

INTRODUCTION TO HOUNTONDJI

The article printed below is extracted from African Philosophy: Myth and Reality, by Paulin Hountondji, which was published by Hutchinson in June 1983. Hountondji was born in the Ivory Coast, and received his Higher Education in Paris, where he was a pupil of Althusser in the middle 1960s. He is now Professor of Philosophy at the National University of Benin. His book is a collection of articles (originally in French) covering such diverse topics as Nkrumalism, negritude, and the goals of philosophical thought, and includes a brilliant and moving study of the 18th-century German academic philosopher Anton-Wilhelm Amo, who happened (although one would not know it from his writings) to be African.

The overall purpose of Hountondji's book is to explode the idea that African philosophers owe allegiance to some-

thing called 'African Philosophy' - a supposed inarticulate wisdom with roots deep in Africa's past. Hountondji argues that, on the contrary, philosophy must always be explicit, argumentative and pluralistic and he shows (in several articles including the one printed below) that 'African Philosophy' arose, historically, from the work of European missionaries and anthropologists, rather than from that of African philosophers. He argues, therefore, that - paradoxically - it is only by adopting and adapting European philosophical traditions that Africans can acquire real intellectual independence.

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Jonathan Rée

On 'African Philosophy'

Paulin Hountondji

There are two ways of losing oneself: through fragmentation in the particular or dilution in the 'universal'.

Aimé Césaire, Lettre à Maurice Thorez (1956)

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.

Let us note that this definition begs no question, since the meaning of the qualifier 'philosophical' is irrelevant - as is, indeed, the cogency of the qualification. All that matters is the fact of the qualification itself, the deliberate recourse to the word philosophy, and whatever meaning that word may have. In other words, we are concerned solely with the philosophical intention of the authors, not with the degree of its effective realization, which cannot easily be assessed.

So for us African philosophy is a body of literature whose existence is undeniable, a bibliography which has grown constantly over the last thirty years or so. The limited aims of these few remarks are to circumscribe this literature, to define its main themes, to show what its problematic has been so far and to call it into question. These aims will have been achieved if we succeed in convincing our African readers that African philosophy does not lie where we have long been seeking it, in some mysterious corner of our supposedly immutable soul, a collective and unconscious world-view which it is incumbent on us to study and revive, but that our philosophy consists essentially in the process of analysis itself, in that very discourse through which we have been doggedly attempting to define ourselves - a discourse, therefore, which we must recognize as ideological and which it is now up to us to liberate, in the most political sense of the word, in order to equip ourselves with a truly theoretical discourse which will be indissolubly philosophical and scientific (1).

Archaeology: Western 'ethnophilosophy'

A forerunner of 'African philosophy': Tempels. This Belgian missionary's Bantu Philosophy still passes today, in

the eyes of some, for a classic of 'African philosophy' (2). In fact, it is an ethnological work with philosophical pretensions, or more simply, if I may coin the word, a work of 'ethnophilosophy'. It need concern us here only inasmuch as some African philosophers have themselves made reference to it in their efforts to reconstruct, in the wake of the Belgian writer, a specifically African philosophy.

Indeed, Bantu Philosophy did open the floodgates to a deluge of essays which aimed to reconstruct a particular Weltanschauung, a specific world-view commonly attributed to all Africans, abstracted from history and change and, moreover, philosophical, through an interpretation of the customs and traditions, proverbs and institutions - in short, various data - concerning the cultural life of African peoples.

One can readily discern Tempels' motives. At first sight they appear to be generous, since he had set out to correct a certain image of the black man disseminated by Lévy-Bruhl and his school, to show that the African Weltanschauung could not be reduced to that celebrated 'primitive mentality' which was supposed to be insensitive to contradiction, indifferent to the elementary laws of logic, proof against the laws of experience and so forth, but that it rested, in fact, on a systematic conception of the universe which, however different it might be from the Western system of thought, equally deserved the name of 'philosophy'. At first sight, then, Tempels' object appeared to rehabilitate the black man and his culture and to redeem them from the contempt from which they had suffered until then.

But on closer scrutiny the ambiguity of the enterprise is obvious. It is clear that it is not addressed to Africans but to Europeans, and particularly to two categories of Europeans: colonials and missionaries (3). In this respect the seventh and last chapter bears an eloquent title: 'Bantu philosophy and our mission to civilize'. In effect,

we are back to square one: Africans are, as usual, excluded from the discussion, and Bantu philosophy is a mere pretext for learned disquisitions among Europeans. The black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor; he remains a topic, a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not the subject of a possible discourse (4).

What, then, is the content of this Bantu 'philosophy'? I shall not try to analyse the whole book but will content myself with a brief review of its main findings in order to confront them with the real discourse of African philosophers themselves.

According to Tempels, Bantu ontology is essentially a theory of forces: Bantus have a dynamic conception of being, while the Western conception is static. For the black man, then, being is power, not only inasmuch as it possesses power, for that would merely mean that power is an attribute of being, but in the sense that its very essence is to be power:

For the Bantu (says Tempels) power is not an accident: it is more even than a necessary accident; it is the very essence of being... Being is power, power is being. Our notion of being is 'that which is', theirs is 'the power that is'. Where we think the concept 'to be', they make use (*sic*) of the concept 'power'. Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. Where we would say that beings are distinguished by their essence of nature, Bantus would say that forces differ by their essence or nature (5).

However, power so defined is not only a reality: it is also a value. The Bantu's entire effort is devoted to increasing his 'vital power', for all power can increase or diminish. This again, Tempels tells us, is opposed to the Western conception. As far as the European is concerned, one either possesses human nature or one does not. By acquiring knowledge, by exercising his will, by developing in various ways, man does not become more human. On the contrary, when a Bantu says, for instance: 'I am becoming strong' or when he says compassionately to a friend who has been struck with misfortune: 'Your vital strength is reduced, your life has been eroded', these statements are to be taken literally as implying an essential modification of human nature itself.

Another principle of this Bantu 'philosophy' is the interaction of forces. This interaction, says Tempels, is not merely mechanical, chemical or psychic, but, more fundamentally, it is akin to the metaphysical dependence which links the creature to the creator (in this sense that 'the creature is, by its very nature, permanently dependent on its creator for its existence and subsistence').

Yet another principle is the hierarchy of forces. An important one, this, since it is the foundation of social order and, so to speak, its metaphysical bedrock.

At the top of the scale, we are told, there is God, both spirit and creator.

Then come the forefathers, the founders of the various clans, the archpatriarchs to whom God first communicated the vital force.

Then there are the dead of the tribe, in order of seniority; these are the intermediaries through whom the elder forces exert their influence over the living generation.

The living themselves, who come next, are stratified 'not only by law but in accordance with their very being, with primogeniture and their organic degree of life, in other words with their vital power'.

Right at the bottom of the scale the lower forces, animal, vegetable or mineral, are also said to be stratified according to vital power, rank or primogeniture. Thus, analogies are possible between a human group and a lower animal group, for instance: 'He who is the chief in the human order "demonstrates" his superior rank by the use of a royal animal's skin.' (This is the key to totemism, according to Tempels.)

Stress is laid on the internal hierarchy within the living group, a hierarchy founded, according to Tempels, on a metaphysical order of subordination. This order was in jeopardy every time the colonial administration imposed on a black population a chief who did not fit the norms of tradition. Hence the protests of the natives: 'So-and-so cannot be the chief. It is not possible. henceforth nothing will grow on our soil, women will no longer give birth and everything will be stricken with sterility.'

Finally, as the ultimate crown of this theoretical edifice, Bantu 'philosophy' emerges as humanism: 'creation is centred on man', and especially on the living generation, for 'the living, earthly, human generation is the centre of all mankind, including the world of the dead'.

If it be added that the interaction of all these forces, far from being haphazard, takes place according to strict and immutable laws (of which Tempels formulates the three most general), one is immediately aware of the miraculous coherence of this ontological 'system' - and of its great simplicity. However, its author assures us that it is the ultimate foundation of the entire social practice of the Bantus, of all Africans and of all 'primitives' and 'clan societies'.

Political criticism

This is all very fine, but perhaps too good to be true. One is reminded of Césaire's massive criticism, grave in content, global in scope. While accepting some of Tempels' points, Césaire views his exposition as a politically oriented project and highlights its practical implications.

Césaire's criticism may be summed up in a sentence: Bantu 'philosophy' is an attempt to create a diversion. It diverts attention from the fundamental political problems of the Bantu peoples by fixing it on the level of fantasy, remote from the burning reality of colonial exploitation. The respect shown for the 'philosophy' and the spiritual values of the Bantu peoples, which Tempels turns into a universal remedy for all the ills of the then Belgian Congo, is astonishingly abstract (albeit perfectly understandable in view of the author's political lineage), compared with the concrete historical situation of that country. Further, when it is considered that 'the white man, a new phenomenon in the Bantu world, could be apprehended only in terms of the categories of traditional Bantu philosophy', that he was therefore 'incorporated into the world of forces, in the position that was his by right according to the rationale of the Bantu ontological system', that is to say, as 'an elder, a superior human force greater than the vital force of any black man' (6), then the real function of Tempels' much vaunted respect for Bantu 'philosophy', and at the same time the relevance of Césaire's criticism becomes apparent. The humanist thinker throws off his mask and reveals himself as the guardian of the colonial order, and his hazy abstractions can be seen for what they are, concrete devices in the service of a very concrete policy which is nothing less than the preservation of imperialist domination. Césaire's irony can now be fully appreciated.

Bantu thought being ontological, Bantus are interested only in ontological satisfaction. Decent wages? Good housing and food? I tell you these Bantus are pure spirits: 'What they want above all is not an improvement in their material or economic situation, but recognition by the white man and respect for their human dignity, for their full human value.' In short, one or two cheers for Bantu vital force, a wink for the Bantu immortal soul, and that's that. A bit too easy, perhaps? (7)

Yet Césaire's criticism left the theoretical problem untouched, since, in his own words, his target was 'not Bantu philosophy itself, but the political use some people want to make of it'. The idea that there might exist a hidden philosophy to which all Bantus unconsciously and collectively adhered was not at issue, and Césaire's criticism

left it unbroached. The theory has therefore remained very much alive; in fact, it has provided the motivation for all our subsequent philosophical literature. The history of our philosophy since then has been largely the history of our succeeding interpretations of this collective 'philosophy', this world-view which was assumed to be pre-determined, and to underpin all our traditions and behaviour, and which analysis must now modestly set out to unravel.

As a result, most African philosophers have misunderstood themselves. While they were actually creating new philosophemes, they thought they were merely reproducing those which already existed. While they were producing, they thought they were simply recounting. Commendable modesty, no doubt, but also betrayal, since the philosopher's self-denial in the face of his own discourse was the inevitable consequence of a projection which made him arbitrarily ascribe to his people his own theoretical choices and ideological options. Until now African philosophy has been little more than an ethnophilosophy, the imaginary search for an immutable, collective philosophy, common to all Africans, although in an unconscious form (8).

From Temples to Kagamé: continuity and discontinuity

Such is the mainstream of African philosophy, which I must now endeavour to describe. Reference to Tempels enables us from the outset to see its essential weakness, to which I shall return. But fortunately there is more to African philosophy, even in its ethnophilosophical vagaries, than the mere reiteration of Bantu Philosophy.

In the first place, its motivations are more complex. The aim is no longer to furnish European settlers and missionaries with an easy access to the black man's soul, raised to the status of unwitting candidate for 'civilization' and Christianization. African philosophers aim to define themselves and their peoples, in the face of Europe, without allowing anybody else to do it for them, to fix and petrify them at leisure.

Moreover, even if this attempt at self-definition maintains the fiction of a collective philosophy among our authors, they nevertheless show genuine philosophical qualities in the manner in which they claim to justify this fiction. The severe rigour of some of their deductions, the accuracy of some of their analyses, the skill which some of them display in debate, leaves us in no doubt as to their status. They are certainly philosophers, and their only weakness is that the philosophical form of their own discourse has been created in terms of a myth disguised as a collective philosophy.

One example will suffice to illustrate this point: Kagamé. La Philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'etre, expressly and from the outset, establishes its point of view in relation to Tempels' work as an attempt by an autochthonous Bantu African to 'verify the validity of the theory advanced by this excellent missionary' (9). Nor can it be denied that the Rwandais priest is often in accord with the Belgian missionary, particularly where we are concerned here.

1 The idea of an immutable, collective philosophy conceived as the ultimate basis of Bantu institutions and culture, recognized more or less consciously by every Bantu. 'Philosophical principles,' writes Kagamé '... are invariable; since the nature of beings must always remain what it is, their profoundest explanation is inevitably immutable.' And again, concerning his 'sources' of information: 'We shall have to resort to a kind of institutionalized record.... Even if the formal structure of these "Institutions" is not the expression of a philosophical entity, it may be shown to be a direct consequence of a mode of formulating problems which lies within the purview of philosophy.' (10)

Let us note, however, that Kagamé is here much more subtle than Tempels. Unlike the Belgian missionary, he is duly wary of attributing to his fellow countrymen a philosophical system in the full sense of

the word, with clearly and logically defined articulations and contours. All he admits to is a number of invariable 'philosophical principles' that give no indication of forming a system; and he willingly speaks of 'intuitive philosophy', as opposed to academic, systematic philosophy.

2 The idea that European philosophy itself can be reduced, in spite of its eventful and variegated history, to a lowest common denominator, namely the Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy. In fact, this second idea explains the first, since it underlay and triggered off the strategy of differentiating African 'philosophy' from European philosophy.

On the other hand, as far as the content of this Bantu 'philosophy' is concerned, there are undeniable convergences between Kagamé and Tempels, especially as regards the Bantu conception of man.

3 The idea that man is indivisible, a simple unit, and not, as the Europeans believe, a compound of body and soul. Thus, Kagamé tells us that there is no word in Kinyarwanda to denote the soul, at least as long as the individual is alive.

4 The idea that God, and not the natural parents, is the real begetter and author of individual destinies.

5 The idea that people's names indicate their destiny.

6 Above all, the idea that humanity is at the centre of the Bantus' thoughts and preoccupations, to such an extent that other beings are conceived solely in opposition to it, as negations or inverted images of their own natures as thinking beings: things (ibintu in Kinyarwanda) are by definition beings deprived of intelligence, as opposed to humans (umuntu, pl. abantu), which are defined as the intelligent being.

As against these similarities, Kagamé does part company with Tempels (without expressly saying so) on a number of very important points.

In the first place, his method, which is founded on direct linguistic analysis, differs from Tempels'. Among all the 'institutionalized records' of Bantu culture, Kagamé deliberately emphasizes language and its grammatical structure (11). Hence perhaps the exceptional value of his book. Kagamé nags us - and in doing so renders us signal service - with the disturbing reminder that we might think very differently if we made systematic use of our mother tongues in our theoretical work. Indeed, the Rwandais philosopher is much more sensitive than was his Belgian predecessor to the contingency of language and the inevitable rooting of even the most abstract human thought in a world of pre-existing meanings.

More rigorous in method, Kagamé's analysis is also less ambitious in aim. It is offered to us expressly as a 'monograph', valid only for a specific geographical and linguistic area: Rwanda and its close neighbours. This is a far cry from Tempels' rash generalizations, with their claim not only to open wide the doors of Bantu philosophy but also to hold the key of all 'primitive' thought.

Moreover, it is obvious that Kagamé, while he joins with Tempels in asserting the existence of a collective Bantu philosophy, carefully avoids confining it within a narrow particularism. On the contrary, he more than once emphasizes its universal aspects, by which it is linked with, among others, European 'philosophy'. For instance, he tells us that 'formal logic is the same in all cultures' and that concept, judgement and reasoning have no Bantu, Eastern or Western specificity. 'What is expressed on this subject, in any language of Europe or Asia, America or Africa, can always be transposed into any other language belonging to a different culture.' (12)

Kagamé is also peculiarly sensitive to those transformations of Bantu 'philosophy' which result from its contacts with European culture. To him these transformations appear profound and significant, whereas Tempels believed that 'acculturation' could never impart more than a superficial veneer. Thus, the Rwandais philosopher warns us: 'You will not find, in our country at the present time, more than a

few people who have not corrected their traditional views on the world and on the heroic style of the past.' (13) In particular, he insists at length on the innovations introduced by the missionaries into the vocabulary and even the grammatical structure of Kinyarwanda (14). In this he shows himself sensitive to the internal dynamism and capacity for assimilation of his own culture - so much so that he himself gives us the facts with which to refute his own initial methodological assumption, posing the immutability of philosophical principles.

Such divergences are important and would suffice to differentiate Kagamé's work clearly from Tempels'. But beyond these formal differences even more striking is the fact that the two authors, while both postulating the existence of a constituted Bantu philosophy, give different interpretations of its content. Thus (although his criticism remains general and is not directed overtly at Tempels) Kagamé in fact rejects the fundamental thesis of the Belgian missionary, according to which the equivalence of the concepts of being and power is the essential characteristic of Bantu thought. It is true that the Rwandais priest also recognizes a difference between the Aristotelian concept of substance and kindred concepts in Bantu thought. This difference is that the 'philosophy of European culture' tends to conceive being in its static aspect, while the philosophy of Bantu culture prefers to consider its dynamic aspect. But he states that this is only 'a slight nuance', for the two aspects remain complementary and inseparable in any mode of thought:

In both systems, indeed, there are inevitably a static and a dynamic aspect at the same time.

1. Any structure, considered apart from its finality, must appear static.
2. If you then consider a structure as having an end, as being structurally oriented to action or being used for an end, that structure will present its dynamic aspect.

It therefore follows that if the philosophy of Bantu culture is called dynamic, it must be remembered that it is in the first place static. If the philosophy of European culture is described as static, it must not be forgotten that it is in the second place dynamic. Let me summarize these two correlative aspects in a double axiom:

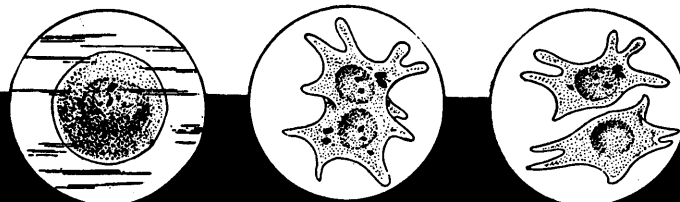
1. Operational predisposition presupposes essence.
2. Essence is structured in terms of its finality. (15)

While Tempels is not mentioned, the target of this critique is clear. But this is far from being the only divergence between Kagamé and Tempels. Many others occur in their interpretations of Bantu 'philosophy', even though they both suppose this 'philosophy' to be constituted and pre-existing, confined once and for all in the African's eternally immutable soul (Tempels) or at least in the permanent essence of his culture (Kagamé). Who is right? Which is the better interpretation? The choice is the reader's. Perhaps he will wish, in order to form his own opinion and close the debate, to return to the evidence itself and take cognizance of the original text of African 'philosophy', that secret text so differently interpreted by Tempels and Kagamé? This is what one usually does in Europe (and even Asia) when, in the name of intellectual integrity, one studies an author or a doctrine with a view to arriving at one's own conclusion in the face of the 'conflict of interpretations' (16). Only a return to sources can enlighten us. It alone can enable us to discriminate between interpretations and assess their reliability or simply their pertinence.

Unfortunately, in the case of African 'philosophy' there are no sources: or at least, if they exist, they are not philosophical texts or discourses. Kagamé's 'institutionalized records', or those which Tempels had earlier subjected to 'ethnophilosophical' treatment, are wholly distinct from philosophy. They are in no way comparable with the sources which for an interpreter of, say, Hegelianism, or dialectical materialism, or Freudian theory, or even

Confucianism are extant in the explicit texts of Hegel, Marx, Freud or Confucius, in their discursive development as permanently available products of language.

I can foresee an objection. Of course I know that among Kagamé's 'institutionalized records' the products of language occupy a large place (proverbs, tales, dynastic poems and the whole of Africa's oral literature). I shall even add that Kagamé's work is so exceptionally interesting precisely because of his extraordinary knowledge of the traditions, language and oral literature of Rwanda (17). But the point is that this literature - at least as it is presented by Kagamé - is not philosophical. Now, scientific method demands that a sociological document is interpreted first in terms of sociology, a botanical text (written or oral) first in terms of botany, histories first in terms of historiography, etc. Well then, the same scientific rigour should prevent us from arbitrarily projecting a philosophical discourse on to products of language which expressly offer themselves as something other than philosophy. In effecting this projection, Kagamé - and Tempels before him, along with those African ethnophilosophers who followed suit (we



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are less interested in the European variety (18)) - committed what Aristotle called (and Kagamé himself is rather fond of invoking Aristotle) a metabasis eis allo genos, i.e. a confusion of categories (19). This leaves readers with no means of checking their interpretations. As the evidence derived from the 'institutionalized' - but not philosophical - 'records' is inadequate, readers are brutally thrown back upon themselves and compelled to recognize that the whole construct rests on sand. Indeed, Kagamé, in spite of the very attractive qualities of his analysis and the relative accuracy of some of his sequences, has remained on the whole the prisoner of an ideological myth, that of a collective African 'philosophy' which is nothing but a revamped version of Lévy-Bruhl's 'primitive mentality', the imaginary subject of a scholarly discourse which one may regret Kagamé did not apply to something else.

Kagamé himself seems to have been aware of the difficulty, for he felt compelled, in order to render the idea of a collective philosophy plausible, to assume, at the beginnings of Rwandais culture, the existence and deliberate action of 'great initiators', intuitive philosophers who are supposed expressly to have formulated the principles of Bantu philosophy at the same time as they founded the institutions of that society (20). But it is easy to see (and Kagamé himself can hardly have been taken in) that this assumption is gratuitous, even mythological. Moreover - and this is more serious - it does not even solve the problem but rather encloses us in a vicious circle. The alternatives are as follows. Either Bantu ontology is strictly immanent in the Bantu languages as such and contemporaneous with

them (which Kagamé expressly recognizes, since he infers this ontology from the grammatical structures of Kinyarwanda), in which case it cannot have been taught by 'initiators', who would have had to express themselves in these Bantu languages; or this philosophy really was taught at a particular point in time, and in this case it is not coeval with the Bantu languages but is a historical stage in Bantu culture, destined to be overtaken by history.

Either way, Bantu 'philosophy' (21) is shown to be a myth. To destroy this myth once and for all, and to clear our conceptual ground for a genuine theoretical discourse - these are the tasks now awaiting African philosophers and scientists. I will now seek to show briefly that these tasks are in fact inseparable from political effort - namely, the anti-imperialist struggle in the strictest sense of the term.

The unshackling of discourse

I have quoted Kagamé only as an example. Despite his undeniable talent and his powerful theoretical temperament (which so brilliantly distinguishes him from some ethnophilosophers), it seems to me that his work simply perpetuates an ideological myth which is itself of non-African origin.

Unfortunately, Kagamé is not alone. A quick look at the bibliography suggested in note 1 is enough to show how much energy African philosophers have devoted to the definition of an original, specifically African 'philosophy'. In varying degrees, Makarakiza, Lufuluabo, Mulago, Bahoken, Fouda and, to a lesser extent, William Abraham remain caught in this myth, however scientific and productive their research (remarkable in some cases), sincere their patriotism and intense their commitment may have been (22).

Theirs is clearly a rearguard action. The quest for originality is always bound up with a desire to show off. It has meaning only in relation to the Other, from whom one wishes to distinguish oneself at all costs. This is an ambiguous relationship, inasmuch as the assertion of one's difference goes hand in hand with a passionate urge to have it recognized by the Other. As this recognition is usually long in coming, the desire of the subject, caught in his own trap, grows increasingly hollow until it is completely alienated in a restless craving for the slightest gesture, the most cursory glance from the Other.

For his part, the Other (in this case the European, the former colonizer) didn't mind a bit. From the outset he himself had instinctively created a gap between himself and the Other (the colonized), as between the master and his slave, as the paradigmatic subject of absolute difference (23). But eventually, as a gesture of repentance, or rather to help allay his own spiritual crisis, he began to celebrate this difference, and so the mysterious primitive 'mentality' was metamorphosed into primitive 'philosophy' in the hard-pressed master's mystified and mystifying consciousness. The difference was maintained but reinterpreted, or, if one prefers, inverted: and although the advertised primitive 'philosophy' did not correspond to that which the colonized wished to see recognized, at least it made dialogue and basic solidarity possible.

It was a case, says Eboussi aptly, quoting Jankelevitch, of 'doubly interpreted misinterpretation', in

which the victim makes itself the executioner's secret accomplice, in order to commune with him in an artificial world of falsehood (24).

What does that mean in this context? Simply that contemporary African philosophy, inasmuch as it remains an ethnophilosophy, has been built up essentially for a European public. The African ethnophilosopher's discourse is not intended for Africans. It has not been produced for their benefit, and its authors understood that it would be challenged, if at all, not by Africans but by Europe alone. Unless, of course, the West expressed itself through Africans, as it knows so well how to do. In short, the African ethnophilosopher made himself the spokesman of All-Africa facing All-Europe at the imaginary rendezvous of give and take - from which we observe that 'Africanist' particularism goes hand in glove, objectively, with an abstract universalism, since the African intellectual who adopts it thereby expounds it, over the heads of his own people, in a mythical dialogue with his European colleagues, for the constitution of a 'civilization of the universal' (25).

So it is no surprise, then, if this literature, like the whole of African literature in French (and, to a lesser extent, in English) is much better known outside than inside Africa. This is due not to chance or to material circumstances only but to fundamental reasons which proceed from the original destination of this literature.

Now the time has come to put an end to this scandalous extraversion. Theoretical discourse is undoubtedly a good thing; but in present-day Africa we must at all costs address it first and foremost to our fellow countrymen and offer it for the appreciation and discussion of Africans themselves (26). Only in this way shall we be able to promote a genuine scientific movement in Africa and put an end to the appalling theoretical void which grows deeper every day within a population now weary and indifferent to theoretical problems that are seen as pointless.

Science is generated by discussion and thrives on it (27). If we want science in Africa, we must create in the continent a human environment in which and by which the most diverse problems can be freely debated and in which these discussions can be no less freely recorded and disseminated, thanks to the written word, to be submitted to the appreciation of all and transmitted to future generations. These, I am sure, will do much better than we have.

This, obviously, presupposes the existence of freedom of expression, which in varying degrees so many of our present-day political regimes are endeavouring to stifle. But this means that the responsibility of African philosophers (and of all African scientists) extends far beyond the narrow limits of their discipline and that they cannot afford the luxury of self-satisfied apoliticism or quiescent complacency about the established disorder unless they deny themselves both as philosophers and as people. In other words, the theoretical liberation of philosophical discourse presupposes political liberation. We are today at the centre of a tangle of problems. The need for a political struggle makes itself felt at all levels, on all planes. I shall simply add that this struggle will not be simple and that clarity as well as resolve are needed if we are to succeed. The future is at stake.

Footnotes

1 Here is a minimal bibliography: W. Abraham, The Mind of Africa (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1962); Jean-Calvin Bahoken, Clairières métaphysiques africaines (Paris: Présence Africaine 1967); Aimé Césaire, Discours sur le colonialisme (Paris: Editions Réclame 1950; Several reprints by Présence Africaine); Alioune Diop, 'Niam M'Paya ou de la fin que dévorent les moyens', preface to I. Tempels, La Philosophie bantoue (Paris: Présence Africaine 1949); Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, 'Le Bantou problématique', Présence Africaine, no.66 (1968); Frantz Fanon, Peau noire, masques blancs (Paris: Seuil 1952); Frantz Fanon, Les Damnés de la terre (Paris: Maspéro 1968); Basile-Juleat Fouda, 'La Philosophie negro-africaine de l'existence' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Lelli, Faculté des Lettres, 1967); Alexis Kagamé, La Philosophie bantou-rwandaise de l'être (Brussels 1956); Françoise-Marie Lutuluabo, Vers une théodicée bantoue (Tournai: Casterman 1962); Françoise-Marie Lutuluabo, La Notion Juba bantoue de l'être (Tournai: Casterman 1964); Vincent Mulago, Un visage africain du christianisme (Paris: Présence Africaine 1965); A. Makarakiza, La

Dialectique des Barundi (Brussels 1959); Alassane N'Daw, 'Peut-on parler d'une pensée africaine?', Présence Africaine, no.58 (1966); Kwame Nkrumah, Consciencism (Heinemann 1964); Léopold Sédar Senghor, Nation et voie africaine du socialisme (Paris: Présence Africaine 1961); Léopold Sédar Senghor, Liberté I. Négritude et humanisme (Paris: Seuil 1964).

The reader may also wish to include the present book and some earlier articles of mine: 'Charabia et Mauvaise Conscience: psychologie du langage chez les intellectuels colonisés', Présence Africaine, no.61 (1967); 'Pourquoi la théorie?', Bulletin de la Commission Inter-africaine de Philosophie, Société Africaine de Culture, no.3 (Paris: Présence Africaine 1969); 'Le Problème actuel de la philosophie africaine', in Contemporary Philosophy. A Survey, ed. Raymond Klibansky, vol. IV (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice 1971).

I have cited only African authors, in accordance with my definition of African philosophy. Non-African Africanists are not included. It is for the readers to judge whether I am justified after they have read the book.

But I have included West Indians like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. They are

African of the Diaspora, and although they are not, and do not claim to be, philosophers, they afford us the means of conducting a fruitful political criticism of a certain form of philosophy.

To be complete the list should also include all the doctoral theses and other similar works by African students and researchers in philosophy, even if they bear on the most classical European authors, for they are works of philosophy by Africans. Our 'naive' definition of African philosophy as a set of texts enables us to see the internal discords of that literature, torn between a tragic renunciation of African allegiances on the one hand and imprisonment within an 'Africanist' ideology, itself of non-African origin, on the other. The only reason, therefore, for not citing texts in this category is that I have not been able to make an exhaustive inventory of it or even a representative choice.

Finally, North-African literature is omitted for material reasons alone. It is, of course, an integral part of African literature in general, although it constitutes a comparatively autonomous subset, no less than the black African literature on which we focus here. One day it would be useful to investigate systematically the problem of the real unity which underlies the obvious differences between these two literatures.

2 Rev. Father Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue*, translated from the Dutch by A. Rubbens (Paris: Présence Africaine 1949). A first translation had been published in 1945 by Editions Lovania, Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi). Présence Africaine has recently printed its third edition, which says a good deal! References are to the 1961 edition.

3 Cf. Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue*:

A better understanding of the field of Bantu thought is equally necessary for all those who are called upon to live among the natives. Therefore this first concerns colonialists, but more especially those who are charged with the administration and justice of the Blacks, all those who wish to see a fruitful development of clan law, in short all those who want to civilize, educate, raise the Bantus. But if this concerns all colonialists of good will, it is addressed more particularly to missionaries. (p.17)

4 In the last resort, this is perhaps the basic vice of ethnology in general (and not only of ethnophilosophy). Lévy-Bruhl's work at least had the merit of displaying, in a naive and clumsy way, how ethnological discourse has always depended on an ethnocentric attitude itself dictated by a concrete historical situation ('primitive' societies were in fact always societies dominated by imperialism). From this point of view, Lévy-Bruhl's belated self-criticism in his *Carnets* is far from being as radical as is sometimes supposed, for it retains the central notion of 'primitivity' and fails to explain the reasons for his earlier misconceptions.

Many recent ethnologists have tried to practise a neutral ethnology, free of value judgements and of racism and ethnocentrism. This intention may be praiseworthy in itself, but it does not prevent ethnology, as a type of discourse, from resting, as much as ever, on an ideological foundation. Ethnology (or anthropology, or whatever we care to call it) always assumes what it wants to prove, i.e. a real distinction between its object and that of sociology in general, the essential difference between 'primitive' (or perhaps 'archaic') societies and other societies. On the other hand, it also attempts to abstract from the real power relationship between these societies and the others - in other words, imperialism. In any case, it is clear that the societies selected for study by anthropology are in fact always dominated societies and that the scholarly discourse of the anthropologist has meaning only in a scientific debate originating elsewhere (in the dominant classes of the dominating societies) and in which these peoples do not participate. More detailed analysis is, of course, necessary here.

5 Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue*, pp.35-36.

6 *ibid.*, p.45.

7 *Discours sur le colonialisme*, 4th ed. (Paris: Présence Africaine 1962), p.44.

8 This applies, of course, to only one of the currents of African philosophy. A glance at the bibliography above will show that it has always provoked contestations within African philosophy itself (within African philosophical literature) and that it co-exists with other currents, though these are relatively insignificant.

9 Kagamé, *La Philosophie bantou-rwandaise de l'etre*, p.8.

10 *ibid.*, pp.17-33.

11 Kagamé presents his analysis as a reflection on the particular structures of the Kinyarwanda language. These structures are seen as delineating a kind of articulation of reality, a sort of grid through which the Rwandais perceives the world. Hence the idea of constructing a table of Bantu ontological categories, doing for Kinyarwanda what Aristotle, according to Kagamé, did for Greek. The results of the inquiry are by no means unattractive. Kagamé proposes four Bantu metaphysical categories, which he aligns with Aristotle's in the following table:

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

This table calls for a number of remarks:

(1) The first two categories fracture the unity of the Aristotelian concept of substance and make it appear irremediably ambiguous. Man and things are not part of the same genus but constitute two radically different genera. More accurately, man is the originary category in relation to which things are thinkable. These, by definition, are non-man, *ibintu*, beings without intelligence (a category which includes, let us not forget, minerals and vegetables as well as animals).

(2) The originary concept of man can only be defined in tautological terms. Man is the sole species of a unique genus. This is why Kagamé can write:

Some Europeans have taken great pleasure in the 'naïveté' of the Bantus, when asked 'Umuntu ni iki?' ('What is man?'). Called upon to give a definition of the being endowed with intelligence ... our Bantus, after much embarrassment, ended up by answering: 'Umuntu, ni umuntu nyine!' ('Man, precisely, is man!'), which meant something like this: 'By formulating the question, you have yourself given the answer, and it is impossible to explain further! You have stated the genus and the unique species! What would you answer if you were asked: 'What is the rational animal (i.e. man)?' (*ibid.*, p.118).

We may ask ourselves, however, to what extent the Bantus' embarrassment described here is not due rather to the intrinsic difficulty of the question asked (the most difficult of all questions, after all). The average European would certainly have been equally embarrassed and would have answered no less 'naïvely' than the Bantu, even though European languages enable the concept of man to be divided into simpler categories.

But perhaps the most serious difficulty concerns the interpretation given by Kagamé of Aristotle's project (which inspired him). No doubt Aristotle's ontology was connected with the structures of the Greek language, but this should not lead us, surely, to underestimate the originality of his project, which was intended not so

much to explore the actual structures of the Greek language as to transcend all such contingencies by grounding language in a universal and necessary order.

12 *ibid.*, p.39.

13 *ibid.*, p.27.

14 *ibid.*, particularly pp.64-70.

15 *ibid.*, pp.121-22.

16 The reader may have recognized here the title of a book by Paul Ricoeur, *Le Conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Seuil 1969). Without any doubt, the problem of African 'philosophy' refers us back to the problem of hermeneutics. The discourse of ethnophilosophers, be they European or African, offers us the baffling spectacle of an imaginary interpretation with no textual support, of a genuinely 'free' interpretation, ennobled and entirely at the mercy of the interpreter, a dizzy and unconscious freedom which takes itself to be translating a text which does not actually exist and which is therefore unaware of its own creativity. By this action the interpreter disqualifies himself from reaching any truth whatsoever, since truth requires that freedom be limited, that it bow to an order that is not purely imaginary and that it be aware both of this order and of its own margin of creativity. Truth is attainable only if the interpreter's freedom is based on the nature of the text to be interpreted; it presupposes that the text and the interpreter's discourse remain rigorously within the same category, i.e. the same univocal field. Aristotle's doctrine of the 'genera of being' means just this.

17 Cf. Kagamé's other works, particularly: *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 ethnophilosophy is still going strong. No wonder, if one remembers the praise lavished by a philosopher of Bachelard's rank (followed in this by Albert Camus, Louis Lavelle, Gabriel Marcel, Chomard de Lauwe, Jean Wahl, etc.) on a book as equivocal as *Bantu Philosophy* (cf. no.7, 1949) 'Témoignages sur La Philosophie bantoue du Père Tempels', *Présence Africaine*, no.7, 1949). So, if we want to avoid out of the vicious circle of ethnocentric prejudice, must we indiscriminately praise any work, whatever its quality, which attempts, equivocally, a problematic rehabilitation of the black? The most serious aspect of the matter, in the case of the European philosophers (I mean the genuine ones), is that they flagrantly flouted the theoretical implications of their own philosophical practice, which obviously rested on responsible thinking, on theoretical efforts on the part of the individual subject, and so excluded the reduction of philosophy to a collective system of thought.

The healthiest European reaction to Tempels' enterprise remains, as far as I know, that of Franz Crahay's 'Le Décollage conceptuel, condition d'une philosophie bantoue' (Conceptual take-off: a precondition for a Bantu philosophy), *Diogene*, no.52 (1965). We shall return to this and explain its limitations.

But more complete, more systematic and of exemplary lucidity, in my view, is the remarkable critique by the Camerounian Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, 'Le Bantou problématique', *Présence Africaine*, no.66 (1968).

It may be worth adding that my criticism of Tempels, and also the article by Eboussi, is aimed in no way at the man but at his work, or rather at a particular idea of philosophy which has unfortunately become dominant since his time and which, if it is not destroyed once and for all, is likely to stifle any potential African creativity. All I want to do, therefore, is to clear the ground for a philosophical practice worthy of the name, based on rigorous scientific practice, and at the same time to provide a new reading of existing African philosophical literature and, by ridding it of its ethnophilosophical illusions, to show that this theoretical practice has actually already begun and needs only to liberate itself and to recognize its autonomy and its possible functions in a new Africa.

19 It would be an entirely different matter, of course, if Kagamé had succeeded in providing philosophical texts by African sages or in transcribing their words. His interpretation would then have been founded on actual philosophical discourses, universally accessible and verifiable.

This perhaps indicates an urgent task for present African philosophers: the systematic transcription of everything that can be recorded of the discourses of our ancestors, sages and scholars who are still alive.

But here again, one must distinguish. The thought of an African sage, even if he purports to be the spokesman for a group, is not necessarily that of all the individuals in that group, and still less that of all Africans in general. Also, if such discourses are to be transcribed, it should not be only for the sake of advertising them for the possible admiration of a non-African public but, first and foremost, so that they can be scrutinized by all contemporary Africans. In any case we can be grateful to Marcel Griaule for having so faithfully recorded the words of an Ogotemmel (cf. Marcel Griaule, *Dieu d'eau. Entretiens avec Ogotemmel*, Paris: Editions du Chêne 1948). A transcript of this kind by a European ethnologist is infinitely more valuable than all the arbitrary fabrications by other 'Africanist' Europeans about the African soul or the Bantu world-view and all those impressionistic sketches of 'Dogon wisdom', 'Diola philosophy', etc.

At present I confine my discussion to the Bantu area, for the simple reason that it seems to have produced the most abundant philosophical or ethnophilosophical literature of African origin; and it is in this kind of explicit discourse that African philosophy must be sought: elsewhere we shall find nothing but the mirages of our desires, the fantasies of our regrets and nostalgias.

20 *La Philosophie bantou-rwandaise de l'etre*, pp.37, 180, 187 and *passim*.

21 The reader will have immediately understood the discriminative (i.e. conceptual) use I make of the following terms: philosophy (without quotation marks) in the proper sense - a set of explicit texts and discourses, a literature intended as philosophy; 'philosophy' in an improper sense, as indicated by the quotation marks - the collective, hypothetical world-view of a given people; ethnophilosophy - a research resting, in whole or in part, on the hypothesis of such a world-view and the attempt to reconstruct a supposed collective 'philosophy'.

22 These, of course, are not at issue. Some of the authors mentioned are extremely instructive, and Africans will gain by reading them. My critique, I repeat, is not negative; but it is natural to demand more of those who have already given because we know they could do better.

23 This is the real meaning of Lévy-Bruhl's work. Cf. *La Mentalité primitive* and other texts of the kind; cf. also all the ideological discourses collected by Césaire in that inspired anthology of follies, the *Discours sur le colonialisme*.

24 F. Eboussi-Boulaga, 'Le Bantou problématique', *Présence Africaine*, no.66 (1968).

25 The phrases *rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir, civilisation de l'universel*, etc., are, of course, favourite expressions of Senghor.

26 Here lies the inadequacy of the analysis offered in Franz Crahay's 'Le Décollage conceptuel, condition d'une philosophie bantoue'. The 'take-off' has already taken place. All people think conceptually, under all skies, in all civilizations, even if their discourse incorporates mythological sequences (like that of Parmenides, Plato, Confucius, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kagamé, etc.) and even if it rests wholly (as is nearly always the case) on fragile ideological foundations, from which, of course, it must be liberated by critical vigilance. In this respect, there is nothing exceptional about African civilizations.

But Crahay ignores the real problem, which is the choice of interlocutor and the destination of the discourse. Mythical or scientific, ideological or critical, language is always forced by social discussion to improve itself and to pass by successive leaps through all the levels of consistency and rigour. The main task in Africa is to subject language to social discussion and to allow it to develop its own history through writing and its necessary complement, political democracy.

27 We are, of course, considering science not in terms of its results (as a system of constituted truths) but as a process, as an actual search, as a project which takes shape within a society and which is always greater than its provisional findings.