical depth of their situation. To demonstrate what Serequeberhan's radical African hermeneutics offer the philosophical counselling session, I turn

now to an existing case study from within the literature of philosophical counselling. Rather than construct a fictional case study, I engage with one that is already presented in the literature. It is telling that there are currently few, if any case studies from within African lifeworlds illustrating philosophical counselling practiced in these contexts. I return to this issue in the last section of this paper.

Re-reading a Philosophical Counselling Case Study Through Serequeberhan

The main concern of this section is what a situated hermeneutic re-reading of an established case study might reveal that the original reading did not. The case study selected is drawn from Schuster's [Philosophical Practice] (1999), in many regards a foundational text that introduced philosophical counselling practice, in the tradition of Gerd Achenbach, to the English-speaking world. Schuster's (1999) case of William, or Villi, concerns a man in his forties who suffers from recurring nightmares, fear of death, and anxiety rooted in guilt. Over a period of three months, Schuster draws on figures such as William James, Martin Buber, and Abraham Isaac Kook (Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi under the British Mandate) to discuss with Villi. By her own account these sessions were largely successful: "he did not suffer anymore from nightmares and could sleep without waking up in the middle of the night" (SCHUSTER 1999, 171). Schuster's intervention genuinely and clearly helped Villi. What the current section offers is thus *not* a correction or critique of the intervention but a *philosophical re-reading*, one that asks what additional layers of meaning a situated hermeneutic framework reveals within the same material.

The Case of William or Villi

Villi's background is Moroccan Israeli; he grew up in a household marked by spiritual practices:

His mother had often gone to pray at the graves of important rabbis. She also had a collection of charms against the evil eye and against evil spirits. There had been all kinds of superstitious beliefs in the family: The children had been forbidden to jump in the house, because that would cause the ghosts of the dead to return. (SCHUSTER 1999, 169-170)

He has various recurrent and vivid nightmares. In one, Villi sinks into the ground, arriving at an underworld full of decayed bodies (SCHUSTER 1999). In another, angels would be carrying him to a room where his mother's body is being prepared for burial; he felt like he was about to be sacrificed (SCHUSTER 1999). In a third, he is "fighting with black people and of being persecuted by German Nazis," groups with whom, as Schuster (1999, 168) records, "he had never encountered violent relations." Schuster's response to Villi's situation is careful; she introduces, *inter alia*, Charles Tart's research on parapsychology to address Villi's fear that his heritage is "primitive." She suggests that the "phenomenon Villi experienced, that is, precognition through dreams, is shared by other people" and need not be seen as "abnormal or primitive" (SCHUSTER 1999, 170). Schuster (1999) then draws on James' pragmatic approach to religious experiences, Rabbi Kook's vision of divine goodness and religious optimism, and

Buber's I-Thou relation.

What a Situated Hermeneutic Reveals

Re-reading the case through the framework of Serequeberhan does not dispute Schuster's outcome. Instead, it asks a prior question: what was the source of Villi's suffering at the level of historicity, and was it addressed? Here, the vocabulary developed in the preceding sessions becomes revealing. I look at two issues; first, the dead-past operating in the counselling encounter; and second, a fractured historicity through the nightmare imagery.

In Schuster's account of Villi, she records and moves past a moment that becomes important for a situated hermeneutic methodology. When asked about his family's spiritual practices, Villi responds that "he found his parents' faith in ghosts embarrassing and primitive" and that he is "uncomfortable thinking and talking about it" (SCHUSTER 1999, 170). As noted above, Schuster draws on Tart's studies, effectively rehabilitating the practices by showing that science finds something credible in them. This is a generous move, and it partly works. But it does not ask a prior question: *where does Villi's shame come from?* In Serequeberhan's terms, what is operating here is a dead-past, not in the sense of inert tradition but in the precise sense of a living heritage that has been rendered mute by an internalisation of an "'objective' inferiority" (SEREQUEBERHAN 2009, 49). Villi has not arrived at this judgement that his heritage is "primitive" through living critical reflection; instead, one might argue drawing from Serequeberhan that he has absorbed it from a cultural environment. His dismissal of these practices is not of his own, but the colonial residue masquerading as a personal judgment.

Moreover, there is another detail in Schuster's account which she does not interpret in enough detail. Villi's nightmares involve "fighting with black people and of being persecuted by German Nazis, but he always escaped by disappearing in grottos and underground tunnels" (SCHUSTER 1999, 168). Schuster notes Villi's own confusion with this dream. She does not offer any immediate interpretation of this imagery or dream. Read through a situated hermeneutic lens, however, this is important material. The nightmare, we might note, does not belong to Villi's personal history; it belongs to his *historical horizon*. A person who inhabits a structurally liminal position – no longer fully at home in the indigenous heritage that has been rendered "primitive", not yet fully at home in the dominant culture that actively marginalises – may find that their fractured historicity surfaces precisely in the form of anxieties that feel foreign because they are not personally generated. We might note that they are *horizon-generated*. The fighting and persecution in Villi's dreams may be less about his individual psychology than about structural violence of inhabiting a horizon in which one's own past (or past) has been devalued.

Importantly, this attempt at what a situated hermeneutic might reveal is not replacing Schuster's reading or even attempting at resolving her interpretation. Instead, I argue that Serequeberhan's framework creates a question that Schuster's does not; Serequeberhan's framework allows for additional hermeneutic layers to surface.

A Situated Re-Reading

I briefly discuss the three processes mentioned earlier by providing a *situated re-reading* of Schuster's case. The first process, an organic indigenisation and appropriation, reveals the philosophical counsellor's stance or disposition. A philosophical counsellor informed by Serequeberhan's framework would enter the session having already performed the process of an organic indigenisation and appropriation of their own philosophical concepts and ideas. Concretely, this means recognising that James, Buber, and Kook arrive carrying assumptions about what constitutes legitimate spiritual experience, authentic selfhood, and the proper relationship between the individual and their tradition. Even though these figures are valuable, the assumptions that they bring to the conversation are not neutral. Before bringing these figures into the counselling room, the philosophical counsellor needs to ask: what do these frameworks import, and what might they displace? This does not mean abandoning them; it means holding them lightly enough that the counselee's horizon can speak first.

The second process, that of a filtration (sifting and sieving) and fertilisation, can be read separately. In the movement of filtration (sifting and sieving), one might identify *the genealogy question*. Rather than moving directly to philosophical frameworks for understanding Villi's nightmares and guilt, a situated hermeneutic would ask first: *Where does this shame come from?* This is asked as an examination of its *conceptual provenance*. The concepts and ideas we use have provenance insofar as they are shaped into functional constructs by how they are used and where they originated (JANZ 2015). Serequeberhan (2015, 35) considers the provenance or history of philosophical ideas and concepts in terms of "what works" and "what can help us overcome our postcolonial stasis." That is, he asks, do these concepts and ideas help with the double task of African philosophy in supporting the liberation process? Is Villi's judgement, that his heritage is "primitive," a living critical judgment he has arrived at through sustained reflection? Or is it, as the current framework suggests, an internalised inferiority? This is the sieve actualised. The purpose is not to tell Villi that his heritage is valuable, that would be its own imposition. Instead, the purpose is to make the dismissal visible as a historical product rather than a personal conclusion or choice.

Once the internalised inferiority is visible, once Villi can see that his embarrassment is not simply his own but partly a historical sediment, the creative work of fertilisation becomes possible. Villi's struggles point to a rich tradition that does not need to be embraced wholesale or uncritically. They can and should be engaged with as *living possibilities*, as part of his effective-history, rather than as embarrassments to be explained away. Together, the philosophical counsellor and counselee in this framework can begin to construct a framework for understanding Villi's experiences that draws on these resources, alongside the insights of James and Buber. Neither is replaced by the other; instead, they are hybridised into something adequate to Villi's particular lifeworld. This synthesis occurs through the practice of sifting and sieving, where the refined insights are used to fertilise the present and future as the philosophical counselling session allows this moment to emerge.

A return to the source – the goal or outcome toward which the situated re-reading moves – does not require Villi to adopt his tradition wholesale or uncritically. Instead, it allows him to recover access to a dimension of his historicity that shame walled off, and from that recovered access to develop a relationship to his life that is his own. Schuster's intervention helps Villi manage his nightmares. The situated hermeneutic intervention aims at something additional: restoring Villi's capacity to inhabit his own horizon without shame, and from that restored inhabitation to project himself forward into a future, neither defined by a dead-past of internalised inferiority nor by the romantic fiction of an uncontaminated origin. This is what Serequeberhan (1994) might mean by a *historically actualised self*: the actualising of one's free existence from within a recovered and living historicity. It is a goal that philosophical counselling, understood through this framework, is positioned to pursue not by resolving the counselee's tension between heritage and modernity, but by giving that tension the attention it requires.

Negotiating Possible Tensions in a Postcolonial Practice

The attempt to re-read a philosophical counselling case study originating from a radically different context through a Serequeberhanian hermeneutic lens is itself not a neutral practice and one in which various tensions organically surface. Three such possible tensions, or better yet objections, can be raised against this attempt. In responding to these tensions, I also attempt to sift my own argument's inheritance, asking implicitly what in it begins to travel, what might need more qualification, and what must simply be conceded as remaining, for the time, unresolved.

The most pressing issue is whether a hermeneutic for African postcolonial horizons can be organically applied and extended to a Moroccan Israeli counselee in Israel without violating the very standard this paper has set for itself: philosophical resources ought not to be lifted from one horizon and set down in another, *unmoulded*. More specifically, Villi's situation is not colonial in the manner that Serequeberhan discusses. Conflating Villi's situation with those discussed by Serequeberhan would flatten two different histories into a single "postcolonial" one, a position that this paper and Serequeberhan explicitly reject. However, this objection assumes that Serequeberhan's hermeneutic is bound by his horizon and from where he speaks precisely in a manner that does not allow for re-interpretation, and thus an organic indigenisation and appropriation. My discussion of Serequeberhan in this paper (and elsewhere, see LOUW 2025) already resists this assumption.

The threat of the dead-past is not, on Serequeberhan's own account as discussed above, exclusive to the colonised; it threatens everyone equally. What Serequeberhan discusses in his African context *is*, however, a specific historical instance, and my engagement with his work from a different horizon thus already illustrates how his ideas are stretched beyond their initial articulation context. In short, I am not attempting to transplant Serequeberhan's African hermeneutic onto Villi's situation wholesale. Instead, I attempt to *re-mould* his framework – to press Serequeberhan into my service – for a different horizon, one that seems to be of a

similar kind but emerging from a different history and thus horizon (see SEREQUEBERHAN, 2015). This simultaneously *binds* the re-reading to something concrete – that is, the textually visible (audible) echo of an internalised “‘objective’ inferiority” (SEREQUEBERHAN 2009, 49) discussed above – and *bounds* its scope: it is not a universally applicable methodology as I presented it. I am thus not claiming that Villi’s situation is colonial, nor am I claiming that Serequeberhan’s hermeneutic travels to any postcolonial situation *unmoulded*.

There is also a particular concern regarding what a primarily textual re-reading of an already-published case study can actually illustrate, problematised further by the fact that Schuster’s original case was not drawn from an African lifeworld. The preceding discussion, thus crucially, should *not* be read as illustrative of how an actual philosophical counsellor would implement a Serequeberhanian framework in practice. Real sessions involve embodied refusals, silences, and moments in which a counselee might resist a reframing of the kind discussed above through Villi’s re-reading. These complexities cannot be captured by a textual analysis and re-reading, especially not by one that takes textuality as its starting point rather than a concrete, lived counselling moment, event, or observation. This is thus a concrete limitation of the present work; it might demonstrate what a hermeneutic makes visible in already-existing (already-sifted) materials, but it cannot show how that methodology allows the practitioner to respond to actual unscripted encounters.

Additionally, the absence of published case studies of philosophical counselling practices within African lifeworlds is not incidental to my argument. The very process of publishing and writing up these case studies is not neutral (cf. CHIMAKONAM 2017; RATELE 2019). A philosophical counselling case study from within African contexts would have allowed a more organic explication of Serequeberhan’s methodology as constructed earlier in this paper. It would also have exposed this re-reading’s central limitation more clearly, that it can only sift what had already been sifted by someone else’s prior decision about what counted as worth sharing (e.g., Schuster’s demonstration of Villi’s case). I do not attempt this. This absence is a limitation that this paper shares with the wider literature it draws on; addressing and fulling the gap remains important, yet unfinished, future work.

Finally, one might object that the very methodology discussed in this paper merely substitutes one authority for another, and thus becomes the very imposition this paper, following Serequeberhan, has argued against. By providing the counselee a re-reading of their situation, the philosophical counsellor tells the counselee that a self-judgement is not truly their own, but that of colonial residue. This appears to be the very imposition the paper critiques. However, the genealogical question – *Where does this shame come from?* – is posed as a question, and Serequeberhan’s own hermeneutic commitment requires that it remains just that, *a question*. Understanding, on the Gadamerian model Serequeberhan inherits, is never a fact handed from an interpreter who already possesses it to a subject who does not (SEREQUEBERHAN 2015; GADAMER 2013). The conversation or dialogue is not controlled or predicted in advance, and the counselee retains full authority to refuse the reframing of their situation.

Again, it is worth pointing out the limitation discussed above, that the methodology discussed here is not a rendition of an actual session. Power dynamics in an actual case might make resistance and refusal on the counselee's part incredibly difficult, if not impossible. Nonetheless, a philosophical counsellor who presents colonial residue as a diagnosis to be merely accepted as-is not only forecloses the very ongoing re-interpretive framework I constructed through Serequeberhan but also misapplies that framework itself. By posing it as a question, the counsellor invites the counselee to test, experiment with, and rework it *through* their own experience. This points to another concrete limitation that this paper cannot engage with, nor can it attempt to guarantee its success: the very manner in which the question is asked, by whom, and in what tone cannot be predetermined. Ultimately, what can be said about the framework is that it *does not* provide the philosophical counsellor epistemic authority to force their (re-)interpretations onto the counselee. The hopes and aims are to keep the session open, alive, so that the counselee and counsellor can co-inhabit it as a shared space of cultivation.

Conclusion

By constructing a novel framework from Serequeberhan's double task of African philosophy, this paper cultivates a specific philosophical orientation: one that allows the philosophical counsellor to give a hermeneutically faithful account of the counselee's situation through a sifting and sieving of their historical horizon. What the re-reading of the case study demonstrated is that the suffering present in a philosophical counselling session may be constituted at a level deeper than reasoning, and deeper than personal worldview, namely, at the level of historicity itself, where a living past has been rendered mute by internalised hierarchies of inferiority the counselee did not choose and did not have the tools to examine. The situated hermeneutic re-reading asks a different set of questions than Schuster's intervention, even though both are necessary. It examines life at the level of its hermeneutical constitution. The philosophical counsellor in postcolonial African contexts is, on this account, a companion in the sifting of the situated self: patient and discerning, alert to the historical depth of what the counselee carries into the session. The sifting happens not from the outside, but from within a web of relations to heritage, to community, to a living past. Emerging from the sifting is a *historically actualised self*, capable of inhabiting its own horizon without shame and projecting itself forward into a future that is their own.

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