

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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COMMENTS ON CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Dedicated to my son.

“There are two ways of losing oneself: by isolation walled into the individual, or by dilution in the ‘universal’.”

Aimé Césaire (*Letter to Maurice Thorez*, 1956)

NOTICE

I term a group of texts “African philosophy”: to be precise, the group of texts written by Africans and defined as “philosophic” by the authors themselves.

This definition, let us note, involves no “*petitio principii*.” The sense of the adjective “philosophic” need not be reckoned with here, and even less the cogency of the adjective. All that matters is the fact of the adjective itself, the deliberate recourse to the *word* “philosophy” whatever, by the way, the sense or meaninglessness of the *word* may be. In other words, all that concerns us is the philosophic intention of the authors, not the extent (hard to evaluate) of its effective realisation.

Translated by Sally Bradshaw.

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Thus African philosophy is for us a particular literature. It is indubitable that this literature exists; it assumes a shape in a bibliography which has not ceased growing for at least twenty years. The limited aim of this commentary is to circumscribe this literature, and pick out the main themes, and to show what up to now, has been the problem of fact, making that problem itself problematic. It will have achieved its end if, maybe, we manage to convince our African readers that African philosophy does not lie where we have so long looked for it, in some mysterious corner of our soul which is supposedly unalterable, as analysis would have to piece together such a collectively unconscious vision of the world; but that our philosophy is entirely played out in this very analysis; in the laborious dissertations by means of which we have tried up to now to define ourselves. We should recognise the ideological nature of these dissertations, and it remains to us to *liberate* them (in the most *political* sense of the word), in order to make a theoretical dissertation out of them, which would be indissolubly philosophic and scientific.¹

¹ Here, by way of an indication, is a minimal bibliography:

Alioune Diop, *NIAM M'PAYA ou de la fin que dévorent les moyens* (preface to *La Philosophie Bantoue* by R. P. Placide Tempels (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1949);

Alexis Kagame, *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être* (Brussels, 1956);

A. Makarakisa, *La dialectique des Barundi* (Brussels, 1959)

W. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962);

Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1961); *Liberté, I; Négritude et humanisme* (Paris, Seuil, 1964);

Lufuluabo, *Vers une théodicée bantoue* (1962); *La notion luba-bantoue de l'être* (1964);

Kwame N'Krumah, *Consciencism* (London, Heinemann Publishers, 1964);

Vincent Mulago, *Un visage africain du christianisme* (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1965);

Allassane N'Daw, "Peut-on parler d'une pensée africaine?," in *Présence Africaine*, No. 58, 1966, p. 32-46;

Basile-Juléat Fouda, *La Philosophie africaine de l'existence* (Lille, Faculté des lettres, 1967: thesis for Ph. D.);

Jean-Calvin Bahoken, *Clairières métaphysiques africaines* (Paris, Présence Africaine, 1967);

Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, "Le Bantou problématique," in *Présence Africaine*, No. 66, 1968;

Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris, édit. Réclame, 1950, reedited by Présence Africaine);

Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris, Seuil, 1952); *Les damnés de la Terre* (Paris, Maspero, 1961).

I. ARCHAEOLOGY: WESTERN "ETHNO-PHILOSOPHY"

One of its precursors was Tempels. *La Philosophie Bantoue*, written by this Belgian missionary, still passes for a classic of "African Philosophy" in some eyes.² From our point of view, it appears more like a work of ethnology which has philosophic pretensions, or, more simply, if one may be excused the neologism,

The reader may also include this article in the list, and other of our texts which have preceded it, if he wishes to amuse himself at the little game of "groups which include themselves," notably:

"Charabia et mauvaise conscience: psychologie du langage chez les intellectuels colonisés," in *Présence Africaine*, No. 61, 1967, p. 11-31;

"Un philosophe africain dans l'Allemagne du XVIII^{ème} siècle: Antoine-Guillaume Amo," in *Les Etudes Philosophiques*, No. 1, 1970;

"Pourquoi la théorie?," in *Bulletin de liaison de la Commission inter-africaine de philosophie*, Société Africaine de Culture, No. 3, 1969;

"Le problème actuel de la philosophie africaine," to appear in the 4th. vol. of *Contemporary Philosophy*, published by the International Philosophical Institute, 1970.

Comments.

We are here quoting only African authors, according to our definition of African philosophy. Thus non-African "Africanists" are not included in this list. It may be judged, on a reading of what follows, how well founded this exclusion is.

On the other hand, we include Antillaians like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon: these are Africans of the diaspora. And, although they are not themselves philosophers (that is to say they have no pretensions so to be), they nevertheless provide us with the wherewithal to conduct a productive political criticism of a particular form of philosophy.

To be thorough one should add to the list all the theses for doctorates or for diplomas of further education, or master's degrees, or, in short, all university work done by students and African researchers in philosophy, even if they bear upon the most classical European authors. Since they really are philosophical works, and they were produced by Africans, what reason would one have to exclude them? Our term "naive," which covers all the texts of African philosophy, enables us to note the dissonances which are internal to this literature, accurately set apart between tragic parentheses, which pertain to Africa on one hand, and on the other hand to the narrow imprisonment in an "Africanist" ideology which is not itself of African origin. Thus if we refer to none of this first category of texts, it is only on account of not having been able to make an exhaustive inventory, or even a representative selection.

Finally, North African literature is only omitted here for material reasons. It, also, is an integral part of African literature in general, of course, although it constitutes an autonomous sub-group, in the same way as Black African literature, with which we concern ourselves here, does. It would be a useful task some day to lay bare the problem of the real unity of the two literatures systematically, over and above their obvious differences.

² R. P. Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, original version in Flemish, French version, Paris, *Présence Africaine*, 1949. This work is in its 3rd edition, which says a lot!

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a work of ethno-philosophy. It only concerns us here insofar as certain African philosophers have referred to it, in their efforts to reconstitute a properly "African" philosophy, in the wake of this Belgian writer.

La Philosophie Bantoue did indeed prepare the way for all later attempts to reconstruct a particular *Weltanschauung*, a specific world view which is supposedly shared by all Africans, beyond the influence of history and change, and, in addition, *philosophic*. African customs and traditions were examined, proverbs, institutions, in short the various *donnés* of the African cultural life.

One can see what Tempels' motivation must have been. At first glance it appears to be generous, since his aim was to dispel a certain image of the negro which had been spread by Lévy-Bruhl and his school; to show that the negro *Weltanschauung* is not reducible to the tag of a "primitive mentality," which is insensitive to contradictions, indifferent to elementary rules of coherent thinking, which does not absorb the lessons of experience, etc...; but that instead, it depends upon a reasoned view of the universe, which although different from the occidental system, nonetheless deserves the name of "philosophy" in the same way. Thus, at first sight, Tempels' concern was to reinstate the black man and his culture to a position beyond the contempt which had up to then victimised him.

But on closer examination, this is obviously ill-founded: one becomes aware that the book is not written for Africans, but for Europeans, and more particularly for colonials and missionaries.³ The seventh and last chapter carries an eloquent title: "La philosophie bantoue et notre mission civilisatrice." So that, in the end, as usual, everything happens outside the Africans themselves; the "Bantu philosophy" only serves as a pretext for a discussion among learned Europeans; the negro, because of this, continues to be just the opposite of an interlocutor: he is the subject of conversation, a face without a voice that they

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 17: "A better understanding of Bantu thought is quite as indispensable for all who are called to live among the natives. Thus this concerns all colonialists, but more particularly those who are called to lead and judge the negroes, all those who are concerned about the favourable evolution of clan rights, in short, all who wish to civilise, educate, raise, the Bantus. But if it concerns all well-wishing colonials, it is particularly aimed at missionaries."

try to spell out among themselves, an object to be defined, and not the possible participant in a discussion.⁴

What, then, when all is said and done, is the substance of Bantu philosophy? It cannot be a matter here of analysing the whole of Tempels' book. Let us be content to summarise its main results, for the sole purpose of making a confrontation with the actual arguments of African philosophers.

Tempels affirms that Bantu ontology is essentially a theory of forces. The Bantus have a dynamic notion of essence, which is the opposite of the occidental static theory. Thus, for the negro, essence is power. Not only in the sense that he possesses power, for that would merely mean that it was an attribute of a being, but in the sense that he *is* power in his very essence:

To the Bantu, power is not an accident, indeed it is much more than a necessary accident, it is the very essence of being in itself... being is power, power is being. Our notion of being is of that which IS, theirs is of 'the power which is.' Where we would think the concept of 'being,' they would use the concept of 'power.' Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. Where we would say that beings are distinct by virtue of their essence or nature, the Bantus would say that the powers varied by their essence or nature (*op. cit.*, p. 35-36)

⁴ On the whole this is probably the radical fault of ethnology in general (and not only of ethno-philosophy). Lévy-Bruhl's work at least had one merit: that of laying bare without disguise, and without craft, the dependence which is native to ethnological argument in relation to an ethnocentric attitude, itself dictated by a concrete historic situation (so-called "primitive" societies always being, in fact, societies controlled by imperialism). From this point of view, the belated self-criticism in Lévy-Bruhl's *Carnets* is far from being as radical as is sometimes maintained, since it upholds a notion as ideological as the "primitiveness" idea, and anyway does not succeed in explaining away the earlier contempt.

The intention of more recent ethnologists, who claim to have created an ethnology which is neutral, free from value-judgments and all forms of racism or ethnocentricity, is perhaps laudable in itself, but it does not prevent the fact that ethnology, being a kind of argument, still depends, today as much as it ever did, upon an ideological basis. Ethnology (or however else one calls it, anthropology or what you will) always presupposes what is to be shown: the real distinction between its object and that of sociology in general, is the different nature of "primitive" societies (or of "archaic" ones, or what you will) compared with other societies. However, it claims to make a real abstraction of the meeting of forces of these societies and the others, at the same time; that is to say, quite simply, of imperialism.

Be that as it may, it is not difficult to see that societies which are

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But power defined in this way is not only a reality, it is also a value. All the Bantu's efforts are directed towards augmenting his "vital power," since all power can be reinforced or abated. This is again contrary to the western idea, according to Tempels. Indeed, for a European, one either has "human nature" or one has not. Man, in acquiring knowledge, in exercising his will, in developing himself in every way, does not become more of a man. On the contrary, when, for example, a Bantu says: "I am becoming strong," or when, in sympathising with a friend's misfortune, he says: "your vital power is reduced, your life has been impaired," these expressions, Tempels assures us, should be taken literally, in the sense of an essential modification of human nature itself.

Another principle of this Bantu "philosophy" is the interaction of forces. This interaction, Tempels tells us, is not only of a mechanical kind, or of chemical or psychic kind; it is more of the order of that metaphysical dependence which binds the creature to the creator (in the sense that "the creature" is, by its very nature, permanently dependent upon its creator, both for its existence and for its subsistence.")

Yet another principle: the hierarchy of the powers. This principle is important since it founds the social order itself and is, so to speak, its metaphysical foundation.

— On the highest rung, we find God, Spirit and Creator;

— Next come the first fathers of Man, the founders of various clans, the archpatriarchs to whom God transmitted vital power in the beginning;

— Next come the tribe's dead, according to their degree of age: they are the intermediaries through whom the influence of the ancient forces acts on the living generation;

— The living are themselves placed in a hierarchy in their turn, "not only according to a legal statute, but according to their very being, according to primogeniture and the organic degrees of life, that is to say, according to vital powers."

examined by anthropology are always, in fact, societies under domination, and that the knowledgeable arguments of the anthropologist only make sense within a scientific debate in which those people take no part, but which always has its origin elsewhere: in the dominant classes of the dominant societies themselves... Of course a more detailed analysis would be needed here.

— On the lowest rung are the inferior forces: animal, vegetable and mineral, are all arranged in a hierarchy according to their vital power, their rank, or the order in which they were born. From this comes the possibility of analogies drawn from an inferior group to describe a human one. From animals, for example: “whoever is the chief in that order of human beings ‘shows’ his rank by using the skin of a royal animal.” (This is the key to totemism, according to Tempels.)

One must insist in particular on the internal hierarchy of a group of living things, a hierarchy which, according to Tempels, is based on a metaphysical order of subordination. It was this order which was in danger of overthrow every time that the colonial administration imposed upon the black people a chief who did not conform to the dictates of tradition. As a result the natives would protest: “It is not possible that such a man should be chief. This cannot be. Nothing will grow on our soil anymore, the women will no longer bear children and everything will be blighted with sterility.”

Finally, the crowning touch to this theoretical edifice, “Bantu philosophy” leads to a kind of humanism: “creation is based on man,” and more particularly on the man who lives in the present; “the living human generation, on earth, is the centre of all humanity, including the world of the dead.”

If, for the sake of precision, one adds that the interaction of forces which was indicated above does not express itself in a disorderly way, but according to strict rules (of which Tempels formulates the most comprehensive, making them three in number), one can see the wonderful coherence of this ontological “system” which is so simple, and on which the author assures us he bases, in the last analysis, all the social practices of the Bantus. Not only of the Bantus, he adds, but of all Africans in general, indeed, of all “primitive” men, all clan-based societies.

II. POLITICAL CRITICISM

All this is very fine; maybe, in fact, too fine to be true. One recalls Aimé Césaire’s criticism. It is massive—in a double sense: serious in content, worldwide in its relevance, for it does not contest one or another particular point in Tempels’ *exposé*, but

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his aim itself, considered in its political function, and insofar as the practical conclusions of the work elucidate them.

Césaire's criticism may be summarised in one word: *La Philosophie Bantoue* is an attempt at *diversion*. It removes attention from the fundamental political problems of the Bantu people, and pitches it at a level of fantasy, quite out of key with the burning reality of colonial exploitation. The respect for Bantu "philosophy," and the Bantu spiritual values, which Tempels turns into the panacea for all the troubles of the (then Belgian) Congo, is surprisingly abstracted, (or perhaps perfectly understandable, considering the author's political allegiance) considering the concrete historical situation of that country. When one knows that "the white man, a new phenomenon arising in the world of the Bantu, could only be perceived according to the traditional philosophic categories of the Bantu; and that it was therefore incorporated in the universe of forces in the place allotted to him according to the logic of the Bantu ontological system, (that is to say) as a senior, a superior human force which exceeded the force of any negro,"⁵ one can see the real function of the respect for the Bantu "philosophy" which is so much asserted by Tempels, and at the same time appreciate Césaire's criticism. The humanist thinker unmasks himself as a real preserver of the colonial order in this way, and his hazy abstractions are seen to be very concrete ways of supporting an in itself concrete policy: the maintenance of imperialist domination. From this fact springs Aimé Césaire's irony, which one cannot resist appreciating:

"Since the Bantu's thinking was ontological, the Bantus only wished for satisfaction of an ontological kind. Decent pay! Comfortable living quarters! Food! But of course these Bantus are such spiritual folk, 'what they want above everything and before everything is not improvement of their economic or material situation, but the white man's recognition of dignity as a man, for their full human value.' In fact, doff your hats to the Bantu vital force, wink at the eternal Bantu soul, and you're quits. Admit that you're let off lightly!"⁶

In spite of this, nevertheless, Aimé Césaire's criticism leaves

⁵ *La Philosophie Bantoue*, Présence Africaine, p. 45.

⁶ *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Présence Africaine, p. 45.

out the theoretical problem. It was directed, as he admits himself, "not at the Bantu philosophy, but at the use, for political purposes, that some people make of it." So the idea that a secret philosophy could exist, to which all the Bantus adhered collectively and unconsciously, was not relevant. Césaire's criticism left it intact. And it was destined to hang fire and continue to be the essential motivation behind all following works of philosophy. The history of our philosophy, because of this, has to a large extent been only the history of successive interpretations of that collective philosophy, that world-view, that one assumed to be a given principle, underlying all our traditions and all our behaviour, and towards which analysis had nothing to do but humbly enlighten.

The result of this was that in general African philosophers misunderstood themselves. They thought to reproduce pre-existing philosophical themes when they were in fact producing them. They thought to narrate when they were in fact creating. A laudable humility, no doubt, but also a treachery: the self-effacement of the philosopher before his own argument was tied to a projection which led him to attribute his own theoretical choices to his people, his own ideological options. African philosophy has, up to now, been in essence an ethno-philosophy only: imaginary research after a collective philosophy, which might be unchangeable, shared by all Africans, even if it existed in an unconscious form.⁷

III. FROM TEMPELS TO KAGAME: CONTINUITY AND RUPTURE

Such is the dominant current that we must now try to characterise. Our reference to Tempels enabled us to see his essential weakness straight away. We shall return to that. But one must add that African philosophy, even in its ethno-philosophic ramblings, cannot, thankfully enough, be reduced to a pure and simple repetition of *La Philosophie Bantoue*.

⁷ That is, of course, nothing but a dominant current. A glance at the bibliography suggested earlier suffices to show that this current has unceasingly given rise to disputes within the bosom of African philosophy (or philosophical literature) and that it co-exists with other currents which one may term "minor."

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For one thing, the motivation is more complex. There is no more a desire to equip the colonists and missionaries from Europe with an easier route to the negro soul, as there was for the Belgian missionary, who saw negro souls as candidates, willy-nilly, for civilisation and Christianisation. The African philosophers were concerned with the problem of *defining themselves* and their people, in relation to Europe, without allowing anybody else to do it for them, without leaving someone else free to *fix* them, or to *freeze* them.

Moreover, if this will to define themselves encourages a fictitious collective philosophy in our authors, they do nevertheless evince incontestable philosophic qualities in the way they claim to justify this fiction. The rigour of certain deductions, the precision of certain analyses, the mastery with which they manipulate the dialogue in certain cases, leave no room for doubt on this subject. Incontestable philosophers, their only weakness was to realise the *philosophic form* of their own arguments mythically, in the guise of a collective philosophy.

An example will clarify: that of Kagame: *La Philosophie Bantu-rwandaise de l'être*⁸ expressly places itself, from the very beginning, in relation to Tempels' book, as the attempt of an aborigine of Bantu Africa to "check the validity of the theory put forward by the excellent missionary."⁹ And then again it is indisputable that the Rwandaian abbot is in accordance with the Belgian missionary on more than one point, notably this one for what concerns us here:

The idea of a collective and unassailable philosophy which would be the last support for Bantu institutions and culture, and to which all the Bantus would adhere more or less consciously. Kagame writes "Philosophical principles are invariable: the nature of beings should remain as it is... the basic explanation is fatally fixed." And further on, concerned with his "sources" of information: "We should have recourse to an institutionalised kind of document... Even when the formal structure of these 'institutions' expresses nothing philosophic, it can show itself to be a direct consequence of such a conception of a problem arising from philosophy."¹⁰

⁸ Alexis Kagame, *La Philosophie Bantu-rwandaise de l'être*, Brussels 1955.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 17 and 23.

Let us note, however, that Kagame is much more subtle than Tempels. Unlike him, he is wary of attributing a philosophical *system* to his compatriots, with rigidly defined contours and articulations. He is content to speak of “philosophical principles” which are invariable, and about which nothing indicates that they form a *system*: and he willingly speaks of “intuitive philosophy,” as opposed to systematic, taught philosophy.

Another idea which concerns us is that European philosophy itself is reducible to a lower common denominator beyond its turbulent history which would be the scholastic Aristotelian philosophy. It is this last idea which really explains the first one, for it is at the basis of that project which aims at plagiarising African “philosophy” from European “philosophy.”

And as far as the substance of this Bantu “philosophy” is concerned definite convergences should be pointed out, notably, concerning the Bantu conception of man: one idea is that man is indivisible, and is not, as he is for the Europeans, composed of a body and a soul, but is a simple unity. Thus Kagame informs us that there is no word for the soul in *Kinyarwanda*, at least while the man is alive. Another idea is that God is the real begetter, (rather than the parents) and originator of individual destinies. Another is that a proper name denotes the destiny of the man that carries it. And above all, the idea that man is at the centre of Bantu thoughts and preoccupations, to such an extent that other beings are only thought of in opposition to him, as negations, mirror images of his nature of thinking being. In *Kinyarwanda*, things, *ibintu*, are by definition beings deprived of intelligence, while man, *umuntu* (plural *abantu*), defines himself as the existing intelligence.

Having said this, however, Kagame does in fact separate himself from Tempels (although without specifically saying so) on some very important points. First of all his method rests upon a direct analysis of the language, above all. Of all the “institutionalised documents” which are referred to in Bantu culture, *La Philosophie Bantu-rwandaise de l'être* gives pride of place to the language and its grammatical structure.¹¹ From this,

¹¹ Kagame's analysis is indeed expressed above all as a comment on the particular structures of one language, the “*Kinyarwanda*.” These structures sketch, as it were, an articulation of reality, being, so to speak, the bars between which the Rwandan perceives the world. From this comes the

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perhaps, comes the exceptional interest of the book. Kagame disquiets us, and therefore does us a great service, in making us suspect that we might think very differently if, for all our theoretical needs, we systematically employed our mother tongue. From this one can see that the Rwandaian philosopher was much more sensitive than his Belgian predecessor to the contingency

idea of setting up a table of Bantu ontological categories, effecting an operation on Kinyarwanda which Aristotle had achieved, in fact, according to Kagame, on the Greek language. The results of the investigation are not without charm. Kagame proposes 4 Bantu metaphysical categories, which he makes into a correspondence with Aristotle's, according to the following table:

1. <i>Umuntu</i> (plural <i>abantu</i>):	man, being endowed with intelligence	}	1. Substance
2. <i>Ikintu</i> (plural <i>ibintu</i>):	thing, being without intelligence		2. Place
3. <i>Abantu</i> :	place - time	}	3. Time
			4. Quantity
			5. Quality
			6. Relation
4. <i>Ukuntu</i> :	modality		7. Action
			8. Passion
			9. Position
			10. Possession

This table provokes certain comments.

1. The first two categories break the unity of the Aristotelian conception of substance, which is made to look irremediably equivocal. Man and objects are not in the same category, but set up two radically different genres. More precisely, man is the original category in relation to which things are thinkable: these are by definition non-men: *ibintu*, beings deprived of intelligence (a category which includes, let us note, minerals and vegetables as much as the animals themselves).

2. The concept of man, in so far as it is the original concept, could not be defined in anything but a tautological manner. Man is the unique species of a unique genus. This is why Kagame can write: "Some Europeans have laughed at the expense of the 'naïveté' of our Bantus, when these men had to answer the question: *Umuntu ni iki?* What is a man? Put in the position of having to give the definition of that being which has intelligence, our Bantu, after much difficulty, would reply: *Umuntu ni umuntu, nyine!* Man is man, exactly! Something like this: 'In formulating the question, you have yourself given the answer, and there is no way of explaining it better! You have, in fact, declared the genus unique and the species unique! What would you answer if you were asked this question: 'What is the reasoning animal (that is to say, man)?'" (*op. cit.*, p. 118).

One wonders, however, how much of the Bantu's difficulty is attributable to the intrinsic difficulty of the question asked (the most difficult question there is, in fact). An average European would certainly have experienced the same difficulty, and would have replied no less "naïvely," although his language does give him the ability to spread out the concept of Man into simpler categories.

of the language, and the ineluctable way that all human thought, even the most abstract thoughts, is rooted in a universe of given meanings.

Kagame's analysis is more rigorous in method and also less ambitious. It expressly call itself a "monograph," applicable only to a limited geographical and linguistic zone: the Rwanda and its near neighbours. We are far from Tempels' hasty generalisations, which claimed to hold the key not only to Bantu philosophy, but to primitive philosophy in general.

On the other hand, is it easy to see that Kagame, while affirming, with Tempels, the existence of a collective Bantu philosophy, yet avoids placing this in a narrow particularism.

On the contrary, on several occasions he underlines the universal aspects, by which it links with, among others, European "philosophy." Thus, he says, "formal logic is the same in all cultures." Ideas, judgments, reasoning, have no Bantu, Oriental, or Occidental stamp. "Whatever is expressed on this subject, in whatever language of European or Asian or American or African systems, is always transposable into any other language belonging to a different culture."¹²

In the same vein, Kagame is particularly sensitive to the changes which took place in Bantu philosophy after its contact with European culture. These changes seemed deep to him, while Tempels took all "acculturation" to be nothing but a superficial veneer. The Rwandan philosopher informs us, for his part: "You will only find very few people in our country, now, who have not corrected their traditional views on the world and on the atmosphere of the heroic past,"¹³ and he insists lengthily, in particular, upon the innovations introduced by the missionaries into the vocabulary and even the grammatical structure of

But the most serious difficulty, perhaps, concerns the interpretation which Kagame gives to Aristotle's project, which he imitates. The fact that the Greek philosopher's ontology has, in fact, remained a prisoner of the grammatical structure of the Greek language, does not, in our opinion, justify an erroneous reading of the original meaning of his work, which aimed, at the outset, not so much to explore the actual structures in the Greek language, but on the contrary, to go beyond all artificiality of this kind in founding the language upon a vital and universal order.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

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Kinyarwanda.¹⁴ In this way he reveals himself as sensitive to the inner dynamism and assimilative capacity of his own culture. To such an extent that he himself gives us, *in fact*, the wherewithal to refute his own affirmation, given at the outset as a methodological principle, concerning the immutability of philosophical principles.

These divergences are important, and would be enough in themselves to set Kagame's work apart from Tempels'. But the most remarkable thing of all is that, apart from formal differences, the two writers, while postulating the existence of a constituted Bantu philosophy, nevertheless interpret the *contents* of that philosophy differently. Thus it is that Kagame in fact rejects the Belgian missionary's fundamental thesis, which claims that the essential characteristic of Bantu thought is the synonymy of concepts of being and of power; however, his criticism remains general, and does not blame Tempels by name. Certainly the Rwandan priest himself recognises a difference between the Aristotelian conception of substance, and the equivalent concepts in Bantu philosophy. This difference lies in the fact that "the philosophy of European culture" envisages a being in its static capacity, while the philosophy of Bantu culture prefers to regard it in the light of its dynamic aspect. But that is nothing but a small shade of meaning, he continues, since the two aspects remain complementary and inseparable in any kind of thinking: "In both philosophical systems, in fact, the static and dynamic aspects are inevitably coexistent!

Firstly because any structure, considered as such, and reduced to a final abstraction, presents a static aspect.

Secondly, if afterwards, you consider that structure insofar as it is for a particular purpose, structurally oriented to perform or to be used for a particular purpose, then it appears as dynamic.

Thus it follows that even if the philosophy of Bantu culture was defined as dynamic, one must remember that it is above all static. If that of European culture was defined as static, one must remember that it is secondly dynamic. I can summarise the two correlative aspects in this double axiom:

1. Operational predisposition supposes essence;
2. The structure of essence is a function of its finality."¹⁵

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, cf. notably pp. 64-70.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 121-122.

Tempels is certainly not referred to by name, but the meaning of the criticism escapes no-one. The most serious thing is that this disagreement is not the only one. One could quote many others, in the interpretation which the two authors give to Bantu "philosophy"; to a philosophy which they, however, presume to be *founded, a given fact*, sequestered once and for all in the eternally unchangeable African soul (according to Tempels) or at least in the permanent essence of his culture (according to Kagame). Which one is right? Which is the superior interpreter? Only the reader can decide. Perhaps he might like to settle the discussion and have his own personal opinion; go back to the real philosophy, read the text where African "philosophy" takes its origin, this secret text which Tempels and Kagame had interpreted differently. This is what is usually done in Europe (or even in Asia) out of simple intellectual honesty, when one is studying authors or doctrines, and one wishes to settle "conflicting interpretations" oneself.¹⁶ Going back to the sources is the only thing that can enlighten us. By it alone can we discriminate between different interpretations, and appreciate their degree of accuracy, or else their relevance.

Unfortunately, as far as African philosophy is concerned, source books do not exist; or else if they do exist, they are not *texts*, or philosophical *treatises*. The "established documents" of which Kagame speaks, or those that, before him, Tempels had subjected to the tag "ethno-philosophical," are, as far as philosophy

¹⁶ This is the translated title of a work by P. Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations* (Seuil, 1969). There is nothing surprising in this since the problem of African "philosophy" sends us back to the more general problem of hermeneutics, quite obviously. In fact, the ethno-philosophers' arguments, whether European or African, present us with the baffling spectacle of an imaginary thesis quite unsupported by texts; it is a "free" interpretation in the true sense of the word, drunken, given over to the caprices of hermeneutics alone, and to the dizziness of a freedom which does not know itself. It does not know itself because it thinks to *translate* a non-existent text, and does not recognise in this its own function of *creation*. At the same time it inhibits itself from achieving any sort of *truth a priori*, since truth rests on the supposition that freedom should be subjected to order, and should give way before an order which is not simply imaginary; and that it should remain aware both of the order and of its own margin of creativity. Truth cannot be attained unless the interpreter's freedom accommodates itself to the nature of the text to be interpreted; it presupposes that the text *and* the interpreter's argument stay rigorously within the same genre; that is to say that they be consonant one with the other. Aristotle, with his doctrine of the "orders of being" only wanted to express this idea.

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is concerned, radically heterogeneous; they are not comparable to the sources which would be consulted by a student of Hegelianism, or of dialectical materialism, or of psycho-analytical discipline, or even of Confucianism. For there are the explicit texts of Hegel, Marx, Freud, or Confucius, couched in discursive terms, products of a permanently available language.

I can see an objection raising its head. It will be pointed out that among Kagame's "established documents" it is the products of language that occupy an important place (proverbs, stories, dynastic poems, and all the *oral literature* in which Africa is so rich). Agreed. It could even be added that Kagame's work is exceptionally interesting, in its extraordinary knowledge of traditions, and in the acquaintance with the language and the oral literature of Rwanda which it evinces.¹⁷

But one must add that this literature, in the way that Kagame evokes it, at least, *is not* philosophic; and that scientific method demands that one should give a sociological interpretation to a sociological document *first of all*; as with a botanical document, whether written or oral, one gives *first*, a botanical interpretation, or with an historical document one applies an historic analysis *first... etc. etc...* This same scientific method demands that one should not arbitrarily project a *philosophical argument* upon products of language which are specifically self-styled as other than philosophy. In projecting, Kagame, as, before him, Tempels, and as all African ethno-philosophers who were to follow in his footsteps (Europeans interest us less),¹⁸ commits what Aristotle

¹⁷ Cf. other works by Kagame, notably: *La Poésie dynastique au Rwanda* (Brussels, 1951); *Le Code des institutions politiques du Rwanda précolonial* (Brussels, 1952); *Les organisations socio-familiales de l'ancien Rwanda* (Brussels, 1954).

¹⁸ European ethno-philosophy is still going strong, quoting Tempels as the authority. It is not really relevant to include a bibliography here. It is not surprising, when one knows the appreciation that a philosopher of Bachelard's standing felt the need to express about a book as controversial as *La Philosophie Bantoue* (cf. *Présence Africaine*, No. 7, 1949: *Témoignages sur la Philosophie Bantoue* du père Tempels), as did his fellow countrymen Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Chombard de Lauwe, etc... Is there, then, no way of breaking the vicious circle of these ethnocentric prejudices, except by indistinctly appreciating *anything* — I mean: the first work which attempts, by means of equivocal argument, to rehabilitate the negro in a problematic fashion? The most serious thing, as far as the European philosophers are concerned (the real ones), is that they thus embarked on a flagrant contradiction of the theoretical implications of their own philosophical method, since it

calls a *metabasis eis allo genos*, a confusion of genres (and Kagame willingly evokes Aristotle). The reader has no way of verifying the interpretation, in fact, the evidence of the "established documents" (which are unphilosophical) cannot suffice, so the reader is harshly thrown back upon himself, and forced to recognise that all this construction is built on sand; and that Kagame, in spite of the attractiveness of his analysis, in spite of the relative methodicalness of some passages, has on the whole stayed a prisoner of the ideological myth of a collective African "philosophy," a new and simply reevaluated version of the "primitive mentality" of Lévy-Bruhl; the imaginary object of a learned argument about which one wishes, in the case of Kagame, that he had applied himself to something else, under the circumstances.¹⁹

presumes, quite obviously, a responsible line of thought, a theoretical effort over an individual subject, and excludes, by this fact, any reduction of philosophy to a system of collective thinking.

The healthiest European reaction we know, of recent date, to Tempels' work is still that of Franz Crahay: "Conceptual Take-off: Conditions for a Bantu Philosophy," in *Diogenes*, No. 52, Winter 1965. We will come back to it later, to show its limits.

But complete, more thorough, and anyway exemplary for its lucidity, is, in our eyes, the work of the Cameroon Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, in "Le Bantou problématique," in *Présence Africaine*, No. 66, 1968.

It is, perhaps, worth adding that our criticism of Tempels, no less than the article of Eboussi's that I quote, has no intention of attacking the man, but only the work, or more precisely, a certain view of philosophy which has unfortunately made progress since then, and is in danger of stifling all African creativity in the philosophical sphere, in the egg, if one did not put a definite period to it. So, all we wish to do, is to clear the ground for a philosophical method which would be worthy of that name, and linked with a more general practical theory. We wish to undertake a new reading of existing African philosophical theory at the same time, and to see, in freeing it of its ethno-philosophic illusions, that this theoretical method has already begun, and that it only remains for it to free itself, in order to become aware of itself in its due autonomy, and in its possible function in an Africa which needs to be made anew.

¹⁹ It would, of course, be quite different, if Kagame could have supplied *philosophical texts* of African sages, or could have reproduced their words. Then his interpretation would have been founded upon effective philosophical discussions which were universally accessible, and qualifiable.

Perhaps this is an urgent task for present African philosophers: the transcription of everything which may be perceived of our ancestors' thought, and of our living sages and wise men, in a systematic manner.

But here again, our meaning must be clear; one wise African's thought, even if he claims to be the spokesman of a group, is not necessarily that of

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Moreover, Kagame seems to have been aware of the difficulty himself. Thus he feels it incumbent upon him, in order to make the idea of a collective philosophy seem plausible, to assume that at the root of the Rwanda culture is the deliberate action of the "great initiators," the "intuitive" philosophers who were meant to have expressly formulated the principles of Bantu philosophy at the same time as they were founding the institutions of the society. (*op. cit.*, p. 37, 180, 187 and *passim*). Thus it is easy to see (and Kagame himself is certainly not deceived) how gratuitous this assumption is, let alone mythological. But a more serious point is that it does not even solve the problem, but rather encloses one in a vicious circle:

— Either Bantu ontology is absolutely immanent in the Bantu languages as such, and is contemporary with them (which is what Kagame expressly admits, since he infers this ontology of grammatical structures from Kinyarwanda) and in this case it could not have been taught by "initiators" since they would have to have expressed themselves in Bantu languages;

— Or the philosophy really was taught at some particular time, and so it did not originate at the same time as the Bantu languages, but is already itself an historical stage in the Bantu cultural history, destined to be superseded.

Whichever way we turn, Bantu "philosophy" looks like a

all the individuals in the group, and still less that of all Africans in general. On the other hand, if these discussions must be recorded, it is not only so that they can be put forward for the possible admiration of a non-African public, but first, but above all, to be submitted to the appreciation, or the criticism, and the transcendence of Africans of today—of *all* the Africans of today.

One must be grateful to Marcel Griaule, in any case, because he has so faithfully reported the words of an Ogotemmelé (cf. Marcel Griaule, *Dieu d'eau: Entretiens avec Ogotemmelé*, Editions du Chêne, 1948). A transcription of this kind is worth infinitely more from a European ethnologist, than all the arbitrary constructions of other "Africanists" who write from the European side about the African soul, the Bantu world-view, or all the impressionistic categories of the "Dogon wisdom," the "Diola philosophy" etc... etc...

As far as our study is concerned, we are keeping to the subject of Bantus only for a simple reason: it is the Bantu culture which has produced the most extensive *African* ethno-philosophic or philosophic literature, that we know of, to date. And it is in this kind of explicit discussion that one may seek African philosophy. Elsewhere, one finds nothing but the mirages of one's wishes, the shadows of one's regrets and nostalgias.

myth.²⁰ To do away with that myth once and for all, and free our conceptual horizon for a real theoretical discussion, is the task which falls to African scientists and philosophers today. We would now like to show that this task is inseparable in fact, from political efforts (and where relevant, to the anti-imperialist struggle, in the most elevated sense of the word).

IV. FREEDOM OF SPEECH

We have only referred to Kagame by way of an example. In spite of his undeniable talents and his powerful theoretical cast of mind, which distinguishes him so brilliantly from some Western ethno-philosophers, he seems to us to perpetuate an ideological myth in his work, a myth which is not itself of African origin.

Unfortunately, Kagame is not the only one. A brief glance at the bibliography suggested earlier will show how much energy African philosophers have devoted to an original, specifically African philosophy. Makarakiza, Lufuluabo, Mulago, Bahoken, Fouda, and, to a lesser extent, William Abraham, all are caught in varying degrees, in this myth, whatever degree of discipline, or of richness, may be found in their works, however sincere their nationalism may be, or the intensity of their involvement.²¹

It is no longer possible to doubt that one is there fighting a rearguard action. The search for originality is always allied with a desire to be noticed. It only has meaning in relation to the Other from which one wishes at all costs to differentiate oneself. This is an ambiguous relationship in that one asserts

²⁰ The reader will have understood the discriminating usage (or conceptual usage) of the following terms:

— *philosophy*, without inverted commas, means the corpus of texts and discussions which have an explicitly "philosophic" intention;

— "*philosophy*" in the improper sense, emphasized by inverted commas: the hypothetical world-view of a given group of people;

— "*ethno-philosophy*," research which partly rests on these assumptions: an attempt to reconstruct a hypothetical collective "philosophy."

²¹ All these are not being brought into question, of course. Some of the authors referred to are still particularly instructive, and Africans would profit by reading them. Our criticism of them, is not negative, but naturally, one demands more of those who have already given something, because one knows that they *could* do better.

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one's differences, but in asserting them, will not rest until the Other has effectively recognised them. Unfortunately, this recognition is long in coming, and the desire of the subject, caught in his own trap, grows more intense, until he goes so far as to lose himself in anxious attention to the least gestures, the least changes in the Other's eye.

The Other, for his part (in this case, The European, the previous colonist), asks for nothing better. He has defined himself in relation to the Other (the colonised one) instinctively as a master to a slave, from the first. He considers himself the subject par excellence, and his own differentness absolute.²² Then he ends by making a repentant gesture, or rather, by resolving his own internal crisis, in placing a value on this very difference. The mysterious "primitive mentality" is thus suddenly transformed into the "primitive philosophy," into the mystified and mystifying consciousness of the master at bay. The difference has been maintained, but merely reevaluated, or if one prefers, reversed. And, even if the primitive "philosophy" thus proclaimed did not correspond with that which the colonised man would wish to make known, it nevertheless made discussion possible, and the essential community of interests.

Thus it really is a matter of a "misunderstanding taken ambiguously" as Eboussi says rightly, in quoting Jankelevitch—the victim secretly forms an understanding with the executioner, communicating with him in the artificial universe of lying.²³

What, in this case, does this mean? It means that contemporary African philosophy, insofar as it remains ethno-philosophy, has been developed first and foremost for a European public. The African ethnophilosophers' arguments are not directed at their fellow Africans. They are not written with the latter in mind, and it is understood, in spirit, that any contestation would not come from Africans but only, if at all, from Occidentals. Unless these Occidentals were to express themselves by means of African go-betweens, as they well know how. In short, African

²² Lévy-Bruhl's work has no other meaning: cf. *La mentalité primitive*, and other works in the same style; also cf. all the ideological discussions collected by Césaire in that brilliant collection of foolishness which is his *Discours sur le colonialisme*.

²³ F. Eboussi-Boulaga, "Le Bantou problématique," an article quoted in *Présence Africaine*, No. 66, 1968.

ethnophilosophy became the spokesman for Africa at large, before Europe at large, at the imaginary meeting-point of "that which is given and that which is received." Thus one sees that "Africanist" particularism is itself, in the abstract, part of an abstract universalism, *objectively*, since the African intellectual who is assumed by it is engaged at the same time; above the shoulders of his people, in a mythical dialogue with Europeans who speak the same language, he is engaged in the constitution of a "civilisation of the universal."²⁴

Thus there is nothing surprising in the fact that this literature, as with all African literature expressed in French (and to a lesser extent, that which is expressed in English), should be much more widely known outside Africa than within it. It is not only by chance, nor for purely material reasons, it is related to basic reasons concerning the public for which the literature was written in the first place.

So now we must finally put paid to this scandalous extraversion. Theoretical discussion is certainly a good thing. But we must, at all costs, in present-day Africa, address it in the first place to our compatriots, and put it forward for the appreciation and discussion of the Africans themselves.²⁵

It is only in this way that we shall be able to promote a scientific movement in Africa, and put an end to the appalling theoretical void which never ceases to dig deeper and deeper every day, in an indolent population which is indifferent to

²⁴ The expressions "*rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir*," "*civilisation de l'universel*" etc..., are favourite expressions of Senghor's.

²⁵ Here one can see the inadequacy of Franz Crahay's analysis in the article quoted earlier: "Conceptual Take-off: Conditions for a Bantu Philosophy," *Diogenes*, No. 52, Winter 1965. In fact, a conceptual take-off is always already accomplished. All men think in concepts, under all skies, in all civilisations, even if they integrate mythological sequences in their discussions (as Parmenides, Plato, Confucius, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kagame, etc. do) or even if the discussion rests entirely (as is almost always the case) upon fragile ideological foundations, from which a scientific scrupulousness must constantly free it. From this point of view, African civilisations are no exception to the rule.

On the other hand, the real problem which F. Crahay fails to see is that of the *interlocutor's choice*, of the *destination of the discussion*. Whether the language be mythical or ideological, it is always brought to improve itself and pass, by successive stages, through degrees of rigour and precision, by virtue of the social experience of discussion. So it remains, above all, to throw it into this social situation in Africa, where it may develop its own history, thanks to the written word, and, a necessary complement, political democracy.

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theoretical problems, of which it does not even see the importance.

Science is born from discussion, and lives by it.²⁶ If we want our countries to adopt it one day, then it behoves us to create a human milieu there in which and by which the most diverse problems can be freely worked out, and where these discussions may be no less freely taken down, diffused by virtue of the written word, to be submitted to appreciation by all and transmitted to future generations, who, one can be sure, will do much better than we.

All this presupposes freedom of expression. This is a liberty which so many political regimes these days do their best to stifle, in varying degrees. But this means that the responsibility of the African philosopher (as with any African man of science) extends infinitely far beyond the narrow framework of his discipline, and that he cannot afford the luxury of a comfortable apoliticism, or of a peaceful complaisance in the face of the established disorder—except at the price of denying his own role as a philosopher, and as a man. In other words, the theoretical liberation of a philosophical discussion presupposes political freedom. We are today at the heart of a nexus of intricate problems, intimately connected with each other. The need for political effort can be felt at all levels; let me but add, in the light of the preceding analysis, that this battle is not a simple one, and that, in order to conduct it successfully, as much lucidity as resolution is required. The future will be at this price.

²⁶ Here, of course, it is not a question of science considered from the point of view of its results (and as a system of established truths), but from the point of view of its process, insofar as it is effective research; insofar as it is a project which takes its form from the society, and which always goes beyond its temporary results.