

The Concept of Active Consciousness in Marcien Towa

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Consciousness is a relationship established between a thinking subject and that which constitutes the object of his thought. It is the process by which the subject manages the contact between the reality (internal or external) which confronts him and to which he gives a *meaning*. It is a process of appropriation and re-appropriation of the object by the 'I', the thinking subject. From that moment, the *active consciousness* may be considered a practical consciousness which is not solely limited to observing its object and does not have merely a passive relationship with its object, but becomes a practical intent. Active consciousness is a process by which the thinking subject attempts to go beyond or transcend a given situation by acting upon it so as to improve its initial situation. In the context of philosophy in Africa, active consciousness identifies as a process of appropriation by which the exercise of philosophy shapes itself as an undertaking aimed at the appropriation of a *liberty* which is essential for humanity in general and for the Black African in particular. This ambition is all the more pertinent in that the Black is a person for whom, in certain thinkers' view, the idea of liberty poses numerous difficulties in its application, though for reasons that are frequently unjustified and even aberrant.

In what sense is the concept of 'active consciousness' operative in the philosophical system of Marcien Towa in terms of the African's consciousness of *being-present* that involves him in a universal project? If it is true that liberty is the essence of what it means to be human, what justifies the conclusion in Marcien Towa's thought that this liberty is the result of the application of an active consciousness? To try to answer these questions, we shall adopt two avenues of approach. First we shall analyse what is at stake philosophically in Towa's project of *self-being*, before examining how far the philosophical solution to the sundering of the subject may be embedded within the phenomenon of appropriation.

Towa and the basic 'being-ourselves' project

Marcien Towa is principally known for his radical critique of what is rightly or wrongly called 'ethnophilosophy', as well as the idea of 'negritude' advanced by Léopold Sédar Senghor. In his view, these are two modes of thinking that fail to embed philosophical activity on the level of the *concept*. For Towa the whole essence of philosophical activity in Africa, particularly in Black

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Africa, should have as its guiding principle the establishment of the conditions of liberty for the Black African person. This outlook lodges his work at the heart of a project that seeks the liberation of the African individual, particularly the Black African, not only in relation to the Western world, but also from his own traditional identity, a condition which has fundamentally impeded Africans from enjoying that type of liberty and autonomy which lies at the heart of what it means to be human, or raising themselves to the same level as the imperialist West. Such a project is thus conceived with dual intention: to discover a response to Western dominance by adopting the ways of knowledge and the technologies by which the West has exercised its domination over us, while still being true to ourselves by subjecting our traditions to uncompromising philosophical critique.

In terms of such an uncompromising critique of our past, Towa remains convinced that the exercise of thought is the activity by which man assesses and challenges beliefs, representations of the world and received opinions in order to sort the valid from the invalid, and to 'retain as valid only those that successfully come through this critical sorting test' (Towa, 1979: 7). The process of 'thinking' thus takes on here a limited or restrictive sense which embraces only the needs of philosophical activity. Any discourse which fails this test as well as any discourse or approach to reality which does not submit to it cannot be taken into consideration for they do not contribute to the effectiveness of philosophical activity.

The prior condition for this would be that the Black African should have acquired a reasonable level of awareness on the scientific and technological planes, but also that he should be able to break away from the single mind-set these may imply. This prior condition has an accompaniment: the need to appropriate to himself the power exerted by the West in its domination of Africa and in its refusal to accord Africans that *right to liberty* which constitutes one of the fundamentals of philosophical activity. Towa writes in *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle* [Essay on the philosophical problematics of present-day Africa] that 'with science and technology we penetrate to the heart of European specificity, that which the European thinker considers both as the privilege and burden of Europe, the secret of its power and its dominance' (1971, I: 7). Necessity dictates that we appropriate that which differentiates the other from us and which permits him to dominate us. That is a prior condition for us to philosophize. Western science and technology have become weapons whose mastery allows a people to enjoy *liberty*. This latter element is essential for the human being as a constituent component of his self-being. Thus, Towa thinks that our liberation is impeded by the relationship we maintain with our past: 'the history of our thought should not propose the exhumation of a philosophy which would dispense us from philosophizing, but above all should encourage us to determine what it is within us that should be subverted so as to make possible the subversion of the world and our present condition in that world' (Towa, 1971: 75).

These two passages oblige us to meet a double challenge: on the one hand, an appropriation of what constitutes the strength and dominant power of the West, and on the other a demand for the *being-present* of the subject as an entity locating itself and by itself by affirming its individuality and its consciousness of being set apart from the collective consciousness which to some degree might come across as an alienating substance. The coupling together of these two fundamental aspects emerges as the achievement of *liberty*. And since, if we look at this process from a dialectical perspective – notably that of Hegel in *Lessons on the Philosophy of History* – the presence or absence of liberty and of thought, that is to say, of philosophy, signifies the belonging or non-belonging to universal history (Towa, 1971: 19), that means that the pursuit of liberty necessarily passes by way of a will to affirm oneself in the fullness of one's own consciousness.

Marcien Towa strongly believes that liberty has to be wrenched free through effort, and that subordinated peoples must above all deliver themselves from the Western monopoly over rational thought. It is in such a manner that the dominated can achieve the goal of putting an end to the

dominance relationship which advantages only the dominant partner and whose concrete manifestation is imperialism. It is in this light that Towa poses the following question: 'if it is true that the thesis affirming that philosophy is exclusively Western in nature leads to the legitimization of Western imperialism, does it not then follow that the negation of imperialism also leads to the negation of this thesis?' (1971, II: 23). These propositions establish a direct liaison between 'Western imperialism' and the 'exclusivity of philosophy to the West'. We have here the two faces of the same coin. The struggle against imperialism embodies therefore represents a will to put an end to a dominance that is not only economic but also intellectual.

However, Towa warns of the risk of veering towards the assimilation of Western culture on the part of Africans, rather than their demonstrating a capability to appropriate the substance of Western power. Assimilation is even dangerous when it finds its concrete expression in the idea that 'the Western way of life, even if it is imposed, would be sufficient to restore to the African his humanity' (1971, II: 25). Assimilation represents blind submission without any effort of analysis or questioning. This is what occurs when the formerly colonized person aspires only to 'escape from his subjugated and devalued world and to fling himself blindly into the universe of the new [...]' (1971, II: 24). In Towa's opinion, the idea of negritude advanced by Senghor fell into this trap by reserving to the West the exclusivity over reason, over rational or rationalizing thought. In distinguishing Aimé Césaire's positions on negritude from those of Senghor, Towa wrote that 'Senghor on the other hand so made the Black a person in whom emotion and instinct were completely dominant and so willingly accorded to the European the exclusivity of reason that one could wonder whether his real purpose was to serve rather than to deny European imperialism' (ibid.). Did not Senghor affirm that 'emotion is African, reason is Greek?' (1969: 295). First impressions are that this assertion has significantly marked intellectuals in general and more specifically those of the Black African diaspora. Does this mean that it should be interpreted as indicating a relationship of mutual exclusion between sensibility and reason?

It is indeed true that Senghor, in an article entitled 'Qu'est-ce que la Négritude?' (What is Negritude?), stressed that 'the Negro is the man of nature. The plant and animal environment that has forever flourished in Africa with its warm moist climate has endowed him with a very great sensitivity which many ethnologists have drawn attention to. The Negro is sensually alert to all contacts, even the most gentle of solicitations. He feels before he sees, he reacts immediately to the contact with an object, to the emanations of the invisible. Herein lies his emotive power, through which he gains cognizance of the object. The White European, on the other hand, holds the object at a distance; he examines it, he analyses it, he destroys its life-force – or at the very least tames it – so as to use it for his own purposes' (Senghor 1977: 92). But we should be aware that Senghor's commentaries need to be set in their proper contexts so as to better situate their points of attachment. The great writer and poet was marked by a number of different influences of diverse orientation which profoundly influenced his intellectual activity.

Noteworthy among these influences are the works of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl on so-called 'primitive' societies, particularly his *How Natives Think* (1910/1985) and *Primitive Mentality* (1922/1923). In his analysis of the way 'primitive' societies mentally represented their world, Lévy-Bruhl drew the emphasis that such representations 'contain as integral elements aspects derived from the emotions and the sense of movement, and especially that, rather than concepts of inclusion or exclusion, they involve processes of participation that are clearly defined to a greater or lesser extent, but which are in general strongly felt' (1985, II, 'The Law of Participation'). We will not spend any time here on the details of this 'law of participation' which has been the object of extensive research. It is sufficient to point out that Lévy-Bruhl's discussion of this 'law' influenced to a certain degree the position taken up by Senghor on the question of sensibility.

Amadou Oury Ba considers that there could be much interest in teasing out another influence on Senghorian thought, that of German thinking. Ba asserts that ‘commentaries on the nature of a people’s culture were very widespread in 18th century Germany. Though distant in time and place, such commentaries nevertheless explain to a great extent the role that Senghor accorded at a particular moment to the sensibility of a people, especially to that of emotion as a process for explaining nature and as the ferment for the constitution of a primordial culture’ (Ba, 2008: 168). This observation of Ba’s is founded broadly on the following admission by Senghor: ‘Nothing about the Germans left me indifferent, even though I was by that stage an adult. No doubt this was due to the impressions and dreams I had inherited from my childhood. At that time also, as now, I was only interested in civilizations which either conformed closely to my own – to its negritude – or which were starkly different. I have always needed to root myself firmly in my identity or to find my fulfilment through complementarity’ (Senghor 1977: 12–13). For Senghor, there was a clear consonance between negritude and German sensibility. The possible recognition in German thought of the fundamental elements of negritude constitutes a potentially interesting line of research in philosophy and comparative literature.

However, the position taken by Senghor is better understood in the light of the following passage: ‘the African locates himself in an absolute space, that is to say that “his” space, the place where he is to be found, is qualified concretely [...]. The African’s personal space is not distinguished by dispersion or exteriority, but by what one might call a principle of integration, or of *condensation* of energy or life force in a specific place’ (Ndaw, 1983, II: 127). The African’s relationship with the object finds its basis in the proximity of the two entities. It is a direct relationship which functions on the principle of integration tending towards a cosmic harmony and stability made possible by a state of ‘human sympathy’.

Senghor’s approach impacts significantly on the problem of ‘intuition’. Is the Black African essentially intuitive by nature? In terms of this question, a passage from *Liberté 3. Négritude et Civilisations de l’Universel* explains that ‘the White European is first and foremost discursive in his nature, while the Black African is primarily intuitive. It remains nevertheless that both are creatures of reason, *homines sapientes*, but not in the same way’ (Senghor 1977: 92). This explanation sheds light on a previous position taken by Senghor which had been declared inadmissible by thinkers such as Cheik Anta Diop and other celebrants of the *African personality* such as Wole Soyinka (e.g. in *Opera Wonyosi*, 1977). It therefore became urgent for Senghor to revisit his remarks to try to explain that it was categorically not his position that the Black African was fundamentally and essentially a creature of emotion who was incapable of reasoning. Black African culture was not purely emotional, devoid of any reason; but that at heart sensibility provided that culture with its initial voice and primary means of access to the knowledge of being. This is the integration principle which best permits an explanation for the sources of emotion. Senghor (1969: 10) stresses that the emotion of the Black African ‘arises from his participation in an underlying reality, which he perceives beyond what the senses reveal’. Emotion, through the sensibility that it promotes, is the first stage, the initial phase available to the Black African in his understanding of the universe to which he belongs.

We have also to consider that for Senghor it is necessary to find a suitable place for man as an entity. He is a thinker who believes strongly in the possibility of engaging dialogue between cultures so as to transcend the differences apparent between people of different cultures. That such dialogue can happen arises out of his consideration that cultures are inscribed in a communicative dynamic of mutual comprehension and respect.

It is here that Senghor’s approach becomes fascinating. He cherishes the intention of establishing contacts between civilizations and cultures, with the latter being seen as the ‘spirit’ of the civilization. He looks towards a rendez-vous of giving and receiving with the firm conviction that the

black world brings an essential component to the ‘civilization of the universal’, the environment in which each culture contributes to the others that which is the best of itself. Black cultures bring rhythm, vitality and energy where the Western culture contributes clarity, reasoning and Cartesian logic. It is in the light of this conceptualization that certain acerbic criticisms directed against the affirmation (for the most part taken out of context) that ‘emotion is African, reason is Greek’ would gain from being reconsidered – in the sense of being revised and corrected where necessary – by taking into account the whole of Senghor’s project and what it has placed scientifically at stake. Does not the essence of what it is to be human situate us at the crossroads of reason and emotion? Senghor is envisaging a human being that is complete, not amputated of one or other of his faculties. The thinking subject is equally divided between emotion and reason, and what differentiates black from white comes down to the proportion granted to *discursive reason* and/or to *sensibility*.

To return then to Marcien Towa’s criticism, one must consequently moderate it to the extent that the theoretician of negritude, specifically Senghor himself, considers that reason is effectively universal, and that it is in the first contact with reality that there comes into play both the strong presence of emotion in the Black African and that of reason in the European. But Towa’s view remains that this pathway taken by negritude in its Senghorian sense does not lead us to the liberation of the black man. For Towa, negritude is a way of celebrating the culture of *difference*; but it does not allow for any escape from the current domination. He points out (1971, III: 55) that ‘it is in the name of our distinctive nature, in the name of Senghorian negritude that more or less everywhere in Africa there are set up so-called “democratic” regimes in which only one person is free and who decides everything according to his own whim and pleasure, regimes where “liberty” supposedly reigns without any possibility of protest ...’. These remarks have political implications from the point of view of the analysis of the gaps which exist between the principles of democracy and their effectiveness or their application to the life of a society in the real world.

We should point out here that by putting the notions of ‘democracy’ and ‘liberty’ between inverted commas and by subordinating them at the same time to the liberty of ‘a single person’ who retains the power of decision on the one hand and on the other enjoys the absence of any ‘possibility of protest’, Towa insists on the fact that it is one thing to recognize principles but quite another to permit their application, particularly when important interests are at play. For Towa, the promotion of difference places the culturally dominated individual in a reactionary, not an active, position. Hence the confusion for which a solution is urgently needed: ‘the need to denounce the confusion of essence and value, of being and of having to be, disqualifies the normative use of the past and of “being different” within the sphere of political and social praxis’ (ibid.). However, it is important to clarify the sense of *value* in relation to *essence* and to proceed in such a way as to avoid any confusion between *being* and *having to be*. It is under these conditions that the thinking subject can reach an objective vision of his own *being-in-the-world* as an autonomous entity.

Thus it is that, for Marcien Towa, the fundamental project for philosophical activity is the establishment and the recognition of liberty on the scale of humanity as a whole without any exception: ‘Regarding the idea of liberty that constitutes one of the most fundamental principles of European philosophy, it corresponds exactly to the very essence of our project: an Africa that is free in a liberated world’ (1971: 68). This liberty becomes an imperative for all those who exercise or propose to exercise a philosophical activity. Without liberty, there is no philosophy, for philosophy projects itself as the very locus of the realization and achievement of liberty.

To raise *liberty* to the level of a credo is to assert that black people must demand and assume their own autonomy, something which they will acquire only through the autonomy of thought. Philosophically speaking, the thinking subject can be characterized as one who has the capacity and the aptitude for reasoning, for generating a thought that is grounded in *reason*, but who also

and at the same time is able and willing to defend what his reason produces, to take responsibility for it and to ensure its diffusion for the benefit of the public.

The achievement of this task requires a certain rigour which those undertaking it must impose upon themselves and to which they are obliged to submit. For, says Towa (1971, IV: 66) ‘the insistence on the precision and objectivity of philosophical investigation and the replacement of authority in all its forms by reason and liberty reveal the essentially humanist nature of the philosophical endeavour’. Philosophical activity provides a privileged pathway towards achieving the liberation of Africa, especially Black Africa, from the doubly problematic issue of the struggle against Western imperialism on the one hand, and on the other, of our personal liberation from all that, in our traditions, prevents us from being ourselves.

In this way, philosophical activity, as the child of its times, cannot shy away from the practical challenges to which the subject engaging in this activity must face up. Henceforth it must aim at realizing a process of *cultural autonomy*. It can be said that what marks intellectual imperialism is its attempt to establish its legitimacy in projecting a denial of civilization, historicity and humanity to subject peoples while at the same time refusing to acknowledge cultural difference.

But it is imperative to put an end to imperialism in all its forms by liberating ourselves also from the stranglehold of our traditions. As Towa stresses, ‘it is not by clinging to our essence and our past that we will ever recover a cultural autonomy’ (1971, IV: 67). Cultural autonomy demands that we adopt a critical stance towards everything that we have received. It is a project that requires *going beyond* what is given, without which ‘it would be nothing more than maintaining the status quo or, more exactly, confirming and accelerating the present evolution towards dependency and powerlessness’ (ibid.). It is a matter of finding a solution to that flaw which consists of wanting to save the past purely because it is ours, to maintain a form of alienation which leads to the disaster of the subordinate people. The debate should therefore not aim at a passive preservation of what comes out of our cultural traditions alone, but should address the possibility of reaching a new understanding of this past, a condition *sine qua non* if a new and authentic identity is to be realized.

Self-consciousness in revolutionary action

The effort to attain self-knowledge becomes a revolutionary act in the sense ‘the path to cultural autonomy necessarily passes by way of revolution, and hence by a self-revolution’ (ibid.). This revolution calls for a radical praxis which requires courage and energy. It implies a radicalism which raises man’s freedom to its zenith by granting him the means to affirm himself as creator. Hence the philosophical interest around the expression ‘radical praxis’, which designates the manifestation of what is human within what is universal. In Towa’s words ‘it is the blazing fire in which are consumed all the dead and obsolete elements of the past and of one’s cultural heritage, leaving alive only those vital forces which can still intervene to pick up the challenge of time and ensure a normal relationship with the world’ (1971, IV: 48). Revolution is an act of responsibility that the subordinated person must assume and for which he must pay the price if he is to reach a rediscovery of self. It goes beyond a simple restitution of the past. In effect, what is at stake is *the recognition of a humanity* in the relation between dominant and dominated. But *revolution* is inscribed in relation to the imperialist, whereas *self-revolution* bears witness to a rupture with all dogmatism associated with our traditions. The revolutionary rises up against the world that shaped him. To destroy that world is to destroy an intimate part of oneself, it means entering into conflict with one’s own person. The result of such *self-revolution* is the radical self-transformation of the subject. In this way, the historical subject, being an actor in the process of transformation, is rendered objective by becoming both the one who carries out the revolution and the one by whom the revolution is carried out. In other words, he is actor and object of the revolutionary action.

The rediscovery of self finds its base in the melding of these two dimensions, namely the weight of tradition and discovery of the secret of the dominating West. Henceforth, therefore, the undertaking takes place within a combinatory space, for 'the process of appropriation of the secret of the other and the destruction of everything within us that is opposed to this [cannot be] accomplished except through relying on ourselves, that is, on our own human resources drawn from the most precious depths of our being, our historical origins' (1971, IV: 49). To set the 'historical origin' as the cornerstone of the liberation project is to take on the task of influencing and orienting the collective imagination. Effectively, by attaining self-realization, the thinking subject also realizes the collective consciousness by drawing the mass of his people into the movement. If self-revolution is a test to which the subject submits himself, the *radical praxis* is inscribed within a much broader field, being that of the conscientization of the masses. The involvement of the mass of the people in the revolutionary movement is the highest level of the radical praxis process, since 'the radicalization of a revolutionary movement comes about with the extension and deepening of its implantation within the mass of the people' (ibid.). Thereafter, the liberation project becomes the business of the conscious masses who find self-discovery in this project by being internally motivated by the sole strength of the popular will. They are not following a reactionary instinct, any more than they are responding to a stimulus. Their action is one that is not externally conditioned. The driving force of the radical praxis comes from the impulse of 'acting by conviction', not from any external manoeuvring. But is a *rapprochement* necessary between what one might call the 'bureaucratic bourgeoisie' and the ordinary people in order to form popular masses capable of taking of taking their own situations in hand?

If, as indicated by Marcien Towa, 'one of the most worrying problems for Black Africa can be seen in the divorce between the ruling bureaucratic bourgeoisie and the rural and urban working classes' (50), it is imperative that an effective reconciliation take place between these two groups, and that it should be anchored in communication as a space for dialogue that makes possible a mutual understanding between the different social actors. To accomplish this, the elite must communicate with the ordinary people through a form of discourse that the latter can understand both on the level of the language used and that of its content. A mass revolutionary action finds its efficaciousness in the *appropriateness* of the discourse for the aspirations of those masses.

This points to the necessity to establish a space that enhances communicational inter-action. The strength of the revolution is embodied in the engagement of the mass of the people whose consciousness has been aroused, and the extent of such conscientization depends largely on the use of a form of discourse which connects with them. Marcien Towa, taking the same perspective as Cheik Anta Diop in his book *Nations Nègres et Cultures*, emphasizes the importance of using the vernacular African languages in the venture of conscientizing African masses, but observes that 'in Africa, and particularly in Francophone Africa, the situation is scarcely believable: large numbers of politicians take it on themselves to address their populations only in French. This leads to scenes of incredible absurdity: a politician or a civil servant addressing, with the help of an interpreter, a crowd which speaks the same maternal language as the speaker!' (ibid.). What interests us from these observations is less the political or politicizing aspect as much as the necessity to use a common communicative space within which mutual comprehension is enhanced. For these ideas to take on material strength by penetrating within the mass of the people, the masses themselves must appropriate both the discourse itself and the spirit of the discourse. Indeed, if the parties to the communication can understand each other in a common language, why does whoever wants to elicit a response from the people not address those to whom his speech is directed in the language that they share in common? In this sense, the project to arouse the consciousness of the dominated people and hence to liberate them will have to be founded upon a linkage between and modernity in its action.

It is from this combining of tradition with modernity that springs the power to animate the project of self-reconciliation as an essential condition for the liberation of the subordinate individual and for justifying or granting a sense to his fully conscious *being-in-the-world*. It even arises imperatively from the march of history, for, as Towa observes, ‘in our world of imperialist super-powers, how can one claim an autonomy that is to any extent real in whatever field it might be, without oneself acquiring a sufficient power to resist any overt or covert attempt at subjugation?’ (68). The subject’s claim to autonomy is actualized only by transcending (in the sense of finding a solution to) the question of self-sufficiency in all its forms. It is necessary, whether scientifically, politically, economically or materially, that the subject who is in pursuit of liberty depend entirely on himself. Thenceforth, it is a matter of normalizing what one might call presuppositions of autonomy for the objective rediscovery of the subject to be effective.

There should not be any pretence about the existence of these presuppositions. This is one of the fundamentals of the critical stance adopted by Towa towards Senghorian negritude and towards ethnophilosophy which, in his view, ‘have as their effect, if not their intention, to conceal these [presuppositions] and as a consequence to cover up the degradation and the demolition of our cultures through neo-colonialism’ (ibid.). Self-sufficiency should be the result of an action proceeding from the conscious subject and not from a simple reaction to a stimulus. It is in this sense that, in his analysis of the meaning of the word ‘ethnophilosophy’, Samba Diakité (2007) observes that ‘in using the term “ethnophilosophy”, Marcién Towa wishes to show that ethnophilosophy is nothing other than a reactive movement, as was the negritude that preceded it.’ Certainly, considering ‘ethnophilosophy’ and ‘negritude’ as ‘simply’ reactions tends to show up a wish to minimize the depths of the positions defended on either side of these two forms of thought. As far as Senghorian negritude is concerned, we will limit ourselves to what has been previously sustained in the Senghor–Towa theoretical debate. As for ‘ethnophilosophy’, it is not only the term itself which poses a problem, but also its *modus operandi*, its functionality which is much more profound and demanding than it would be were it just a simple ‘reaction’.

For those whose work is considered (correctly or incorrectly) as arising from this issue, it is furthermore a matter of studying and analysing the fundamental ways of thinking of the peoples considered with a view to making visible the philosophical substance embodied in the different values by which the human may be expressed. Such a project falls within the theoretical space defined by Alassane Ndaw (1983: 60) who considers that ‘in the African way of thinking is expressed the whole set of values, experiences, ideas, conceptions around existence and final purposes which constitute human life’. It is hence the responsibility of the philosopher to carry out a work of archaeology and hermeneutics in order to identify the specific attitudes that Africans adopt before life.

Ndaw’s logic holds that the freedom of the African philosopher resides in the possibility he has to ‘provide a conceptual foundation for the vision of reality that is particular to the peoples of Africa’ (ibid.). Such propositions are integrated by Towa in his liberation project for the Black African.

‘Appropriation’ or the philosophical solution to the sundering of the subject

With Towa, there is a much broader, indeed a much more ambitious dimension to this project than that conferred by what is designated under the term ‘ethnophilosophy’. In Towa’s way of thinking, it is not a matter of reacting to the provocation arising from the outlook of denial held by nineteenth-century ethnology towards Africa and its so-called ‘primitive’ peoples in general.

African philosophers have the obligation of rethinking their society as they rethink themselves from an original standpoint which gives to their discourse a thoroughly scientific character. Now, because he is sundered between two apparently incompatible tendencies, specifically the *assimilation of Western culture* and the *preservation of African traditions*, the subordinated Black African is caught in a situation whose transcendence requires him to be both strategic and subtle, and particularly to effect at the same time a break with dogmatism in whatever form it might appear. It is in this way that the notion of 'appropriation' becomes operative in the sense of making possible the integration of the positive values of an exterior culture with the traditional values which have survived the test of the demands of critical thinking.

Appropriation occurs at the moment when the subject adopts a critical distance both in relation to the values derived from the imperialist West and from the traditional values that weigh us down. Not only is it important to bring to light the philosophy latent in African traditions, but also to inscribe this into the project of the achievement of liberty which will allow putting an end to the artificial (because illegitimate) inequality between peoples. In this light, it is interesting to consider how we might appropriate the so-called Western technologies, science and philosophy in order to better apprehend ourselves and locate ourselves in complete autonomy and liberty.

It is in this sense that Towa emphasizes that 'to the contrary, by stressing these presuppositions, we aim to point out the urgency and necessity to revolutionize our cultures from top to bottom so as to avoid their pure and simple disappearance, and to enable their recognition and rejuvenation' (Towa 1971: 68). This project takes on a highly humanizing perspective since our self-affirmation corroborates our becoming open to our own cultural traditions alongside the opening of ourselves to the external other through mastering the sources of his dominant power, which emanates from a philosophy that is closely linked to science and technology: 'because European philosophy, by reason of its close relationship with science and technology, seems to be at the heart of European power, it will assist us in bringing about the mental revolution which will condition the growth of our own power; by revealing that conceptual philosophical knowledge is the sole foundation of universality and of dialogue with the Absolute, it provides us with valuable indicators which will help direct our efforts to overcome the divisions in Africa that are based on the diversity of extremist religious faiths and to lay the basis for a political unity reflecting the dimensions of our time' (ibid.). What is required is to find the proper balance between the appropriation of these Western influences and their usage necessarily adapted to the realities that Africa imposes on us.

This does not mean a blind submission to European culture or an assimilation of our 'being' through a use of these means for ends that are neither wished for nor carefully conceived. What it does mean is a process of creative appropriation through the application of an *active consciousness*, which in itself is a sign of *liberty*.

Such appropriation does not come about through a 'magic recipe' which you simply need to have for everything at once to change. It is important not only to master the 'recipe' itself but also the mechanisms by which this recipe is constituted and the methods by which it might be applied to Black African realities, notably because we are relating to two civilizations each of which has its own functioning mechanisms. The diversity of cultures grants a dominant status to the West in whose hands lies the power of technology, and creates among subordinate cultures an aspiration towards liberty. Since the two wills are incompatible, the clash between them is inevitable. But for the response to dominance to be proportionate to what has been inflicted upon it, it becomes imperative that one appropriates the 'victory secret' of the *other*. To do this needs an *active consciousness* which puts itself to the test in a search for self that is embedded within a project which aims to transcend the diversity of cultures. Hence, 'getting hold of the West's "secret" must henceforth consist in acquiring a thorough knowledge of Western civilization, in identifying the reason for its power and in introducing it into our own culture' (Towa, 1971, III: 40).

We should try to understand the sense that Marcien Towa gives to the verb ‘introduce’ here. This does not mean bringing about an ‘addition’ of Western cultural elements to traditional Black African cultures while leaving these latter intact. This *introduction* does not correspond to a *grafting* or to an *add-on* of elements. Rather it is a mechanism which, at the same time as it makes its own the secret of the West, also subjects the Black African traditions to a test whose expected outcome is the revolution of the culture.

Thus it is that the liberation project, the quest for liberty, becomes the moment of *opening up* as the basis for self-disposition. For the culturally subordinate individual, this self-disposition validates the project of *self-affirmation* through his *being-there-in-the-world* in terms of an entity conscious of his own goal. But the self-affirmation project involves simultaneously the willingness to assume our past together with the appropriation of the secret of the external other. Such an opening up of self implies a will to rupture, a sundering of the self from its essence, since ‘the will to be oneself leads directly to the proud re-appropriation of the past, because the essence of the self is but the result of the past of the self; but when the past is lucidly interrogated and scrutinized, it will attest that the self’s present subjection finds its explanation in the provenance of the self’s essence, that is, in the self’s past, and nowhere else’ (ibid.: 40). It is clear that if it is from the essence of the self that the weakness of the self comes when faced by the other and the imbalance of otherness, the self’s revolution is effected through putting its essence to the test. This testing is brought about in a dialectical process of self-negation through *self-revolution*.

Towa’s outlook is not reflected in the spirit of the words quoted below of the Royal Lady, a character in Hamidou Kane’s 1961 novel *L’Aventure Ambiguë* (Ambiguous Adventure) who affirms that the children of the Diallobé people need to be sent to school so that their individuality should become laid down through the denial of its essence, whose maintenance and preservation would otherwise embed it in dogmatism. Our cultures had to be put to the test. The Royal Lady exclaimed: ‘the school in which I would place our children will kill in them what today we love and rightly conserve with care. Perhaps the very memory of us will die in them. [...] What I am proposing is that we should agree to die in our children’s hearts and that the foreigners who have defeated us should fill the place, wholly, which we shall have left free’ (Kane, 1972: 46). The remarks of the Royal Lady are of a very high level of complexity. She presents the Western school as being the avenue which makes it possible to pass from our natural form of self-esteem to our being-in-the-world as a consciousness of being that constitutes itself in and through confronting the other. The subordinate individual exposes himself, in his quality as a natural creature, to a test of the discovery of his objective self which involves him in a process of opening up. The school is the place where otherness finds a rational basis. It encourages the opening up to the other by allowing the integration of what is positive in the other’s cultural values. It is certainly a process of integration and not assimilation. Integration proceeds through a combination of aspects that are useful for the subject to reach his existential completeness. This subject thus presents as the product of a melding of positive values. Assimilation, on the other hand, represents either a radical replacement of the older cultural values, or a juxtaposition of certain values alongside others. It is by rendering the subject blind to assimilation that *memory* is wiped away. Such assimilation is the equivalent of what Marcien Towa calls ‘submission, subjection to Westernness’ (1971: 24).

The Royal Lady does not present her call to the Diallobé in that light. Indeed, she makes it clear that ‘I, the Most Royal Lady, do not like the foreign school. I detest it. My opinion, nevertheless, is that we must send our children there anyway’ (Kane, 1972: 45). It seems paradoxical to hate the school and yet to support the idea of sending the children to it. Is it not because the foreign school will destroy in these children what the Diallobé consider to be of their very essence, something that, for them, is inalienable?

One must realize that, from the Royal Lady's way of thinking, the reality principle takes precedence over that of pleasure. If the heart is reticent about the children's attending the school, reality demands a denial of the self which may lead to the discovery of the secret of the West and the emergence of a subject fit for facing up to the imperialist. Hence the fact that the school presents as a necessity of which one is wary, because it provides the privileged pathway to acquiring and integrating the dominating power of the West: the school is the place where the loss of certain values is signed off. However, the values which weigh the subordinate individual down die in contact with the *other* through the integration of certain of them. What the subordinate individual loses is simultaneously replaced by positive values drawn from that other and which are a sign of an integrative opening up to a new essential identity. The values which fail to meet the test of contact yield room to these new values whose combination with the remaining resistant values then constitute the essence of the new subject that emerges from this process of *contradiction and transcendence*.

This opening up is thus played out through a positive *subjection* which renders operative the concept of appropriation by dispensing with any element of submission or servitude. It constitutes a relationship between 'being ourselves' and 'taking on the secret of the West'. This relationship presents a significant difficulty whose solution lies not in 'submission' but in *subjection* in the sense of a 'utilization for unwonted ends, meaning ends that are not conceived or intended by oneself. In this case, on the other hand, it is European philosophy which is taking a place within a project that is now entirely ours, and which thereby itself becomes ours; for any cultural element at all will become ours once it is at our disposal, rather than us at its, once we subject it, in Aimé Césaire's expression, to the dialectic of our needs' (Towa, 1971: 69). Contrary to *servitude*, *subjection* is a universal project of a society founded on an *ethic of the mutual recognition* of peoples for each other. It is the moment of the suppression of the exploitation of man by man that puts an end to the organized domination of man by man. *Subjection*, in the sense Marcien Towa gives it, is the marker of self-enjoyment and self-disposition. One who engaged in such personal subjection is he who is conscious of his *liberty* as a subject but who embeds the enjoyment of that liberty in the recognition of what constitutes human dignity, namely autonomy.

Conclusion

The conditions of existence of the Black African, or indeed of any *subordinate subject* seeking liberty and dignity, requires effectiveness of conscientization. The active consciousness as a consciousness that takes charge of itself, which struggles for autonomy and self-affirmation as a *being-in-the-world*, is the principal weapon the human has to triumph over obstacles he must face in the process of self-reconciliation.

It is in this way that the process of *opening up* may be conceived, from an African perspective, as initiated by a profound sundering of the subject and by his strong intention to bring to awareness his life situation so as to resolve his problem of the moment: that is the desire for self-affirmation in the world. The opening up thus goes hand in hand with the desire for affirmation and it is in this process of liberation that the subject attains a universal dimension. In this case, however, the universality is not experienced as an imposition, it is not constraining but active, that is to say desired and sought for by the conscious subject.

The effectiveness of this opening up passes by way of an *active consciousness* which refuses to be characterized by emptiness and passivity. It functions in the service of a cause, an ideal which, for Marcien Towa, takes the form of a political, cultural, economic and social liberation of the Black African. It is a rational and rationalizing consciousness because it is grounded in reason and embedded in a process of the pursuit of reason, a reason that is free, autonomous and responsible for the task of achieving a liberty that is essential for the human soul.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

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