

REFLECTIONS ON AFRICAN  
PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT  
AS SEEN BY EUROPE AND AFRICA

What should we understand by African philosophical thought if not a philosophy expressed by African thinkers, based on their own experience with the means and within the limits of that experience? A closer inspection will show, however, that this truism calls for rethinking. If we abide by the writings of our contemporary philosophers, African and non-African, who have endeavored to put the essence of African thought into one of the Occidental languages or a Westernized indigenous language, we soon see the perplexity in which we find ourselves when it is a matter of transcribing the systems of thought that are properly African, that resemble no other system of thought and that Africans alone are able to expound and understand. This was for a long time the questionable affirmation of the advocates of Negritude and is still questionable today, because we cannot judge the value of the written formulation of such a system of thought unless we put ourselves into the circumstances in which it was born and in which it lived. Though the existence of a dialectic relationship between a collective con-

sciousness and its formulation as a philosophical system is conceivable, obviously the philosophical thought captured, so to speak, at the source and the oral or written forms in which this thought is preserved and transmitted are two totally different things. To opt for one or the other or for both can involve tasks which many hands share in varying degrees. It is not necessary that a philosopher formulate and express his philosophy in writing or that someone else gather his statements and give them form for his philosophy to be valid and durable. Moreover, although he transmits it orally he never does so with the same words, even if they are always recognizable and memorable among all others. Platonic, Hegelian and Scholastic philosophies remain themselves whether we write about them or read the works of their founders. Consider Pyrrho, Socrates, Jesus: oral tradition has sufficed to bring their message down through the centuries to us even though they wrote nothing. Why should it not be the same for the oral philosophical traditions of Africa?

In the cases mentioned above, what is an oral *tradition* at the beginning if not a word transmitted from mouth to mouth by the immediate disciples, the apostles and the faithful, the witnesses of the truth of the message and the reality of the acts of the Prophet, the Philosopher or the Messiah? Later, perhaps a long time afterward, the message was committed to writing and was most often the work of several hands: the Elastics, Pyrrhonians and Platonists, the Evangelists after the Apostles and before the Doctors of the Church, then Scholasticism after St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. We could say the same of the Chinese and the Hindus; then why not of the Hausas, Lamnsos', Swahilis? Up until today the oral philosophies of Africa have kept a Socratic silence. This is not an indication of an absence of philosophical thought.

The problem that arises here is to know to what extent this thought is deformed by those who formulate it in writing, whether they are European, American or even African. To what extent and in what spirit? Do they only render an ephemeral or superficial service, or do they contribute to the conception and transmission of African philosophies of the past and present? Do the African Africanists have—can they have—the same view as Euro-American Africanists? Apparently, there is something more dialectical in the

contributions of both toward African thinking in recent centuries.

In fact, the use of writing in Africa today has often mistakenly given the impression that those who offer any written formulation of African thinking are innovators, whereas in reality they need only be conscious of perpetuating a centuries-old tradition, constantly undergoing changes in the hands of African communities. African philosophies or science cannot be said to begin with the introduction of writing. This only brings another dimension to them: it does not create them.

Nevertheless, Euro-American or Afro-Africanist philosophers making up the Afro-Western Africanist school, have, through their criteria from the Western world, offered a dialectical contribution that cannot be refuted, especially in their written formulation. There might be a tendency to think that emphasis on African cultural experiences, rather than on the tools expressing them, will introduce a new form of Socratic silence in those committed to the course of becoming philosophers through the mere written formulation of African philosophies. However, as problematic as this may appear, the history of these philosophies, even with their underpinnings of prejudice, superiority and inferiority complexes, and so on, can never exclude colonial and neo-colonial contributions nor the Euro-American Africanists. The reason is that they seem to enjoy a certain historical privilege that keeps pursuing us with its Cartesian logic of "*Cogito ergo sum, dubito ergo sum.*" We are thus obliged to accept both the African philosophies we live atavistically and their written formulation, especially with the use of Western languages and the influence of non-African philosophies.

True, we might ask ourselves what criteria should be used to judge the authenticity of an African philosophy: birthplace? degree of foreign influence? active or passive participation in the cultural experiences of Africa? But observers and translators will always have to make way for participants and authors in the same way as spectators clearing a space for the dancers and musicians. Whatever criteria we use, we can never deny that there is a dialectical distinction between the spectator's participation in the music and that of the drummers and dancers: a distinction between "they" (the drummers and dancers) "do this or that, believe in this or that" whereas the drummers and dancers nurse, tender and trans-

mit a language of “we,” the inclusive “we,” if we consider some of the affirmations of African languages. There is no doubt that the “they” language is at once foreign to the dancers and musicians, though it is inspired within the same arena of musical performance and life. Concretely, observers do not hesitate to make-believe that African philosophies only begin when they meet the eyes and ears of those writing about them in European languages. Few, if any, so-called African philosophies when put into their original languages could resist the criticism and spontaneity of African drummers and dancers. Beyond their pathetic appeal for a rigor, a universalism to which they cannot lay claim and their submission to an alphabetical system more or less adapted to their needs, more or less accepted or rejected, there is the fact that all these hitherto exclusively oral languages, as soon as they enter into contact with European languages, begin to lose their hold. A movement toward universalism? By no means!

Whatever the case may be, we are basically and simply convinced that historically and dialectically there is room to question the apparent truism according to which African philosophies are the exclusive province of African writers and have nothing to do with what Euro-American Africanist philosophers, along with their Afro-Africanist colleagues and African philosophers themselves, think.

Certainly we sometimes need to suspect the salvation-oriented intentions of some Euro-American Africanist philosophers, such as the Reverend Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary who spearheaded the defense of and saved Africanist philosophical thought from the condemnation and gropings of 19th-century Western anthropological schools of thought, with the publication of his *Bantu Philosophy*. However, we need not belabor too long the point of accepting his contribution to African thought. Placide Tempels had goals that were external to classical African thinking. As a missionary, he sought the best way to gain converts to Christianity and as a researcher he looked for the most convincing means to inform Western scholarship as to the existence or non-existence of an African philosophy. His answer to both these problems was that not only was there an African philosophy but also that it must be the basis of any missionary work of conversion.

Nevertheless, his best-known work, *Bantu Philosophy*, reveals a series of disparities between Western thought and African thought. Among these is a striking duality of language and cultural paradigms that today reveal rather than conceal the predominant mentality in Europe at the time. While genuine classical African thinking did not disdain non-churchgoers, and did not consider Africans uncivilized, making no distinction between those who went to church and those who did not, nor between natives and non-Africans, Western thought on the whole opposed Christians to pagans, evolved to non-evolved peoples (the uncivilized, the barbarian, the Bushman). In the throes of the invading *churchgoing*, classical African thought reacted putting Christians and Moslems side by side as betrayers of the age-proven authentic life and culture. The term “pagan” was no more pejorative in the mouth of a Christian than “churchgoer” of “faithful” was in the mind of a lay African *homekeeper*. And if the homekeepers baptized the churchgoers with such names as *God's people* or *those who belong to God*<sup>1</sup> it was simply because in their own minds the idea of belonging to God was so obvious that no one needed to solemnize it with a rite. Those who dared to do so explicitly merited the name “God's people.” Churchgoers whom African non-churchgoers call *Ve Nyuy yi*, God's people, are seen and judged with the same suspicious eyes as Christians rejecting paganism and regarding it as a transitory stage that will eventually be overcome by Christianity. Traditional African thought sees churchgoing as equally transitory. Those who left or kept their own people at home *to go to church* were only engaged in a transitory act. One left the homekeepers to go to the church, or the temple, or the mosque, only to return to the home and its keepers.

This is therefore the nature and origin of a dualistic code of behavior issuing from the confrontation of African and Western cultures. As the example we have given above shows, there began to be two weights and two measures, resulting from the Western presence in Africa. The refinement and progress of this dualistic standard calls for new philosophical systems to embrace both of

<sup>1</sup> Many African languages make this distinction between those who go to church—the children of God: *Ve Nyuy yi*, and those who stay home: *Wir vefo la* (Lamso')—like some Tikari languages of the Cameroon Grassfields.

them. It is precisely this dialectic that questions the apparently obvious thesis according to which an African philosophy can be nothing else than a philosophy expounded only by Africans.

Since that is the case, let us look for a reasonable means to resolve a dichotomy that dialectically and simultaneously diminishes and yet enriches African cultural experiences and thought through the non-African Africanist contributions as well as through the contributions of Africans.

#### DIALECTICS OF EXISTENCE AND NON-EXISTENCE

Western scholarship had for a long time established its intrinsically racist theories on the principle of the existence or non-existence of an African thought that was radically different from that of the West, so that the main question was to discover if such or such a discipline or science existed or not in classical African communities before their historical contact with the Western world. At first, this might sound like the Platonic concern with ontological problems or with what Greek philosophy generally considered to be the fundamental elements of which matter consists. But the existence *versus* nonexistence theme in its colonial setting differed greatly from Platonic concerns. Even if it did so only indirectly, we should be mindful here of Aristotle's rejection of those Platonic ontological concerns as being too abstract and detrimental to reality.

The truth-claims of the thesis of existence *versus* non-existence that Africanists promoted in African research was based primarily on colonial or neo-colonial prejudices. They were more sentimental than scientific, more popular than objective. They rested on a rigid and racist hierarchy of values that conferred barbarity on the Blacks and made *tabula rasa* of qualities proper to them. The promoters of the thesis thus set out to confirm or deny the scientific theories, arguing for or against. In general, it was believed that "primitive peoples" were subjected to non-rational systems of thought while the whole of the civilized world obeyed universal reason. Things African were consequently considered too rudimentary and exotic to have been the outcome of a rational systematization.

Thus the essential theme of historical research on indigenous

African thought became that of proving whether this or that science existed or not among the Blacks or, more generally, among “primitive peoples.” We are told that for long Western scholarship affirmed that primitive peoples were incapable of any science. The earliest ethnologists who set themselves apart from this opinion had to prove the contrary, namely, that primitive peoples were, are and will ever be humans, capable of anything human. Placide Tempels was one of the first to share this opinion. Speaking of African philosophy, he wrote:

“We need not expect the first African who comes along, especially one of the young ones, to be able to give us a systematic exposition of his ontological system. Nonetheless, this ontology exists, and it penetrates and informs all the thought of these primitives; it dominates and orients all their behavior. It is our task to trace out the elements of this thought, to classify them and to systematize them according to the ordered systems and intellectual disciplines of the Western World.”<sup>2</sup>

Pioneers in African research had first and foremost to establish the existence or non-existence of each discipline, or its equivalent, within African tradition. In order to present history, religion, literature, music, philosophy, or whatever other discipline apropos of Africa, to a Western public, they had to call on Western standards. In the passage quoted above, the existence of African ontology is emphasized not as an end in itself but as a means toward the task of its systematic exposition by Westerners. The mission of Westerners is to commit Bantu ontology to writing, not merely because Africans are unable to do so but also because this ontology *exists*.

The existence or non-existence thesis questioned and set aside the existence of African religions, theology, music, literature, etc. It took a long time for approaches such as that of Tempels to appear. But while he believed that Western philosophy was static whereas African philosophy was dynamic, some Westerners based their arguments on the Shakespearian “To be or not to be, that is the question,” and plausibly judged and concluded that there was

<sup>2</sup> Placide Tempels, “*Bantu Philosophy*,” *Présence Africaine*, Paris, p. 21, 1959.

no history, literature, medicine or philosophy in African cultures. Both Tempels and those who rejected the existence of African sciences erred in giving preference to the question of existence or non-existence to the detriment of a more realistic and positive question of the *howness* of that existence. After all, the existence of the Africans themselves is the basis of the existence of any African science. One could not question the one without questioning the other. The fundamental question of the *howness* of the existence of those who are already endowed with an existence should never have been blurred by the apparent priority of the thesis of existence *versus* non-existence. No existence is parasitic. Not even that of parasites. The Shakespearian “To be or not to be, that is the question,” must be understood in more realistic terms. If not, it needs modifying. For us, the question is “to be and *how* to be.” We must always behold things in their *howness* of existence. But for Westerners the need to affirm the non-existence of primitive civilizations was essential in order to justify their mission or the slave trade, colonialism, neo-colonialism, with all their ramifications of assimilationism, indirect rule and apartheid.

With the thesis of existence *versus* non-existence, it was illogically proved that the absence of writing meant the absence of historical heritage and transmission. African languages were catalogued as dialects or vernaculars simply because they were not written and did not have a written *historia*. Along with this we can associate a whole range of vocabulary which has been promoting a dichotomous language paradigm within European languages. Think of the opposition between citizen and native, nation and tribe, house and hut, priest and magician, religion and animism, village and borough, kings and chiefs. As a result, many leading Euro-Africanists have reacted by refusing to concern themselves any longer with this false problem of existence or non-existence of an African culture. The historian Basil Davidson rightly observes in this wise that,

“These historical advances have swept away some old myths and established some new truths. The seductively agreeable belief so dear to nineteenth-century Europe that all in Africa was savage chaos before the coming of the Europeans may linger here and there but not among historians concerned with Africa. The happy



conviction of the conquerors that they were bringing civilization to peoples against whom the Gates of Eden had barely closed may still have its adherents, yet not among those who have looked at the evidence. Far from being a kind of museum of Barbarians whose populations had stayed outside the laws of human growth and change through some natural failing or inferiority, Africa is now seen to possess a history which demands as serious an approach as that of any other continent.”<sup>3</sup>

What we have been stressing here is that the colonialist thesis of existence *versus* non-existence was as misleading as it was contradictory. It became more realistic and profitable to research into *how* African cultures and sciences had survived and expressed themselves through orality than to attempt to discover whether African cultures and sciences existed at all. Tempels was correct when he said, “Anyone who claims that primitive peoples possess no system of thought exclude them thereby from the category of men.”<sup>4</sup>

The best proof for the existence of these African cultures and sciences can be nothing other than the concrete existence of Africans themselves. Neither Africans nor Euro-American Africanists can forge African sciences without the lives of Africans and African cultures. To have wished to deny their existence was an expression of the will to power of the West over its colonial empire.

#### ANTS COLLECTIVELY AMASS THEIR ANTHILLS

One of the effects of the thesis of existence *versus* non-existence was its belief in the mistaken notion that a science becomes a science because of the art of writing. If the material absence of alphabetical writing lured many pioneer Euro-American Africanists, and those who later followed in their paths without questioning, into the idea that Western alphabetical writing alone ratifies the existence of science and the transmission of cultural heritage there is a need today for correction. Instead of using alphabetical writing to condemn a culture that does not have it, we should use it to praise such a culture.

<sup>3</sup> Basil Davidson, *Africa in History*, Granada Publications, 1974, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Placide Tempels, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

Recently, an Afro-European Africanist philosopher of some repute, Paulin Hountondji, accepted the idea that writing conditions the existence of a science, in general, and philosophy in particular, when he defined African philosophy as a set of written texts or as a literature that has existed for the past thirty years or so:

“By ‘African philosophy’ I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves ... So for us African philosophy is a body of literature whose existence is undeniable, a bibliography that has grown constantly over the last thirty years.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps what disturbs some Afro-European Africanists about the existence of African philosophies is the absence of the Chinua Achebes or Wole Soyinkas of these philosophies. There is a great need for concrete works to serve as proof of their existence as well as support for their teaching. But these needs in themselves are not sufficient reason to define African philosophies as mere literature. Hountondji believes he is saving African philosophies in this way when in fact he is condemning them. What he says is that there cannot be an African philosophy without a set of written texts or literature and that African philosophical literature has only existed for thirty years, since when the bibliography on the subject has been constantly growing and enriched.

The major fallacy of Hountondji’s reasoning stems from the confusion between the content and the container, the contents and the tools of their expression. Writing as a tool at the disposal of the sciences cannot be taken to represent them. Hountondji’s definition is misleading in that it invites us to give more importance to the tools than to what they are used for; it gives more importance to the container than to the contents. To give more weight to the alphabetical writing that preserved for a later and special transmission the messages of a Socrates, a Pyrrho, a Jesus Christ, than to the oral transmission itself is to question the validity and *raison d’être* of the transcription that claims to give us the authenticity of the oracle. The role of writing should not be confused with the role of human experience it serves.

<sup>5</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy—Myth and Reality*, Hutchinson and Co., London, 1983, p. 33.

Hountondji does not lack in daring; he contradicts himself when he writes in his postscript:

“So let there be no mistake about it: I have never for a moment in this essay argued that pre-colonial Africa was an intellectual *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, my view is that every society in the world possesses practico-theoretical codes or practical ideologies on the one hand and, on the other, written or oral texts, transmitted from generation to generation ... In short, we have not been trying to deny the existence of African thought. Our contention is that it deserves to be taken far more seriously than it is by the ethnophilosophers and that instead of reducing it to a closed and dogmatic system, we must exploit its richness, its contradictions, its life.”<sup>6</sup>

We agree with some of Hountondji’s criticism of ethnophilosophers, but he seems to forget that those he thus qualifies were anxious to bridge the gap between oral philosophical texts and their own written philosophical texts, without setting temporal limitations on the beginning of African philosophy. He seems to imply that African philosophy either begins with written texts or with the opinions of their authors. “By African philosophy I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.”<sup>7</sup> A philosophical text is a tissue of philosophical and cultural experiences issuing from a triple source of thought, time and space. Our view then is that the lives of Africans as sources of philosophy in time and space are the only conditions for the existence of African philosophy. The real problem, as we stated above, is not whether philosophies exist but how they exist in time and space since the first and foremost condition for the existence of any philosophy is human life with its desires and aspirations. The existence of an African philosophy does not go back thirty years as Hountondji would have us believe but is as old as Africans themselves. We can appreciate his desire for pedagogical text, but such a desire should neither mislead and limit our definition of the beginning of African philosophy nor give the impression that philosophy is impossible

<sup>6</sup> *Idem.* pp. 178-9.

<sup>7</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

in oral civilizations. What of the Peripatetics? Oral tradition is perhaps more fragile but there is nothing contradictory in orally teaching and transmitting our cultural experiences and the sciences that enable us to understand them. It is even more natural.

*Ethnophilosophy* is sometimes accused of being “hybrid.” This accusation puts into question the use of interdisciplinary methods in research. Accepting this opinion would mean that the collaboration and team-work between followers of different disciplines for a better understanding of the African oral past, or orality in general, would be discouraged, whereas it should be encouraged. If no man is an island, neither is any discipline. Ants, no matter where they are, collectively amass their anthills.

#### IN SUPPORT OF GENUINE COMPARISON

Genuine comparison as a result of a cultural African-Western contact has often been distorted or simply absent from the philosophical research under discussion here. Investigations become distorted once we tend to regard the tools of earlier African philosophical expressions and transmission with disdain, once we confuse content and container, once we set the wrong people to conduct African research, once we favor some languages to the detriment of others, once we do not liberate our mentalities from earlier linguistic, political and economic prejudices, ideologies and practices.

Comparison between cultures is not valid unless it aims at promoting human understanding and is founded on the idea that human cultures are at once similar and different and that, consequently, to argue in favor of the differences to the detriment of the similarities is to argue in favor of racist anthropology that establishes a hierarchy of human cultures.

If at any time it was believed that the presence of writing implied the annihilation of oral communication, it is an error that must be corrected, because writing as a cultural invention and tool, whatever its degree of integration into human life and history, does not and cannot replace the role of “orality,” the orality of transmission that links, generation by generation, the past to the present and the present to the future. Our one ambition has been to attempt to correct this error of Africanist-ism whereby we tend to confuse

the otherwise complementary roles of writing and orality within culture, in our enthusiasm to commit everything to writing. What is too often forgotten in this excess of zeal is the progress of the other sciences. In our day, writing enters into conflict with modern inventions that dispute its supremacy. We would not be far from the truth in visualizing the dangers of written text and literature vis-à-vis television, telex, telephone, cassettes, video and other means of telecommunications promised for tomorrow. The avowed end is to find the best means for an integral recovery of any lived experience and embrace it, whether it comes from the senses or from reason or a combination of the two. In all that, there is more a step forward toward orality than toward alphabetical writing. It is as though writing has proved to be one of the principal betrayers of the integrity of human cultural experiences rather than their faithful representative.

All this must be included in Africanist-ism if we do not want to exclude the present generation of Africans from their ancestral past, their collective present and future. The Africans of today, yesterday and tomorrow can never unchain their hands, ears, eyes, noses, heads from the lands and times and minds that bore them. In Africans, too, past, present and future meet as Siegfried Sassoon wrote in 1886:

“In me, past, present, future meet  
To hold long chiding conference.  
My lusts usurp the present sense  
And strangle reason in his seat.  
My loves leap through the future’s fence  
To dance with dream-enfranchised feet.  
In me the cave-man clasps the seer,  
And garlanded Apollo goes  
Chanting to Abraham’s deaf ear.  
In me the tiger sniffs the rose.  
Look in my heart, kind friends and tremble  
Since there your elements assemble.”

Bongasu Tanla Kishani  
(*École normale supérieure, Bambili, Cameroon*)