



# QUEST

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*The way forward for QUEST*

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## EDITORIAL

### The way forward for *QUEST*

#### *Looking back*

The publication of the present volume XVII of *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie* marks the end of a period of transition, and further consolidation of our journal as one of the very few surviving periodicals devoted to philosophical debate in and about Africa.

In the transition period now behind us, two volumes appeared that were entirely devoted to the philosophical implications of recent major changes occurring in the Southern African subcontinent:

- XV-2001, *African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy*, edited by Pieter Boele van Hensbroek in his capacity as outgoing *QUEST* Editor; and
- XVI-2002, *Truth in Politics: Rhetorical Approaches to Democratic Deliberation in Africa and beyond*, edited by Pierre-Phillipe Salazar, Sanya Osha and Wim van Binsbergen – the latter two in their capacity of Member of the *QUEST* Editorial Team and incoming *QUEST* Editor, respectively.

These thematic volumes dealt with issues of the greatest importance:

- the emergence of *ubuntu* philosophy as a new and mainly Anglophone branch on the imposing tree of the African philosophies of Being Human, whose earlier branches (from Kagame on) were largely Franco-phone
- the rekindling, mainly from the newly democratic South Africa, of the originally Diopian idea of the African Renaissance
- the attempted creation of moral and political conditions for post-

conflict and post-trauma sociability, through the procedures of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), whose contradictory philosophical implications – with special emphasis on the potential and limitations of a modern rhetorical perspective inspired by Protagoras, Aristotle and Cicero – *QUEST* explored in a special volume devoted to *Truth in Politics*.

This temporary concentration on Southern Africa was certainly justified. More than ever, Southern Africa has been articulating itself in recent years as an integral part of the African continent, and the changes occurring in the subcontinent are of the greatest relevance for Africa as a whole. Moreover, South Africa has been a country – throughout the twentieth century CE – where philosophy has thrived, due to a combination of a highly developed urban, industrial, educational and academic infrastructure, and the prominence (in addition to the long-standing presence of Islam) of Christianity as a world religion, in the training of whose clergy philosophy has always played an important part.

However, this sustained concentration on Southern Africa through two special volumes also implied elements of discontinuity for *QUEST*:

- the absence of Francophone contributions,
- the near-absence of reviews,
- a relative over-representation, within the *QUEST* pages, of other disciplines than philosophy
- a relative under-representation of contributors who could meaningfully qualify as Africans in Robert Sobukwe's sense of accepting Africa as their home
- a relative under-representation of certain themes that have occupied *QUEST* from its inception:
  - the possibility, the definition, and the critique, of a specifically African philosophy, and
  - the reflection on themes of socio-political transformation *throughout* the African continent.

*The present Volume XVII*

We flatter ourselves that with the present volume, this discontinuity is largely remedied.

A modest *Reviews* section once more concludes this volume.

Francophone contributions (Duran-Ndaya Tshiteku, Malango Kitungano) once more declare *QUEST*'s determination to be emphatically bi-lingual – however great (and conspicuous!) a burden such bilingualism imposes on an Editorial Team that so far happens to be entirely Anglophone, and that lacks both the financial resources and the time to hire Francophone editorial assistance.

With a predominance of contributors who are in every respect African intellectuals from and in Africa, the present volume returns to *QUEST*'s perennial themes such as the debate on the nature of an African philosophy, in which Hountondji has played such a major role (extensively discussed in Sanya Osha's opening article in this volume). Professor Hountondji is one of the members of the *QUEST* Advisory Editorial Board and as such will feature below in the context of the launching of *QUEST* XVI. Used to seeing his seminal, though iconoclastic work in African philosophy dismissed by his African colleagues, he will be gratified by the careful and balanced, if not uncritical, reading that Professor Osha accords his work. Along the same lines of the debate on African philosophy, this volume has F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo's extensive review of Imbo on Okot p'Bitek.

With the exception of some of our Senegalese colleagues, African philosophers have so far kept largely aloof of the Afrocentrist debate – if they have not adopted the dismissive attitude of some of their most cosmopolitan brothers (Mudimbe and Appiah) vis-à-vis this intellectual movement. Nonetheless that movement has developed into a major identity expression among African Americans and in certain branches of Africa-related scholarship; this was reason to consider (Malango Kitungano) once more the heritage of Cheikh Anta Diop, its potential relevance for African philosophy, as well as some of its recent criticisms. In a forthcoming volume, XIX, we shall devote further attention to Afrocentricity as a key development in recent, Africa-based identitary strategies.

Clearly, Diopian thought situates itself in a critical reaction to the racism

that was implied in mainstream North Atlantic approaches to Africa of an earlier vintage. Against the same background we may situate, in the present volume, the exploration of patterns of African jurisprudence (Idowu) from a point of view of legal philosophy. This is a vast field of enquiry, of which one would hope that a further instalment will go beyond the well known anti-racist critiques of the works of Hume and Hegel by writers such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Henry Louis Gates Jr. – and beyond the blaming of, specifically, Jews for the marginalisation of Blacks.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, there is room for a consideration, in the near future, of the discourses and debates around the Islamic *shari‘a* code from a perspective of African jurisprudence.

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<sup>1</sup> Such blaming seems to reflect, not so much the history of ideas across the millennia, but especially the very recent history of the difficult interaction between Blacks and Jews as two marginalised groups in urban Northern America during the last century and a half; cf. Berman, Paul, ed., 1994, *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments*, New York: Delacorte; Washington, Joseph, ed., 1984, *Jews in Black Perspectives: A Dialogue*, Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Berlinerblau, J., 1999, *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena controversy and the responsibilities of American intellectuals*, New Brunswick etc.: Rutgers University Press.

Citing Brackman’s unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California Los Angeles, 1977, Idowu attributes ‘Ham’s curse’ to the Talmud, i.e. to a compilation of Jewish rabbinical texts from the early first millennium CE. However, this should not make us ignore the fact that the account has a much longer history, going back to the Old Testament, in a section (Gen. 9: 25-27) written in Palestine more than half a millennium before the Talmud, and adopted by Christianity by the time of the Talmud’s emergence. In that passage, Noah, allegedly recovering from drunkenness and realising ‘what his younger son [largely implied to be Ham] had done unto him’, is already said to curse Ham’s son Canaan.

And why was not Ham himself thus cursed? Perhaps because the name Ham (‘Hot’?) referred to an immense geopolitical area encompassing most of the Biblical world, with a phenotypically highly diverse population, whereas the name Canaan (of uncertain etymology in West Semitic, and in Afro-Asiatic in general) may have specifically carried African, Black somatic connotations, and in fact could be given a Niger-Congo etymology in the proto-Bantu *\*káán*, ‘to refuse’ – a possible echo of (Middle Bronze Age or earlier) social exclusion, on somatic grounds, of what I propose to have been (proto-)Bantu speaking Blacks in West Asia, *prior to the historical emergence of Judaism* in the Late Bronze / Early Iron Age. Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., ‘Explorations in theory and method of ethnicity in Mediterranean proto-history’, in: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., & Woudhuizen, F.C., in press, *Ethnicity in Mediterranean proto-history*, Oxford: British Archaeology Reports.

Among the featured articles in the present volume a theme in Ancient Greek philosophy, notably the reconsideration of Gorgias' scepticism (Alumona), reflects a continuous strand in *QUEST*: the reflection, not only on the emerging canon of African philosophy, but also on the North Atlantic / Western tradition – in the awareness that academic philosophy in Africa (whatever one may think of Hountondji's central thesis) developed *at least in critical contact with* the Western tradition.

Finally, as a reminder that *QUEST*, an *African Journal of Philosophy*, has an firm interest in theoretical issues even beyond their immediately recognisable African applicability, the British aesthetician Gerald Cipriani shares his phenomenologically-orientated thoughts on noetic validity in aesthetic interpretation – the first time, if we are not mistaken, that modern aesthetic theory is drawn within the orbit of *QUEST*.

### *QUEST Laboratory*

What is new is the section *QUEST Laboratory*, which – in the present volume and subsequent ones – aims at the *initiation* of critical debate and discussion on specific topics, and thus seeks to continue and intensify one of the main functions *QUEST* has had over the years. Both 'laboratory' and 'initiation' suggest that contributions in this section are primarily selected, not for their balanced academic qualities in form and content, but for their apparent potential to direct our philosophical reflection and debate in novel and promising directions.

In the present volume, the *QUEST Laboratory* section contains the proceedings of a special *QUEST* Colloquium held in Leiden, the Netherlands, on 23 March 2004. This colloquium was to mark the publication of the special issue *Truth in Politics* (*QUEST* volume XVI), and thus the transition of *QUEST* leadership from its illustrious co-founder and long-time editor, Dr. Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, to the present Editor. During the colloquium the office of Editor was formally transferred, and the first volume produced under the new leadership officially presented to Professor Paulin Hountondji of the University of Cotonou, Benin. Professor Hountondji is one of the focal points of the network of African philosophy, and a long-standing mem-

ber of *QUEST*'s Advisory Editorial Board.

The theme of that workshop, held in Leiden, the Netherlands, on 23 March 2004, was '*The transcultural framework for the construction of African knowledges*' / '*Le cadre transculturel pour la construction des connaissances africaines*'.<sup>2</sup> The theme was particularly appropriate. For the material reality of *QUEST* itself has been that of a 'transcultural framework for the construction of African knowledges', ever since its first years as a combined local and expatriate initiative of Roni M. Khul Bwalya (†) and Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, when both were teaching philosophy at the University of Zambia (1987). For as a venue of philosophical publication, *QUEST* is

- published originally in North Atlantic languages of communication (French and English)
- patterned originally after North Atlantic formats of philosophical production (notably the published scholarly article – whose format is neither that of African sages, nor Socratic, nor peripathetic)
- supported by typographical, printing and financial skills and facilities largely situated in the North,
- yet emphatically (and truly) African in its contributors, themes, concerns, and identity – generally considered as a major African resource for philosophical knowledge production.

Key note speaker at the symposium was Paulin Hountondji. Having personally lived through the ups and down of African philosophical periodicals

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<sup>2</sup> In connection with this Symposium, *QUEST*, in the person of its Editor, wishes to express warm thanks to the following persons and institutions: to Professor Hountondji, whose inventive use of an already scheduled trip to Copenhagen allowed him to participate in the *QUEST* symposium at minimum extra costs; to the African Studies Centre's Seminar Committee, for paying these costs; to the other speakers at the symposium, who waived the reimbursement of their travelling expenses in recognition of *QUEST*'s financial position; to Kirsten Seifkar, M.A., member of the Editorial Team in charge of everything having to do with communications, subscriptions, finance, logistics, and English copy-editing, and thus one of the secrets of *QUEST*'s survival and also of the symposium's success; and to Professor Sanya Osha, the other member of the Editorial Team – *QUEST*'s financial position did not allow him to attend the seminar, but *QUEST*'s new lease of life owes a very great deal to Sanya Osha's dedication, his philosophical expertise, his prolific writing, and his acute sense of quality.



for more than three decades, and famous for his theoretical insights in the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic implications of the production (including the actual publication) of philosophy by Africans, Professor Hountondji's address, even though delivered off the cuff, was a splendid introduction to the theme of the symposium. Regrettably, the speaker's many other inter-continental and local commitments did not allow him to offer his address for publication in the present volume.

Of the other four addresses, one – by the present Editor – illustrated the theme of the symposium by reference to both his editorial and his critical closing article in the *Truth in Politics* special volume XVI. In addition to singing the well-deserved praises of his predecessor, the outgoing Editor Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, this allowed Wim van Binsbergen to sketch the considerable dilemmas of hegemony and birthright inherent in North Atlantic leadership of an African journal. More in general, he questioned the wholesale applicability, to African situations today, of established Western mainstream approaches (such as Aristotelian rhetoric, modelled after political practices in Ancient Greece). Since the gist of that argument has appeared in volume XVI, there is no point in including it here.

The symposium contribution by Julie Duran-Ndaya Tshiteku, in French, sketched the dilemmas inherent in the situation where an African researcher from the Democratic Republic of Congo, herself a member of the North Atlantic diaspora, sets out to investigate the dynamics of religious self-organisation and mutant identity among her fellow migrants – whilst doing so in a format of knowledge production imposed by North Atlantic academic procedures governing the preparation and defence of the doctoral thesis. Having met with great recognition from the audience, her text appears here in an even more accomplished version.

The other two contributions, by the outgoing Editor Pieter Boele van Hensbroek and by the leading figure of African Anthropology in Belgium Professor René Devisch, explored the theme of the symposium by reference to the present Editor's book *Intercultural encounters: African and anthropological lessons towards a philosophy of interculturality*, which had just been published; also these texts appear here in revised versions.

Touching at the very heart of the *QUEST* project, and bringing out into the open contradictions that either personal friendship, embarrassment, or political correctness usually make us gloss over tacitly, this small collection of

essays seems to be a fitting start for the *QUEST Laboratory* as a new, recurrent rubric. The incisive, polemical and occasionally highly personal form of the contributions, whilst perhaps contrasting somewhat with the sustained academic prose characteristic of the standard *QUEST* contributions, adds a dimension of frankness and directness that may be illuminating and inspiring, even though it can never replace the detached and polished academic product.

### *Conclusion*

This then is *QUEST* volume XVII which we are now sending out into the world, with considerable relief and confidence. The relatively late date of its appearance reflects more than only the pangs of transition. Since Volume XVI was published, very major improvements were made in various essential domains, including

- in the peer review structure of the journal,
- the management of subscriptions and back issues and financial matters in general, and
- in the retro-digitalisation of all volumes of *QUEST* ever published (soon to be uploaded onto the *QUEST* website: <http://www.quest-journal.net>).

In these developments (which have greatly taxed the time table of the three members of the Editorial Team) *QUEST* has been very fortunate that the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, – as one of the world's finest centres of African Studies – has extended official hospitality to *QUEST* for the duration of a five-year period.

Another reason for the delay has been that we needed time to allow the fruits of the appearance of *QUEST* XVI to be reaped in the form of a larger number of submissions, of generally improved quality, – including more and more French contributions, as well as an increasing number of contributions from non-African scholars. This strategy has worked, as proves not only the present publication of Volume XVII, but also the simultaneous publications of Volumes XVIII (2004) and XIX (2005) – thus bringing *QUEST*'s publication entirely up to date.

Let me conclude by thanking my two fellow-members of the *QUEST* Editorial Team, the Advisory Editorial Board, and our authors, for their various generous contributions. I express our deep recognition towards the African Studies Centre, whose essential support (gained on the basis of Volume XVI) will greatly stimulate the growth, and ultimately complete Africanisation, of *QUEST*. And I invite African philosophers, intellectuals in general, as well as Africanists world-wide, to increasingly use *QUEST* as a venue of publication, and, more in general, as a locus of inspiration and debate; and thus to confirm, or – as the case may be – to challenge and correct, the editorial policy of which the present volume is the implementation.

Wim van Binsbergen



## Articles

### LEGACIES OF A CRITIQUE OF ETHNOPHILOSOPHY

Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* revisited

by Sanya Osha

*ABSTRACT.* This essay revisits Hountondji's famous critique of ethnophilosophy by re-reading his landmark text, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* and the debates that attended its sometimes problematic reception by a number of African scholars. It also provides a reading of Hountondji's most recent text, *The Struggle for Meaning* to demonstrate the multiple ways in which the latter text amplifies the arguments of the former and similarly, it evinces how the latter text reduces the philosophical exclusivity of the former as a strategy for popularizing his central theoretical concerns. Indeed Hountondji's central contribution to African philosophy, the critique of ethnophilosophy, is implicated in the problematic of origins, which can be construed as a quest for foundations. In pursuing this methodological trajectory, we would see how very little of Hountondji's thought has changed and also demonstrates how the latter text (*The Struggle for Meaning*) provides the contexts and conditions for a better appreciation of his structures of thought together with a number of other equally important African thinkers. In some ways, it can be argued that *The Struggle for Meaning* is not an advancement of Hountondji's thought, rather, it is a largely eloquent recapitulation of earlier theoretical positions that often employs para-philosophical modes of discourse to restate what is indeed philosophical in African thought and what continues to be the enduring problems and challenges that face the contemporary African philosopher in considerably harsher milieus and times. The essay concludes by claiming that Hountondji's revisitations of Husserlian epistemology and the critique of ethnophilosophy are two of his central contributions to the making of modern African thought.

*KEY WORDS:* ethnophilosophy, problematic of origins, Hountondji, meaning, para-philosophical modes of discourse, Husserl

Several African thinkers ascribe the emergence of modern African philosophy to a discourse known as ethnophilosophy which in a way is an outgrowth of colonial anthropological interventions. Ethnophilosophy in recent times has become greatly undervalued because

- (a) it is conceived as a product of a vast imperial undertaking that has its beginnings in the legitimation of colonialism and
- (b) because of its relentless and systematic deagentialization of subject peoples and agents and then
- (c) even at its best, because it can be excessively patronizing in its claims to give voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless.

However, it can be argued that ethnophilosophy in the wave of decolonization might in some respects have aided nationalist agitations and postcolonial ideologies of liberation that gave rise to certain counter-discourses (to colonialism and the master-discourses that promoted it) through which modern African thought gained its various discursive orientations, momentum and stability. For an African philosopher like Paulin J. Hountondji, ethnophilosophy provided the fertile grounds on which to develop a powerful philosophical practice such that is unique within the canon of modern African thought.

This essay revisits Hountondji's famous critique of ethnophilosophy by

- re-reading his landmark text, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*
- revisiting the debates that attended its sometimes problematic reception by a number of African scholars; moreover,
- it provides a reading of Hountondji's most recent text, *The Struggle for Meaning* to demonstrate the multiple ways in which the latter text amplifies the arguments of the former;
- relatedly, it evinces how the latter text reduces the philosophical exclusivity of the former as a strategy for popularizing his central theoretical concerns. Indeed Hountondji's central contribution to African philosophy, the critique of ethnophilosophy, is implicated in the *problematic of origins*, which is also a quest for foundations.

In erecting this particular discursive frame we would see how very little of Hountondji's thought has changed and also demonstrate how the latter text (*The Struggle for Meaning*) provides the contexts and conditions for a better appreciation of his structures of thought together with a number of other equally important African thinkers. In some ways, it can be argued that *The Struggle for Meaning* is not an advancement of Hountondji's thought, rather,

it is a largely eloquent recapitulation of earlier theoretical positions that often employs para-philosophical modes of discourse to restate what is indeed philosophical in African thought and what continue to be the enduring problems and challenges that face the contemporary African philosopher in considerably harsher milieus and times.

Anthony Appiah calls *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* perhaps

“the most influential work of African philosophy written in the French language.”<sup>1</sup>

In his preface to a new edition of the somewhat controversial text, Hountondji explains why he makes the critique of ethnophilosophy his theoretical point of departure in addition to restating the conditions of mental enslavement in Africa, the ever unfavourable relations in the international division of labor, the continuing peripheralization of so-called peripheral knowledges and the abiding interest in science and technology in the African postcolony. These various concerns are important for him because they have a profound impact not only on how Africa relates to itself but also to other parts of the globe. Abiola Irele echoing Hountondji, writes, “no cultural development of any importance will be possible in Africa until she had built up a material strength capable of guaranteeing her sovereignty and her power of decision not only in the political and economic but also in the cultural field.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, since the publication of *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, the multiple problems of the African continent have worsened. Africans know what needs to be done to get out of the unending cycle of degradation, violence and general socio-political disequilibria, but the material power and conditions together with favourable international contexts are usually lacking.

Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary, initiated the ethnophilosophical tendency in philosophico-anthropological studies in Africa with the publication of his work, *La Philosophie bantoue / Bantoe-filosofie* in 1945. Hountondji argues that this pioneering text was written primarily for a European audience in which the Bantu subject features as a mere anthropological ob-

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<sup>1</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, Forward, *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture and Democracy in Africa*, Athens: Ohio University Center of International Studies, p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> Abiola Irele, Introduction, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 25.

ject, a passive presence awaiting the attentions and ministrations of the European adventurer in material, intellectual and psychic terms. In his words,

“it aims on the one hand at facilitating what it calls Europe’s ‘mission to civilize’ (by which we understand: practical mastery by the colonizer of the black man’s psychological wellsprings) and, on the other hand, at warning Europe itself against the abuses of its own technocratic and ultra-materialistic civilization, by offering her, at the cost of a few rash generalizations, an image of the fine spirituality of the primitive Bantu.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, a crucial problematic is raised: the colonizer can ‘civilize’ the ‘native’ on the condition that she spiritually redeems herself.

Tempels’s corpus provoked a few intellectual reactions from a Rwandais priest, Alexis Kagame. Kagame attempts to construct a universal ontology drawing from an Aristotelian philosophy of consciousness. Similarly, in incorporating Greek syntactical structures in relation to his mother tongue, his entire theoretical project fails in Hountondji’s view:

“His critique, [...] is not a radical one. He should have renounced Tempel’s whole project instead of accepting its dogmatic naiveté and carrying it out slightly differently. Kagame should not have been content to refute Tempels, he should have asked himself what the reasons were for his error. Then he might have noticed that Tempels’ insistence on emphasizing the differences was part and parcel of the whole scheme, the reconstruction of the Bantu *Weltanschauung*, inasmuch as the scheme was not inscribed in the *Weltanschauung* itself but was external to it.”<sup>4</sup>

Hountondji grants that Kagame has a powerful theoretical temperament but concludes in the same vein that his

“work simply perpetuates an ideological myth which is itself of non-African origin.”<sup>5</sup>

Other prominent ethnophilosophers include<sup>6</sup> Makarakiza, Lufuluabo, Mulago, Bahoken, Fouda and in some respects, William Abraham.

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<sup>3</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



In other words, African scholars who engage in ethnophilosophy are no better than their western counterparts in constructing doubtful mythological theories and depictions of Africa. In his view:

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 people, in a mythical dialogue with his European colleagues, for the constitution of a 'civilization of the universal'.<sup>7</sup>

Hountondji argues in several instances that the discourse of ethnophilosophy, rather than instituting a genuine philosophical practice in Africa has instead prevented its development. It is a waste of time as a scholarly endeavor and a misdirected kind of labor in which preconstituted structures of thought are mummified. In short, the preoccupation with ethnophilosophy discourages the confrontation with the problems and challenges of the present. By the practice of ethnophilosophy,

"we have unwittingly played Europe's game- the Europe against which we first claimed we were setting ourselves to defend. And what do we find at the end of road? The same subservience, the same display of wretchedness, the same tragic abandonment of thinking by ourselves and for ourselves: slavery."<sup>8</sup>

Within ethnophilosophical literature,<sup>9</sup>

"there is a myth at work, the myth of primitive unanimity, with its suggestion that in 'primitive societies- that is to say, non-Western societies- everybody always agrees with everyone else. It follows that in such societies there can never be individual beliefs or philosophies but only collective systems of belief."

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

By the time Hountondji attained the height of his intellectual/ philosophic powers, ethnophilosophy had been deprived of its theoretical momentum;

“that discourse has lost its critical edge charge, its *truth*. Yesterday it was the language of the oppressed, today it is a discourse of power. Formerly a romantic protest against European pride, it is now an ideological placebo.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps one of the most damaging remarks Hountondji makes regarding the concept of ethnophilosophy is that it is

“a mystified discourse and a dreamlike description of a collective thought that exists only in the inventor’s head.”<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Hountondji has criticized the trend in Africa called philosophic sagacity or what he terms a *literature de pensée*.<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to note that the word ethnophilosophy was not coined by Hountondji or Marcien Towa as it is often assumed. Kwame Nkrumah had registered for a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania in 1943 and had proposed to work on what he termed ‘ethnophilosophy.’ In one of his numerous definitions of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji writes that it is

“the extension into the field of thought in general of the inventory of the corpus of so-called ‘primitive’ knowledges, [an inventory] that had been undertaken at that time for plants and animals by two pilot-disciplines: ethnobotany and ethnozoology.”<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, Hountondji together with Marcien Towa made their reputations as philosophers for their relentless critiques of ethnophilosophy.

Hountondji has made many metaphilosophical reflections, indulged in elaborate political philosophizing and written about the adverse conditions that prevail over the international division of intellectual labor. First, he is a committed intellectual in some of the most illustrious connotations of the term: for instance, he argues that

“the responsibility of African philosophers (and of all African scientists) extends far

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Paulin J. Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 208.

beyond the narrow limits of their discipline and that they cannot afford the luxury of self-satisfied apoliticism or the quiescent complacency about the established disorder unless they deny themselves as both philosophers and as people. In other words, the theoretical liberation of philosophical discourse presupposes political liberation.”<sup>14</sup>

One of the charges often made against Hountondji is that he is not sufficiently political for an African philosopher and that he is too theoretical to have any redeeming political value in the continent. But more on this claim later.

Ethnophilosophy, we are constantly reminded is an invention of the west; an invention defines what is ‘primitive’ and what is ‘civilized’, what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘unnatural’, what is ‘normal’ and what is ‘abnormal’ and so on. Hountondji points out that these classifications and various myths of unanimity only serve to

“feed the Western taste for spice, sensation and exoticism.”<sup>15</sup>

The native is violently otherized, violently abused and laid prostrate for western gaze, scrutiny, fetish and consumption. In this way,

“the essential fine responsibility of the primitive was preserved, along with his good-natured insouciance, his passivity, his impotence.”<sup>16</sup>

Indeed many of Hountondji's conclusions are relevant for postcolonial theory and cultural studies. Unfortunately, his work is not always cited by theorists of the postcolonial and cultural studies. But perhaps this grave oversight is not as damaging as the charges made against him by his fellow African scholars.

Olabiya Yai wrote a searing critique<sup>17</sup> of *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* that provoked a multiplicity of reactions within and beyond the African continent. First of all, he accuses Hountondji of not giving an adequate

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<sup>14</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See Olabiya Yai, “The Theory and Practice in African Philosophy: The Poverty of Speculative Philosophy,” *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. VI, No. 2, July 1977.

definition of African philosophy. Specifically, he writes,

“the flight from a debate on the content of African philosophy tells of the inadequacy of the political and philosophical discourse conducted by our abstract philosophers.”<sup>18</sup>

Yai charges Hountondji of “elitism, philosophism and scientism.”<sup>19</sup> He strikes hard at Hountondji when he writes,

“the philosophical stake in Africa is not an interest that concerns only the “philistine” or “intellectual” strata of the petty bourgeoisie, for the masses too must have their voices heard. And here dialectical materialism becomes pertinent, with its irreplaceable role as philosophy of praxis and as philosophy of the oppressed.”<sup>20</sup>

The point being made is that Hountondji’s thought has virtually no political relevance.

Oyekan Owomoyela also published a long critique of Hountondji’s work which is less strident than Yai’s. Owomoyela’s general contention about Hountondji’s philosophical project is that:

“Whereas the case against ethnophilosophy could be construed as being against the misguided concoctions of foreigners and their African cohorts, the philosophers’ pronouncements leave one with the certainty that the real object of their displeasure is African tradition and not what ethnophilosophers make of it.”<sup>21</sup>

He also states with a demonstrable modicum of hesitation:

“Hountondji’s suggestion that African Studies as a discipline is suspect because it was invented by Europeans and is, therefore, part of the European tradition, is strange.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, he makes the claim that

“Anglophone philosophers tend to be more receptive to the philosophical traditions of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Oyekan Owomoyela, “Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration”, *African Studies Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1987, p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

African traditions than are their Francophone colleagues.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus we have two popular arguments against Hountondji's corpus. First, there is the claim that he is not sufficiently political. There is also the charge that in his attempts to denigrate ethnophilosophy, he ignores the importance and possibilities inherent in indigenous African traditions. The point is how accurate are these assertions? Do these claims really do justice to Hountondji's landmark text, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*? And then how has his subsequent work tried to grapple with these two main charges? Indeed these two charges relate to two of the most powerful tendencies in modern African thought: Marxism and nativism which a formulation of poststructuralist thought in Africa has revealed to be fake philosophies (*philosophies du travestissement*).<sup>24</sup> The point is, are both Yai and Owomoyela fair in their assessments of Hountondji's work?

Hountondji had defined African philosophy to

“mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.”<sup>25</sup>

This seems to be an agreeable starting-point. However, this not only the definition he gives. He also concerns himself with the various tasks that face the contemporary African philosopher.

In the case of Africa, philosophy as a meditation on the logic of sciences, on the conditions of their constitution and their development, on the theoretical and historical relationships that they have between them and, as the case may be, between them and their technical applications, on the forms and ways of their social insertion, the modes of social appropriation of their theoretical and practical results, briefly, philosophy as theory of science in the widest sense of the term, can play<sup>26</sup> a considerable role by illuminating

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 and his “Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy. Myth & Reality*, p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Paulin Hountondji, “What Philosophy Can Do,” *QUEST: An International African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.1, No. 2, 1987, p. 19.

with a new light the problem, henceforth classic, of the contribution of science and of technology to the development of our societies.

To identify and appreciate the value, richness and range of Hountondji's philosophical contributions in Africa we have to look beyond Marxian and nativist critiques, we have to refocus on the historical conjuncture in which his *oeuvre* took shape in terms of cultural, political and intellectual parameters and how they affected the production of philosophical thought, we also have to consider the contributions of his contemporaries in relation to his thought and how they have fared over time and space. If we employ this set of criteria, Hountondji remains vital to modern African thought. However, I think his importance lies beyond his critique of ethnophilosophy which oftentimes is over-drawn. It lies instead in his readings of African thinkers such as Anton-Wilhem Amo and Kwame Nkrumah and what their works and contributions accomplished in specific contexts. This is a point I will stress later on.

Apart from his extensive metaphilosophical preoccupations, Hountondji also employs empirical instruments to define the boundaries and possibilities of African philosophy. Part of his empirical strategy is bibliographical. For instance, he mentions authors and their works that have had an impact on modern African philosophy: The Rwandais abbot, Alexis Kagame, Mgr Makarazika of Burundi, Antione Mabona, a South African priest, Father A. Rahajarizafy of Malagasy, Francoise-Marie Lufuluabo of the former Belgian Congo, Vincent Mulago also of the former Belgian Congo, Jean-Calvin Bahoken, the former Protestant clergyman of Cameroon, the Kenyan pastor, John Mbiti, the Nigerians, Adesanya and J. O. Awolalu, Alassane N'Daw from Senegal, Prosper Laleye, from the Republic of Benin and so many others who contributed to the making of modern African philosophy.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Hountondji not only *identifies* what he understands to be African philosophy, but also identifies the pioneers of the field. In retrospect, most of Yai's charges seem insubstantial. Furthermore, there are quite sympathetic readings of his work:

“Hountondji outlines [...] criteria that if met, would be give substance to African philosophy. The first criterion is a shift away from the metaphysical issues (*viz.*, “the

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<sup>27</sup> See Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality*, pp. 58-59.

meaning of life", "human dignity", "the existence of God", etc.) that have infused ethnophilosophy and stifled genuine philosophical activity."<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, Owomoyela's misgivings about the general criticisms of ethnophilosophy go beyond his reading of Hountondji. He claims for instance that Anglophone philosophers tend to be more receptive to traditional African religions than their Anglophone counterparts.<sup>29</sup> This is a highly suspect claim. Both Hountondji and V. Y. Mudimbe in their works, demonstrate that Francophone Africa with its strong traditions of colonial Catholicism was at the forefront of philosophical deliberation on the continental level. Ethnophilosophy, as a discursive branch of African philosophy gained its initial indigenous impetus (and also counter-discourses) through the efforts of authors such as Kagame, Marcien Towa, Fabian Eboussi-Boulaga and of course Hountondji who are/ were from the French-speaking parts of Africa. Most of the central texts of African philosophy that Mudimbe names are Francophone or have French authors; P. Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue/Bantoe-filosofie* (1945), M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau: Ententiens avec Ogotemeli* (1948), A. Kagame, L.S. Senghor, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine* (1962), F. Eboussi-Boulaga, "Le Bantu Problematique" *Presence Africaine* (1968), F. Eboussi-Boulaga, *La Crise du Muntu* (1977), A.J. Smet, *Histoire de la philosophie africaine contemporaine* (1980).<sup>30</sup> Finally, Hountondji claims that "Kagame began the era of African philosophy *stricto sensu*, that is, of the acceptance of responsibility for philosophical discourse by the Africans themselves."<sup>31</sup>

Consequently, both Yai and Owomoyela have very little of enduring value to say of Hountondji's work. This is not to say there are no shortcomings to be found. Indeed there are some. Hountondji's second major book on African philosophy, *The Struggle for Meaning*, rehearses most of the argu-

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<sup>28</sup> See Cheedy Jaya's review of *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* in *African Philosophy*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1999, p. 208.

<sup>29</sup> Oyekan Owomoyela, "Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 1987, p. 96.

<sup>30</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parable & Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 52-53.

<sup>31</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, pp. 90-91.



ments in *African Philosophy: Myth & Reality* in addition to providing the biographical, cultural, political and intellectual contexts that formed the background of the latter text. In terms of new major philosophical breakthroughs one finds very little to say about it. However, it is an important text since in many respects, it is consistent with his earlier book and since it has so much to say about the processes of intellectual conditioning that informed the work of one of the most influential and indeed most consistent philosophical minds of modern Africa.

Hountondji began by writing a Ph.D. dissertation on Husserl under the watchful eyes of Canguilhem, Ricoeur, Derrida and Althusser who were his teachers at Ecole Normale Supérieure. He was fascinated by

“Husserl’s effort to ‘purify the sign.’ First, he excluded from his concerns the indicative sign- a material and empirical sign that is neither discourse nor part of discourse- in order to concentrate solely on expression. Next, he excluded from discourse itself those body movements and various gestures that involuntarily accompany speech and still derive from empirical indication, in order to focus on expression proper- on the linguistic which alone is the true bearer of meaning. Finally, he amputated the communicative dimension from language in which expression functions simultaneously as indices, to concentrate solely on the expression in “solitary mental life.”<sup>32</sup>

More than two decades after his Ph.D. examination, Hountondji returns to Husserl, this time (1995) for the highly prestigious degree of *doctorat d’Etat* at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, Senegal. What could have informed his return to Husserl after a lapse of about twenty-five years? Hountondji gives a few hints:

“any conclusion, provided at this precise stage of my thinking, would have seemed premature to me. I necessarily left the reader dissatisfied, and even I had a feeling that I had interrupted myself mid-way through a sentence...”<sup>33</sup>

It is as if Hountondji had to return to complete an unfinished sentence in both a metaphoric and literal sense. But what does this consummation mean in a philosophical sense? It is difficult to tell given his earlier reservations about continuing his research on Husserl with the ultimate aim of publishing his findings.

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<sup>32</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 72.



After his Ph.D. defense in France, Houtondji decided not write for a foreign public or over the heads of his compatriots.<sup>34</sup> The fate of Anton-Wilhelm Amo, a philosopher from the former Gold Coast who lived and worked in eighteenth century Germany had indicated to him that an epistemic break was required. On Amo, he says,

“I considered it a failure that the work of this *African* philosopher could only be part, from beginning to end, of a *non-African theoretical tradition*, that it exclusively belonged to the history of Western scholarship. I concluded on the urgent need to put an end to the extraverted nature of all European-language discourse.”<sup>35</sup>

So he concludes that

“to publish on Husserl was not the obvious thing for an African academic.”<sup>36</sup>

Yet, more than two decades later he returns to Husserl as if it were a project that he simply had to complete. It is not certain that he completes it. Instead he merely re-treads a well known path and this manoeuvre can be seen as a strategy to revalidate his major philosophical trajectories to date. Husserl clearly remains an abiding interest for him but this long standing preoccupation had to be matched and counteracted with the quest to create a non-western theoretical practice. In view of this, his fascination for Husserl had to be held in check:

“I therefore had to work on the margins and, rather than plunge head-first as a narrow specialist on an author or a current of thought, to clear the field patiently, establish the legitimacy and the outlines of an intellectual project that was at once authentically African and authentically philosophical.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus he moves from a preoccupation with Husserl to reading Tempels which entails the beginning of his critique of ethnophilosophy. He is still of the view that “the critique of ethnophilosophy is still largely a Western affair, because the ethnophilosophy that denounces it is itself an invention of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. pp. 72-73.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 73.

the West.”<sup>38</sup> Henceforth, his project would be to show

“that ethnophilosophy had a more ancient history that was linked to the history of anthropology in general- that is, to the history of the Western gaze on so-called primitives societies.”<sup>39</sup>

Olabiya had argued in his famous article that speculative philosophers such as Hountondji ignored the issues of praxis in their theorizing. Hountondji on his part claims that theory had no usefulness for him unless it is linked to practice. In his words,

“theory has meaning only if it is organized and subordinated to practice, that it derives its legitimacy- insofar as it is itself a form of practice- from its foundational role in relation to other practices.”<sup>40</sup>

In organizing his philosophical practice, he acknowledges his debts to Fanon for indicating the relations between the political, language and Césaire who he calls the “unrivaled awakener of consciences.”<sup>41</sup> However, there existed the problem of foundations. The inferiorization of the black race by the histories and experiences of slavery and various forms of colonization- political, economic and cultural- had the effect of *imageing* the African continent as a *tabula rasa*. Indeed

“the question of writing became unavoidable: to what extent could one conceive a history of African thought in the absence of a writing that would have enabled the different doctrines to situate themselves in relation to others.”<sup>42</sup>

There was the urgent need to initiate, expand and sustain traditions of philosophical writing in Africa and Hountondji recounts his role in accomplishing this task through his participation in various initiatives that aimed to establish and consolidate where necessary, modern traditions of African philosophy.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 85.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. pp. 91-92.

The absence of theoretical traditions (before and after the dawn of political liberation) and universally recognizable philosophies of the self in Africa have been contentious issues of much theorizing. So the textual *tabula rasa* that Hountondji identifies as a crucial theoretical problem can in fact be tied to deeper sociopsychological concerns and patterns. The problem has its origins in the events of slavery, colonization and decolonization. Thus

“on the level of individual subjectivities, there is the idea that through the processes of slavery, colonization, and apartheid, the African self has become alienated from itself (*self-division*). This separation is supposed to result in a loss of familiarity with the self, to the point that the subject, having become estranged from him- or herself, has been relegated to a lifeless form of identity (*objecthood*). Not only is the self no longer recognized by the Other; the self no longer recognizes itself.”<sup>43</sup>

The trauma of the event of colonization affected the collective African psyche directly and this is a point that Hountondji does not stress. Instead he concerns himself with the challenges of creating a philosophical tradition which is a preoccupation that has its own peculiar problems. The problem of creating an appropriate theoretical practice to deal the multiple disorienting effects of the colonial encounter has been framed thus:

“The effort to determine the conditions under which the African subject could attain full selfhood, become self-conscious, and be answerable to no one else soon encountered historicist thinking in two forms that led to a dead end. The first of these is what might be termed *Afro-radicalism*, with its baggage of instrumentalism and political opportunism. The second is the burden of metaphysics of difference.”<sup>44</sup>

This reading of historicist thinking can be said to have acquired its first impulses and manifestations in African philosophical discourses in which discursive radicalism arose out of the various nationalist liberation struggles as exemplified by the works of Nkrumah, Nyerere and Césaire (in which there is usually a re-appropriation and spectralization of Marxist and socialist ideologies) on the one hand, and the multiplicity of tendencies and discourses that have been generated by theoretical validations and counter-discourses of ethnophilosophy on the other. Thus the opposing divisions in

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<sup>43</sup> Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 1 Winter, 2002, p. 241.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 240.

historicist thinking have deep philosophical implications and perhaps also philosophical origins. However, this largely convenient theoretical dualism is more complex in the case of ethnophilosophy and its critiques and its counter-discourses since it is problematic to typify ethnophilosophy as a form of nativism and nothing else. Hountondji has pointed out on several occasions that ethnophilosophy is an invention of the west but was later adopted by Africans for instrumental reasons. Indeed many strands and orientations characterize the problematic course of its gestation and development as a philosophical tendency; western/ African, Marxist/ non-Marxist, Eurocentric/ Afrocentric, Francophone/ Anglophone etc. Even Hountondji's project does not address these multiple tendencies and their concrete manifestations in their fullest possibilities.

In one of his numerous critiques of African forms of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji writes:

“The return to the real thus shatters into smithereens the founding myths of ethnophilosophy: the myth of primitive unanimity- the idea that in “primitive” societies, everyone is in agreement with everyone else- from which it is concluded that there could not possibly exist individual philosophies in such societies, but only belief-systems. In reality an unbiased reading of the existing intellectual production reveals something else. The African field is plural, like all fields, a virgin forest open to all possibilities, to all potentialities, a host to all contradictions and intellectual adventures like all other sites of scientific production.”<sup>45</sup>

In this way, he differentiates between European and African forms of ethnophilosophy and suggests ways in which to move beyond the latter form. If the critique of ethnophilosophy is one of the most valuable and also one of the most consistent contributions of Hountondji to the development of modern African philosophy, then his preoccupation with the structures and institutions of knowledge production in Africa and also on the global level is equally worthy of attention. For instance, he has committed himself to critiquing a trend within ethnophilosophy so as to demonstrate

“how scientific exclusion connects to political exclusion and how, [...] the double problematic of Europe's ‘civilizing mission,’ and inversely of the ‘heightening of the soul’ expected from Bantu cultures, is only meaningful as the “ideological problem-

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<sup>45</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 107.

atic of triumphant imperialism.”<sup>46</sup>

This scenario lies at the heart of the European projects of ethnophilosophy which as we ought to have noticed are somewhat different from African projects. Hountondji explains that

“the exclusion practiced by the European scholar becomes, when it is taken over by the African intellectual, extraversion.”<sup>47</sup>

In order to overcome this pitfall, that is, the impasse of intellectual extraversion, there is the necessity to create

“an autonomous space for reflection and theoretical discussion that is indissolubly philosophical and scientific.”<sup>48</sup>

Hountondji gives greater resonance to his analyses in pointing out that there is the need to de-ghettoize African modes of intellectual production: “thought must be brought out of its Africanist ghetto by acknowledging its right to be occasionally interested in something other than African – for instance in Plato, in Marx, in the theoretical heritage of Western civilization to assimilate and transcend it.”<sup>49</sup>

The problem of intellectual extraversion is one that provokes a lot of useful insights from him. For instance, this is noticeable in his conceptualization of ‘distance.’<sup>50</sup> According to him,

“distance meant first of all geographical distance, the distance from which our scientific, economic, and political dependence is organized.”<sup>51</sup>

On the concrete academic level, ‘distance’ manifests in the following way:

“first and foremost, theory is elsewhere, in the sense of being physically distant. The best universities, the best equipped laboratories, the most authoritative scientific jour-

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<sup>46</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 103.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> See Paulin Hountondji, “Distances,” *Recherche, pedagogie et culture*, 1980.

<sup>51</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 232.

nals, the greatest libraries, and the most credible publishing houses are located in the industrialized countries.”<sup>52</sup>

In view of these kinds of conceptualization, Olabiyi Yai’s charge of excessive elitism on the part of Hountondji now appears unwarranted. In addition Hountondji either draws from or adds to postcolonial theory with regard to his stance on postcolonial conditions of knowledge production which condemns the cash strapped academic trapped in a postcolony<sup>53</sup> into

“accepting uncritically to play the role that the West had carved out for any Third World researcher: that of informant or, in the best, of scholarly informant.”

Hountondji’s disapproval of unanimism, one he shares with Anthony Appiah and V. Y. Mudimbe and which is embedded in his critique of African forms of ethnophilosophy is also one of his central themes. It is a stance that rejects the urge to subsume African beliefs, perceptions, modes of being and orders of production under *one* name. On the origins of the word, Hountondji writes,

“I borrowed the word “unanimism” from Jules Romains but used it in a different context to signify something different: to stigmatize both the illusion of unanimity in the reading of the intellectual history of a given culture, and the ideological exploitation of this illusion for the present and the future. The French writer had used the term, on the contrary, in a laudatory way.”<sup>54</sup>

Hountondji seeks to explode all theoretical ghettos but sometimes, he seems to be deliberately creating problems himself. At one point, he states,

“African philosophy was first and foremost a European invention, the product of an intellectual history at the intersection of the most diverse disciplines, notably anthropology, the psychology of peoples, missiological theory, and a good many concerns.”<sup>55</sup>

It is not enough to make this kind of assertion and leave it at that, this is evi-

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. P. 233.

<sup>53</sup> Hountondji’s views here, echo those of Gayatri Spivak who had done a great deal of work in this area.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 132.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

dently an issue that requires far more exploration and elaboration. He sets immense goals for himself;

“I sought to demarginalize Africa, and to place it firmly at the center of its own history in a world that is henceforth plural; a world whose unity cannot be the result of annexation, or some kind of hegemonic integration, but of periodic re-negotiation.”<sup>56</sup>

With equal lack of irony, it can be argued that the only kind of demarginalization that he has accomplished has to do with himself. Being a major African philosophical figure he is highly sought after within international circles but it is not certain how this unquestioned commodification affects institutional structures of knowledge production in Africa. In addition, strategies for demarginalization in postcolonial regions require a continuous foregrounding and rethinking of the colonial situation and the various categories and frames of perception to which it gives rise: colonizer/ colonized, premodern/ modern, private/ public, the existential and conceptual in-betweenesses, the categories of race, sex, class and gender and a host of other variables. These are crucial issues for any serious project of demarginalization.

He also has replies to his numerous critics – Koffi Niamkey, Abdou Toure, Olabiyi Yai, Oyekan Owomoyela etc. – in often uncomplimentary ways. In one of such responses, he writes,

“one was clearly faced with a terrorist discourse, a discourse of intimidation whose aim was to frighten: a discourse that brandished the worst threats to achieve its end.”<sup>57</sup>

Olabiyi Yai, he calls “an irritated Africanist.” Evidently his attitude towards his critics, who have contributed immensely to the dissemination of his thought, is somewhat contradictory given his views that the African intellectual had to demonstrate

“that no doctrine, no form of thought was forbidden to him, that at the conceptual level, the freedom of the individual could not, in Africa any more than elsewhere, be

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 141.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 168.

restricted in advance.”<sup>58</sup>

He constantly declares the wish to see

“established in Africa an autonomous, theoretical debate, which would be the master of its problems and its themes rather than simply ... being a distant appendage to Western theoretical debates.”<sup>59</sup>

Again, the majority of his critics have by critiquing his work contributed to the broadening of the theoretical space he fought so much to get established.

Politics also form part of Hountondji’s concerns. Between 1991 and 1994, he held a ministerial position in the Republic of Benin which in some ways parallels Ernest Wamba dia Wamba’s move to join the military struggle of Congolese guerrilla fighters to remove Laurent Kabila from power in 1998. Hountondji’s flirtations and involvement with politics are obviously less dangerous than Wamba’s but say a lot about the choices available to an intellectual in a postcolony and the existential peculiarities that result from the ceaseless conflict between the ‘private’ and ‘public’ domains in such a context. He makes a few remarks about the Republic of Congo which though important require greater elaboration:

“the “philosophy of authenticity, “ the state’s official doctrine, managed to reduce this identity to its most superficial and abjectively folkloristic level.”<sup>60</sup>

These state-imposed attempts at identity construction, at regulating the infrastructure of consciousness were in fact a ploy by Mobutism to consolidate its own myths of power and invincibility which had far more dramatic manifestations and consequences in everyday life. The torture, rape, pillage and massacres that were commonplace under Mobutism and post-Mobutist forms of political contestation are issues Hountondji does not conceptualize even as politics in most parts of Africa is being transformed to the “work of death.”<sup>61</sup> The new forms of political contestation and the emergent technologies of domination in Africa obviously require a new vocabulary and new

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 125.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 112.

<sup>61</sup> See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture*, Vol.15, No. 1, 2003.



modes of theorization as states are enfeebled or collapse under a multiplicity of pressures ranging the usual local struggles for political power to adverse conditions brought about neoliberal economic globalization. For instance, space, in its use and misuse, has given rise a new awareness about new forms of both statist and non-statist domination and aggression. Indeed in the so-called peripheries,

“the domestication of world time [...] takes place by domesticating space and putting it to different uses. When resources are put into circulation, the consequence is a disconnection between people and things that is more marked than it was in the past, the value of things generally surpassing that of people. That is one of the reasons why the resulting forms of violence have as their chief goal the physical destruction of people (massacres of civilians, genocides, various kinds of killing) and the primary exploitation of things. These forms of violence (of which war is only one aspect) contribute to the establishment of sovereignty outside, are based on a confusion between power and fact, between public affairs and private government.”<sup>62</sup>

Hountondji's remarks on politics in Africa (in *The Struggle for Meaning*) have not advanced beyond how he conceptualizes it in his first book. So how productive has been his critique of ethnophilosophy? His critique has been important in setting a new set of problematics for African philosophers who wish to move beyond the founding problematic of African philosophy which is, “does it exist?” Ironically, a large part of his thought might have been impossible to accomplish without the existence of ethnophilosophy in both its Eurocentric and indigenous forms. Also, the critique of ethnophilosophy, which is largely a metaphilosophical undertaking is caught up in the founding problematic of African philosophy and its concomitant dead end. Thus it is caught up in the same problematic of origins. This problematic is projected by the attempts to formulate definitional and taxonomic grids for African philosophy – ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy and professional philosophy<sup>63</sup> – and in related forms of African intellectual production such as the discourses of nativism, developmentalism and Marxism which have been criticized as been largely coun-

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<sup>62</sup> Achille Mbembe, “At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa,” *Public Culture*, 2000, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 260.

<sup>63</sup> P. O. Bodunrin, “The Question of African Philosophy,” *Philosophy*, 65, 1981.

terproductive.<sup>64</sup> Hountondji makes useful discoveries in evaluations of Amo and Nkrumah. For instance, his assessment of Nkrumah bears quite enduring insights:

“the critical reading of Nkrumah’s development and of the social and political struggles in Ghana of the period did not aim solely at shedding light on the intricacies of the book. It proposed a method that is applicable, should need be, to other texts. The reinsertion of thought in the real movement of history should enhance both a recognition of the specificity of works of speculative thought, and their relationship to the social, economic, and political context of different periods. It should finally found a pluralist vision of philosophy and African culture by sweeping away, once and for all, the unanimist prejudice and the myth of a society without history.”<sup>65</sup>

Those earlier critiques of these two African philosophical figures actually bypass the dead ends of the critique of ethnophilosophy and the founding problematic of African philosophy. But we need more of them to expand the theoretical space of African philosophy. The metaphilosophical debates on ethnophilosophy dragged on for too long. Anthony Appiah discovered a worthwhile path and so did V.Y. Mudimbe in their separate and distinctive ways. Even Hountondji acknowledges this at several instances.<sup>66</sup> In the mature years (and perhaps also declining days) of his career, Hountondji returns to his old philosophical concerns: the [re]discovery of Husserl with its largely Eurocentric situationality, and the now familiar critique of ethnophilosophy and its inevitable problematic of origins, leaving very little in between except a narrative of a fortunate and eventful intellectual itinerary.

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<sup>64</sup> See Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 and also “Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 142.

<sup>66</sup> See for instance, *The Struggle for Meaning*, p. 127.

## *CIVILISATION OU BARBARIE?*

Lecture synthétique et critique de *Civilisation ou Barbarie* de Cheikh Anta Diop

Par Jean-Luc MALANGO KITUNGANO S.J.

*RESUME: Publié en 1981, le livre Civilisation ou Barbarie de Cheikh Anta Diop continue à susciter de vifs débats houleux dans le cercle des égyptologues. La prétention de ce livre était de démasquer les aspects perniciose de l'idéologie raciste eurocentriste par des moyens scientifiques. 24 ans plus tard, il sied d'en faire la critique en s'appuyant sur ses critiques pour saisir la pertinence de cette oeuvre.*

*MOTS CLE: Civilisation, Barbarie, Egyptologie, philosophie africaine, Cheikh Anta Diop*

*ABSTRACT: Published in French in 1981, Civilisation ou Barbarism by Cheikh Anta Diop continues to arouse lively debates amongst Egyptologists. The book aimed at unveiling the pernicious aspects of the eurocentric racist ideology, by means of scientific argument. A quarter of a century after its publication, it is worth undertaking a synthetic and critical reading of this book, backed by its critics, in order to emphasize the pertinence of its purpose.*

*KEY WORDS: Civilisation, Barbarism, Egyptology, African philosophy, Cheikh Anta Diop*

Cheikh Anta Diop: ce nom est parmi les plus connus des savants spécialistes de l'histoire en général, et de celle de l'Égypte en particulier. Dans les milieux intellectuels et universitaires, il ne laisse pas indifférents ceux qui l'ont lu. Soit on l'admire, soit on en fait une idole, soit encore, on le déteste et à coup sûr, on rejette ses thèses sans autre forme de procès. Ses thèses sur l'origine de l'humanité en général et l'Égypte pharaonique en particulier, furent « problématiques » par le passé et continuent à soulever aujourd'hui encore des débats houleux, féconds mais contradictoires entre chercheurs des différents courants égyptologiques et idéologiques.

## *Introduction*

Né en 1923 dans le village de Caytou, au Sénégal, mort dans la nuit du 7 au 8 février 1986, ce savant sénégalais a établi, devant le monde scientifique, une thèse portant sur l'antériorité de l'homme noir et de sa civilisation en usant des méthodes scientifiques pertinentes d'une part. D'autre part, Il a exploré, de manière intelligente, les données de différentes sciences dont la paléontologie, l'histoire, la physique, l'anthropologie physique, les sciences sociales, la linguistique (...) pour assoire scientifiquement ses intuitions.

En plus de *Civilisation ou barbarie*<sup>1</sup> qui fait l'objet de notre étude, il compte à son actif plusieurs ouvrages<sup>2</sup>. Il a également publié plusieurs articles sur l'Afrique<sup>3</sup>.

Nous allons essayer de dégager les arguments culturels, mieux, les thèses principales de l'ouvrage *Civilisation ou Barbarie*. Notre travail comportera trois sections, en plus de l'introduction et de la Conclusion. Dans la première section nous allons préciser le contexte historique et idéologique dans lequel s'inscrit l'œuvre de Cheikh Anta Diop et le but poursuivit en écrivant *Civilisation ou Barbarie*. Dans la seconde section, nous allons recenser brièvement les différentes thèses qui se dégagent de l'ouvrage et enfin nous relèverons les objections faites à ces thèses par d'autres chercheurs en proposant, entre autre, notre point de vue.

## *Contexte historique et ideologique, but de l'ouvrage Civilisation ou barbarie*

### 1.1.Contexte historique et idéologique

L'œuvre de Cheikh Anta Diop s'inscrit à l'antipode de la vision "eurocentriste" du monde. Au moment où il entreprend ses premières recherches historiques (autour des années 50), l'Afrique noire est sous la domination

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<sup>1</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilisation ou Barbarie*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1981, p. 528.

<sup>2</sup> Voir bibliographie à la fin de cet article.

<sup>3</sup> Voir bibliographie à la fin de cet article.

coloniale européenne et les préjugés de certains scientifiques continuent à la considérer comme un continent anhistorique. Au plan intellectuel, certains scientifiques idéologues essaient tant bien que mal de prouver l'infériorité intellectuelle du nègre. Les thèses de Lévy Bruhl portant sur la mentalité archaïque ou celle des primitifs continuent à être appliquées aux noirs d'Afrique. L'institut d'ethnologie de France créé en 1925 par lui poursuit des recherches systématiques sur ses thèses. La vision d'une Afrique noire anhistorique dans le sens où ses habitants, les nègres, n'ont jamais été responsables d'un seul fait de civilisation s'impose et s'encrent dans les consciences. L'Égypte continue à être rattachée à la civilisation orientale ou méditerranéenne. Cheikh Anta Diop va prendre le contre-pied théorique de ce milieu solidement établi dans l'enceinte même de l'université française. Sa thèse refusée, il persiste en publiant "Nations nègres et culture" en 1954. Dans ce livre, l'auteur fait la démonstration que la civilisation de l'Égypte ancienne était négro-africaine. Par des investigations scientifiques, il remet en question les fondements mêmes de la culture occidentale, notamment en ce qui concerne la genèse de l'humanité et de la Civilisation. A partir des connaissances accumulées et assimilées sur les cultures africaines (notamment la connaissance approfondie de la culture des Wolofs), de celle arabomusulmane ainsi que celle de l'Europe, Cheikh Anta Diop élabore les contributions majeures dans différents domaines et plus particulièrement en histoire, en archéologie et en physique. L'ensemble de ses œuvres historiques se présente comme cohérente en ses éléments. Celles-ci s'approfondissent ou abordent un nouveau contour de la même problématique à savoir: la reconstitution scientifique du passé de l'Afrique et la restauration d'une conscience historique africaine, s'articulant autour de l'Égypte antique.

A ce titre, Cheikh A. Diop est peut être classé parmi les tenants du diffusionisme culturel dont le foyer serait en Égypte nubienne.

But de l'ouvrage *Civilisation ou Barbarie*

Quel est le but poursuivi par le livre *Civilisation ou Barbarie*? Dans l'introduction du livre (p. 9-10), Cheikh Anta Diop précise que son livre est un matériau de plus, du travail qui a permis d'élever l'idée d'une Égypte

nègre au niveau d'un concept scientifique opératoire. Il s'assigne, d'une part, la mission de dénoncer la lignée des égyptologues de mauvaise foi qui ont falsifiés de manière consciente l'histoire de l'humanité. D'autre part, il veut contribuer à faire de l'idée que les égyptiens étaient des Noirs, un fait de la conscience historique africaine et mondiale surtout un concept opératoire: le retour à l'Égypte dans tous les domaines est la condition nécessaire pour réconcilier les civilisations africaines avec l'histoire, pour pouvoir bâtir un corps de sciences humaines modernes.

Pour renouer avec la culture africaine, un regard vers l'Égypte antique est la meilleure façon de concevoir et de bâtir le futur culturel de l'Afrique.

«L'Égypte jouera, dans la culture africaine repensée et rénovée, le même rôle que les antiquités gréco-latines dans la culture occidentale.»<sup>4</sup>

Autant la technologie et la science moderne viennent d'Europe, autant, dans l'antiquité, le savoir universel coulait de la vallée du Nil vers le reste du monde, et en particulier vers la Grèce, qui servira de maillon intermédiaire. Les jeunes philosophes doivent, comprendre à la lumière de l'ouvrage, qu'aucune pensée, aucune idéologie n'est, par essence étrangère à l'Afrique.

Par ailleurs, ils doivent se doter des moyens intellectuels nécessaires pour renouer avec le foyer de la philosophie en Afrique qu'est l'Égypte, au lieu de s'enliser dans le faux combat de l'ethnophilosophie. Il leur faut une rupture avec l'étude structurale atemporelle des cosmogonies africaines<sup>5</sup>.

### *Les thèses culturelles de l'ouvrage*

Cheikh Anta Diop fonde son argumentation sur les données de la chronologie absolue, de l'Anthropologie physique et de l'archéologie préhistorique pour montrer que l'Afrique est le berceau de l'humanité, non seulement au stade de l'*homo erectus*, mais aussi au stade de l'*homo sapiens*. Autour de cette thèse centrale, plusieurs axes d'analyse sont ouverts, en ce qui concerne les négroïdes en général, et l'Égypte comme berceau de la civilisa-

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<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

tion antique, en particulier.

Les recherches paléontologiques et archéologiques de Leakey, ont permis de placer le berceau de l'humanité en Afrique orientale, dans la région des grands lacs africains, autour de la vallée de l'Omo. Deux conséquences découlent de cette découverte selon C.A. Diop:

Une humanité née sous la latitude des grands lacs est nécessairement pigmentée et négroïde; la loi de Gloger veut en effet que les animaux à sang chaud soient pigmentée en climat chaud et humide.

Toutes les autres races sont issues de la race noire par filiation plus ou moins directe, et les autres continents ont été peuplé à partir de l'Afrique, tant au stade de l'*Homo erectus* qu'à celui de l'*homo sapiens*, qui apparut il y a environ 150.000 ans. Ce sont donc les négroïdes qui peuplèrent le reste du monde.

La civilisation Egyptienne est partie du cœur de l'Afrique, du sud vers le nord, que la royauté nubienne est antérieure à celle de la Haute Egypte et lui a donnée naissance<sup>6</sup>. Il découle de cette découverte, une relation de parenté entre l'Egypte ancienne et l'Afrique noire selon les aspects suivants: le peuplement de la Vallée du Nil, la genèse de la civilisation égyptienne dans la Nubie, la parenté linguistique entre l'égyptien ancien et les langues d'Afrique sub-sahariennes, la parenté culturelle ainsi que des structures socio-politiques s'inspirant du matriarcat de la Nubie.

A ce titre, il est pertinent d'analyser les révolutions qui ont apparemment échoué et que la théorie classique n'a jamais pris en compte, à partir d'une description des lois qui gouvernent l'évolution des sociétés dans leurs différentes phases.<sup>7</sup> L'analyse comparative entre la révolution dans les Etats-cités grecs et les Etats à mode de Production asiatique et/ ou africain, débouche sur les conclusions suivantes:

Dans tous les cas, le modèle d'Etat authentiquement indo-européen, l'Etat-cité a décliné et fut remplacé par le modèle d'Etat africain, égyptien en particulier, depuis les conquêtes de Philippe II de Macédoine et surtout de son fils Alexandre le Grand. La structure des Etats-cités rendait les révolu-

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<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapitre 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapitre 5-13.

tions possibles mais impossibles dans les Etats à caractère de M.P.A.<sup>8</sup> En effet dans les Etats-Cités, le cadre étroit de la cité, allié à sa philosophie isolationniste, rendait possible la victoire d'une classe sociale opprimée sur celle qui la dominait. Ainsi dans le modèle M.P.A., forme que pris la Grèce continentale depuis l'unification de Philippe de Macédoine, la révolution, le progrès et la démocratie disparurent et rendirent les révolutions véritables difficiles. La dimension et la complexité des rouages et structures d'interventions mis en place en seraient les causes; d'où le défaitisme de beaucoup des mouvements révolutionnaires (...).<sup>9</sup>

La XVIIIème dynastie égyptienne, contemporaine de l'explosion de l'île de Santorin, avait effectivement colonisé la Crète et toute la méditerranée orientale à la même époque.<sup>10</sup>

Dans la présentation d'une définition de l'identité culturelle et une approche des relations interculturelles<sup>11</sup>. C.A. Diop estime qu'en comparant l'évolution socio-politique d'une simple ville (Etat-cité), à celle d'un Etat territorial groupant des centaines, voire des milliers de villes, tel que le fait l'ouvrage collectif, *Sur le "mode de production asiatique"* (1974); fait montre d'une négligence dans la prise en compte du facteur fondamental qu'est la différence des cadres et à cause de la grande différence d'échelle, des réalités que l'on étudie. Ces réalités, en effet, ne sont plus de même nature. La cité antique fut une formation éphémère, non viable par essence et qui disparut après une brève existence d'à peine quatre siècles, à la faveur de l'Etat romain à la forme extérieure d'un Etat de type M.P.A. Sous cette forme, l'Etat romain eut à durer dans le temps malgré l'héritage de l'effet cumulatif du régime esclavagiste de la cité antique, l'instauration de la propriété privée et de l'économie monétaire marchande, conditions favorables pour une révolution. On se serait attendu à une révolution possible et réussit venant de l'intérieur:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mode de production Asiatique ou Africain.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapitre 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapitre 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 239-240.



“Donc toutes les conditions prévues par la théorie étaient présentes, pour que les transformations révolutionnaires puissent s’opérer à partir de facteurs endogènes. Pourtant, c’est en vain qu’on attendra cette révolution pendant un demi-millénaire. Dès que l’Etat prend la forme asiatique, quel que soit le contenu de ses institutions, la révolution devient impossible, comme dans les autres Etats à M.P.A. authentiques. Cette loi générale ne souffre pas d’exception depuis le début de l’histoire, 3300 av. J.-C., en Egypte, jusqu’aux temps modernes (...)”.

Quelle définition donner alors à l’identité culturelle? S’il s’agit d’un individu, son identité culturelle s’appréhende à partir de son peuple. Quand il s’agit d’un peuple, il faut tenir compte des trois facteurs: le facteur historique, le facteur linguistique et le facteur psychologique. Le facteur historique est le ciment qui unit les éléments disparates d’un peuple pour en faire un tout, par le biais du sentiment de continuité historique vécu dans l’ensemble de la collectivité. L’essentiel, pour le peuple, est de retrouver le fil conducteur qui le relie à son passé ancestral le plus lointain possible<sup>13</sup>. Aussi l’effacement et la destruction de la conscience historique a fait partie de tout temps des techniques de colonisation, d’asservissement et d’abâtardissement des peuples. La régression de l’Egypte et de l’Afrique noire en général, serait alors liée à la perte de la souveraineté nationale et de la conscience historique qui auraient engendrées la stagnation, voire la régression.

Qu’en est-il de l’unité linguistique, à travers le facteur linguistique? L’unité linguistique apparente n’existe à l’échelle d’aucun continent: les langues suivent les courants migratoires, les destins particuliers des peuples, et la fragmentation est patente jusqu’à ce que le pouvoir public organise le facteur linguistique ou le canalise. Cette diversité est, pourtant, marquée par une unité. C’est le cas en Europe où au fur et à mesure que l’on remonte vers la langue indo-européenne, on tend vers une “langue mère”. La plus ancienne des langues africaines, typiquement nègre, qui a été la plus anciennement écrite dans l’histoire de l’humanité, il y a de cela 5300 ans, se trouve en Egypte; tandis que les plus anciennes attestations des langues indo-européennes (le hittite) remontent à la XVIIIème dynastie égyptienne (1470 av. J.C.).<sup>14</sup>

Ainsi par la linguistique comparative on peut remonter et rattacher les

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<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 272.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 276.

langues négro-africaines à leur langue mère: l'égyptien ancien. Pour C.A. Diop, les facteurs historiques et linguistiques constituent des coordonnées, des repère quasi absolus par rapport au flux permanent des changements psychiques.<sup>15</sup> Avec les Noirs de la diasporas, il ne reste plus qu'un lien historique avec l'Afrique noire, non moins négligeable pour la constitution de leur identité.

Une autre thèse est celle de la science égyptienne, laquelle aurait été hautement théorique et l'Egypte noire fut d'un apport scientifique indéniable à la Grèce particulièrement. Il y a lieu d'apprécier les différents emprunts inavoués que les savants grecs ont fait à la science et à la philosophie égyptiennes<sup>16</sup>. Il s'agit des apports en métallurgie: les plus anciennes fabrications volontaires de l'acier dans le monde ne sont jusqu'ici attestées qu'en Egypte. Les fouilles archéologiques au Sahara du Sud confirment ces idées sur le premier âge du fer (2600 à 1500 avant Jésus christ).

En Architecture, l'œuvre architecturale égyptienne implique des connaissances mécaniques et techniques sans commune mesure et devant lesquelles les spécialistes demeurent toujours dans l'admiration<sup>17</sup>.

En ce qui concerne les courants philosophiques égyptiens, ceux-ci sont en rapport évident avec ceux de la Grèce. Ainsi, il existerait un rapport entre les cosmogonies égyptiennes et celle platonicienne qui se déploie à travers le *Timée*. La cosmogonie platonicienne est imprégnée d'optimisme par opposition au pessimisme indo-européen en général. Il s'agit de toute évidence, selon C.A. Diop, d'un héritage de l'école africaine. Il existe en outre un rapport entre la physique d'Aristote et les cosmogonies égyptiennes. *Noun* (d'Aristote) à son équivalent *Nounet* (dans la cosmogonie Egyptienne) comme matière primordiale éternelle et incréée<sup>18</sup> Il existe par ailleurs, une parenté historique des trois religions révélées avec la pensée religieuse égypt-

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<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 280.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapitre 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 364.

<sup>18</sup> Il en est de même de *Hehou* et *Hehout*, l'éternité temporelle et son contraire, le liste des comparaisons qu'il établit se poursuit en dialogue avec les physiocrates grecs tels Anaximandre... Cf. pp. 444-457.

tienne.<sup>19</sup>

Il devient alors possible de définir une méthode propre à identifier le vocabulaire grec d'origine négro-africaine égyptienne<sup>20</sup>. Quelques concepts philosophiques égyptiens ayant survécu en Walaf sont exposés. Par exemple le concept *Ta* signifiant terre en Egyptien, le même concept signifie terre inondée en Walaf (...).<sup>21</sup>

### *Quelques critiques suscitées par les thèses de Cheikh Anta Diop*

La première critique est celle qui peut être formulée sur le plan méthodologique à tous les tenants du courant diffusionniste, à savoir, leur recherche à tout pris des similitudes entre les cultures différentes pour pouvoir rattacher celles-ci à une seule "aire culturel", avec le risque de réduire la pluralité des inventions, des habitudes et des usages à une seule origine culturelle.

La seconde critique qui touche à la race des Egyptiens,<sup>22</sup> R. Mauny estime que les égyptiens antiques n'étaient pas des Noirs mais plutôt à prédominance sémitique: Hyksos, Assyriens, Perses, Grecs... il se réfère à l'ouvrage de C.S. Coon, *The races of Europe*.<sup>23</sup>

Balandier renchérit dans le même sens en faisant la reproche selon laquelle beaucoup d'essayistes africains au général et C.A. Diop en particulier, veulent

“aménager le passé afin de provoquer la réhabilitation des civilisation africaines et

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<sup>19</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapitre 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, Chapitre 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 451-457.

<sup>22</sup> EDITOR'S NOTE: such issues as the skin colour, the genetic homogeneity or diversity, and the genetic affiliation of the Ancient Egyptians, have continued to inspire heated debate to this very day. They cannot be treated by reference to highly dated scientific literature alone. This debate was especially revived in the context of the rise of Afrocentricity in the 1980s, and the *Black Athena* debate from 1987 onwards.

<sup>23</sup> Coon 1939, pp. 91-98, 458-462.

des peuples noirs.”<sup>24</sup>

Suret-Canale critique, pour sa part, l’engouement à rechercher une unité culturelle de l’Afrique noire à partir de l’Égypte en faisant une hyperbole exagérée sur le rôle de l’Égypte.<sup>25</sup> Cette critique s’adressait particulièrement à l’ouvrage *l’Unité culturelle de l’Afrique noire* de C.A. Diop qui fut publié en 1961. La critique reste de mise dans la mesure où *Civilisation ou Barbarie* s’inscrit dans la continuité des thèses des ouvrages précédents. Cette critique, on la retrouve, nuancée, chez Ibrahima Thioub, historien sénégalais, qui estime que

“Même si la traite et la colonisation ne représentent qu’une seconde, au regard de l’histoire égyptienne, il est impossible de faire l’impasse sur elles. C’est aussi notre histoire et notre actualité à nous, Sénégalais et Africains. Voilà pourquoi je le soupçonne d’avoir accordé trop de poids à l’Égypte, en toute bonne foi, sans s’en être rendu compte.”<sup>26</sup>

Cheikh Anta Diop a été “prisonnier” des théories en vogue à l’époque, selon Ibrahima Thiaw<sup>27</sup>, historien chercheur à l’Institut fondamental

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<sup>24</sup> Balandier, G., *Sens et Puissance*, P.U.F., Paris, 1971, p. 212.

<sup>25</sup> Suret-Canale, Jean, “La société traditionnelle en Afrique tropicale et le concept de mode de production asiatique”, in *La pensée*, n°117, Paris, 1964.

<sup>26</sup> Site Internet sur Cheikh Anta Diop, <http://www.menaibuc.com>, et <http://www.aps.sn>.

<sup>27</sup> Cette thèse est corroborée sous un autre aspect par des historiens français comme François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, Jean-Pierre Chrétien et Claude-Hélène Perrot, les directeurs d’un ouvrage collectif intitulé *Afrocentrismes. L’histoire des Africains entre Égypte et Amérique*. (Karthala 2000); ils dénoncent les dérives de ce qu’il est convenu d’appeler l’Afrocentrisme. Tout en reconnaissant qu’il s’agit là d’un « terrain miné », ces universitaires tiennent à montrer que

«l’on peut étudier l’Afrique de façon aussi rigoureuse que n’importe quelle autre région du monde.»

Il ne s’agit pas de nier qu’il y eut dans le passé une vision eurocentriste de la civilisation égyptienne qui en évacuait les apports africains, mais de refuser *a contrario*, une idéologie entièrement noire de la civilisation égyptienne dont l’historien sénégalais Cheikh Anta Diop a lancé les prémices dans *Nation nègres et Culture (Présence Africaine, 1955*. Le débat entre afrocentrisme des héritiers de C.A.Diop et afrocentrisme des écrivains européens et américains blancs et leurs sympathisants de couleur, peut être approfondie, –

d’Afrique noire (IFAN).

“Ces théories ont eu un impact sur son œuvre, explique M. Thiaw. Il n’a pas rompu avec le paradigme dominant de la science coloniale qu’il a combattue avec les outils de l’école coloniale.” (Sud Quotidien, 8-9 février 2003).

Il reste l’influence du militantisme politique sur le discours scientifique. A une époque où les jeunes intellectuels africains, déçus par le concept de négritude, cherchent une idéologie noire et militante de substitution, pour Cheikh Anta Diop, l’une des conditions d’un fédéralisme continental passait inéluctablement par la conscience. En redonnant une histoire, une conscience historique aux Africains, il essayait, surtout, de rétablir leur dignité. Bref son combat scientifique s’est, malgré des apports scientifiques patents, réduit en combat idéologique.

Pour notre part, nous devons reconnaître que l’ouvrage *Civilisation ou Barbarie* aux travers des thèses qu’il véhicule fait appel à une érudition sans commune mesure d’une part, et d’autre part à une interdisciplinarité que nous n’avons pas. Néanmoins, nous appuyant sur l’ensemble des critiques fait à l’encontre des Œuvres de C.A. Diop, nous osons conjecturer que son œuvre s’est inscrit dans un débat idéologique en apportant, toutefois, des avancées dans la domaine de la recherche historique, linguistique et archéologique sur la passé de l’Afrique. La pertinence de ses recherche a, à ce titre, suscité des continuateurs dans l’Ecole africaine d’Egyptologie: Théophile Obenga, Boubacar Boris Diop, Moussa Lam, Babacar Sall. La revue ANKH, *Revue d’egyptologie et des civilisations africaines*, a justement permis, depuis sa création en 1992 par Théophile Obenga, un approfondissement en ce qui concerne l’antiquité égypto-nubienne et toute la problématique de l’histoire de l’Afrique précoloniale.

Par ailleurs, les arguments soutenus dans *Civilisation ou Barbarie* permettent de démasquer certains aspects de l’idéologie raciste dont s’est drapé l’eurocentrisme, en opposition de laquelle un “afrocentrisme” humaniste s’oppose radicalement et parfois en usant de mêmes procédés idéologiques que celle-ci. Sur ce plan proprement idéologique, les chercheurs tels

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voilà le premier courant dans Théophile Obenga, *Le sens de la lutte contre l’africanisme eurocentriste* (Khepera, L’Harmattan 2001), qui s’adresse principalement l’ouvrage de Aymar c.s. Cet ouvrage ne contient, parmi sa vingtaine de contributions, qu’une seule défense académique de l’Afrocentrisme, de la main de Wim van Binsbergen.

Molefi Asante<sup>28</sup> développent des réflexions dans le sens de l'”afrocentricité” comme courant philosophique. Elle est la philosophie la plus importante qui ait émergé dans la diaspora africaine américaine et héritière des intuitions de C.A. Diop dans sa dimension idéologique. Il s’agit d’une idée provocatrice et panafricaine par excellence, qui touche plusieurs continents et plusieurs générations: en République Démocratique du Congo, le Père Lusala, jésuite congolais philosophe-théologien et africaniste s’intéresse à ce courant en menant des recherches basées sur les intuitions de C.A. Diop et de ses héritiers scientifiques que sont Obenga, Lam (...).

### *Conclusion*

La lecture de *Civilisation ou Barbarie* nous a permis de saisir la confrontation entre deux idéologies à savoir: l’eurocentrisme contre l’afrocentrisme, mieux le “negro-afrocentrisme.” L’apport méthodologique est indéniable dans la mesure où, pour étayer ses thèses sur l’origine de l’homme et ses migrations, la parenté Egypte ancienne/ Afrique noire, la recherche sur l’évolution des sociétés, l’apport de l’Afrique à la civilisation, et enfin les possibilités de l’édification d’une civilisation planétaire qui nécessite la rupture avec le racisme en science, C.A. Diop a adopté une méthodologie de recherche qui s’est appuyée sur des études diachroniques, le comparatisme critique et une pluridisciplinarité: archéologie, linguistique, toponymie et ethnonymie, sociologie, sciences exactes tout azimuts.

Grâce à une approche analytique et synthétique, il a été possible à Cheikh Anta Diop d’imposer ses thèses comme reconstitution scientifique du passé de l’Afrique et ouverture sur la possibilité d’une restauration de la conscience historique en dehors de l’ethnophilosophie et des préjugés racistes dont se drape parfois la science en occident.

Dans l’ouvrage *Cheikh Anta Diop, Volney et le Sphinx*, Théophile Oben-

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<sup>28</sup> Molefi Kete Asante est professeur à Temple University, à Philadelphie, où il initia le premier programme de Doctorat en Etudes Africaines. Il obtint son doctorat à l’Université de Californie à Los Angeles. Le professeur Asante, considérée comme l’un des intellectuels africains les plus distingués, a écrit 55 livres et des centaines d’articles.

ga estime que l'originalité et la nouveauté de la problématique historique africaine ouverte et développée par C. A. Diop, consiste en une lecture humaine de l'histoire, en montrant l'intelligibilité dans l'évolution historique des peuples noirs africains, dans le temps et dans l'espace. Un ordre nouveau est né dans la compréhension du fait culturel et historique africain. Les différents peuples africains sont des peuples historiques avec leur Etat: L'Egypte, la Nubie, le Ghana, le Mali, le Zimbabwe, le Kongo (...) leur esprit, leur art, leur techniques sont des facteurs substantiels de l'unité culturelle africaine.

Notre travail n'a été qu'un essai et, à ce titre, il comporte des insuffisances susceptibles d'être corrigées par des chercheurs plus outillés scientifiquement.

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## GORGIAS' SKEPTICISM REGARDING JUSTICE IN THE *EPITAPHIOS* (DK82B5a)

by Victor S. Alumona

*RESUME.* Cet article présume le grand répandu du scepticisme sophiste par l'intelligentsia d'Athènes de la deuxième moitié du 5<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C. Suivant la logique de cette supposition, on peut dire que dans l'*Epitaphios*, Gorgias a prolongé ingénieusement cette sorte de scepticisme à la loi positive et à la justice qu'elle engendre dans la société athénienne de l'époque. L'article maintient que Gorgias a réalisé cela en concevant respectivement des faits favorables et défavorables autour de l'équité, de la loi et de la justice dans les périodes de la parole. Ces périodes sont alors arrangées deux par deux par antithèse, de sorte que sa préférence suggérée se voit sans argument. Mais au cas où un argument soit nécessaire, les périodes, selon la façon dont elles sont arrangées, montrent quelle sorte d'argument il faut avoir. L'assistance en s'alignant sur Gorgias dans la parole, donne, probablement de l'expérience accumulée et de la sagesse traditionnelle, la prémisse évidente mais manquante comme l'on fait normalement quand on pense à une action pratique. En mettant ainsi deux prémisses ensemble dans leur pensée, l'assistance arrive à la conclusion qui reproduit l'idée de Gorgias sur la question de la loi et de la justice – c'est-à-dire, que la loi est rigide et que la justice qui s'en sort est avec malignité. De cette manière, l'article conclut que Gorgias a réussi à reproduire chez l'assistance son scepticisme au sujet de la justice.

*KEY WORDS.* Gorgias, *Epitaphios*, justice, periods, antithesis, scepticism

### *Introduction*

In the *Epitaphios* (DK 82 B5a) otherwise known as the *Funeral Oration*, Gorgias deploys sense-bearing periods<sup>1</sup> antithetically. I argue in this paper that the antithetical deployment of periods in the *Epitaphios* suggests skeptical arguments with regard to the prevailing concept of justice in Greek society, say Athens, of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This contention becomes even clearer when the said arrangement of the periods are discussed in the context

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<sup>1</sup> Periods essentially are short meaningful and complete phrases and sentences rhythmically arranged in write ups to aid remembrance of what was said.

of intellectual ferment known as the Greek enlightenment of the epoch. The arguments of this paper are discussed in two sections – periods on equity and justice and periods on reason and law. The third section is the conclusion in which it is maintained that Gorgias’ rhetorical artistry analyzed in the two preceding sections was capable of creating skeptical dispositions in the audience regarding the conception of justice in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. Greek society.

*Consideration of the relevant periods: The periods on equity and justice*

In pursuance of his eulogy of the fallen heroes, Gorgias opined that they preferred: “Mildness of equity to the Malignity of Justice.” This period should be significant for a sophist like Gorgias in the later half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athens. It should be borne in mind that the epoch saw the conventional view of justice, or what is right, according to which a good citizen was one who abided by the positive laws of the state, severely criticized by the intelligentsia. Champions of this criticism were Thrasymachus of Chalcidion and Callicles<sup>2</sup>, although it was widespread in the society for Plato later identified the trend in both the “prose-writers and poets.”<sup>3</sup>

Thrasymachus main view of justice is that it is nothing but the advantage or interest of the stronger party. In other words, no matter the type of government such as tyranny, aristocracy or democracy – the ruling and dominant power in the society makes laws in order to maximize its own advantage.

Thus, through the instrument of positive laws, the ruling power legislates its own interests as standards of right or just action for the mass of the people. Hence from the point of view of the subject majority, obeying the law amounts to actualizing the advantages of the ruling minority, and in the process, working contrary to the interests of the majority.

Consequently, institutionalizing this as a principle for codification of laws according which justice is dispensed makes the whole concept of jus-

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<sup>2</sup> See Plato, *Republic* I. 336ff; *Gorgias*.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 890a.

tice through law malignant. For this reason, Thrasymachus rejects the whole idea of conventional justice in the Greek society of his time.

Similarly, Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* assails the conventional view of justice. He starts from the premise that 'nature and convention are generally in opposition'. Accordingly, he maintains that 'natural goodness and justice decree that the man who lives rightly must not check his desires but let them grow as great as possible, and practically gratify them to the full. The common run of men condemns this indulgence only out of shame at their own incapacity for it. For a man with power over others nothing could be worse or more disgraceful than self-control and respect for the laws, arguments and reproaches from others. In fact, luxury, wantonness and freedom from restraint, if backed by strength, constitute excellence (*arete*) and happiness; all the rest is fine talk, human agreements contrary to nature, worthless nonsense.<sup>4</sup>

According to Callicles therefore, laws and justice achieved through them are nothing but ploys by weaklings in society to restrain the strongman, who is nature's just man, from attaining his potentialities to the full. As a result living or acting in accordance with the positive laws of the society is malignant because they work against or constrains natural justice. Antiphon, the sophist, has a similar view as Callicles regarding the supremacy of the dictates of nature over and above positive laws or mores of the civil society.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, in Plato's *Republic* II Glaucon believed that Thrasymachus in debating the nature of justice with Socrates failed to adequately represent the views of those who praise injustice. So he offers to do so and thus shows the origin of popular conception of justice: originally, human natural inclination (*phusis*) was for the strong and mighty to gratify with impunity their basic instincts to their own advantage. However, given that such an inveterate behavior is mutual, the experience of people who had both benefited and suffered from it compelled them into codifying rules of conduct for mutual co-existence called laws. Conventional justice is acting in accordance with these laws (*Rep.* 358 c5 – 359 c).

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<sup>4</sup> See W.K.C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy: The fifth Century Enlightenment* Vol. III, Cambridge University Press 1969. p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> See, Trevor J. Sanders, "Antiphon the Sophist on Natural Laws (B44DK)," *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society*, 78, 1977-78, p. 215-236.

Thus, considering the three categories of goods Glaucon identified at 375ff, conventional justice is oddly in the third category as a good not chosen for its own sake but for the sake of the rewards and other things that come from them (357 c). This is less than a noble view of justice, which was nonetheless pervasive in the society.

Plato identifies the consequences of the triumph of Calliclean views for the society when he complains in the *laws*<sup>6</sup>, that because this view of the supremacy of nature's promptings are expressed by wise men such as poets and the prose-writers, young men who are their pupils at various times, found it very convenient to be irreligious as if gods did not exist. On the heels of the irreligion of the youths, arose civil and social disorder as people were lured to nature's way of life which evidently meant a life of dominion over one's fellows and utter refusal to serve others as law and custom demanded.

If as we have seen, some people believed sincerely that

“justice according to nature is a warrant for domination”,

then checks on it by the principles of *aidos* and *dike*, the purpose of which is to make

“political order possible and create a bond of friendship and union”,<sup>7</sup>

are from their point of view malignant checks. Thus, we can conclude that in the age of the Sophists, criticisms of the conventional view of justice appear in the Thrasymachian and Calliclean out-bursts. For the former, justice is malignant because it enjoins one to work always against his own interest and to promote that of others in order to be deemed a good and just man. For the latter, conventional justice is malignant because it acts as a check on what is, in Callicles view, natural justice.

Nevertheless, existing states run on laws which according to Aristotle are of two types:

- (i) positive laws as enacted and codified in constitutions

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 890a.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 322c.

- (ii) Universal laws,<sup>8</sup> those preferred by Sophocles' *Antigone* and An-tiphon the Sophist.

Positive laws define just and unjust actions as they affect persons and communities. Laws and equity seek justice. However, contrary to laws, equity makes up for the defects of a society's written code of law. Thus, equity is required by the inexactitudes in the scope and details of legal enactments, interpretations and applications.

Therefore, while law seeks justice through codified standards applied almost inexorably to persons, equity in seeking justice is sensitive to extenuating conditions of an offender. Generally, equity, unlike law, is therefore situational in approach and considers, more than law, the intentions and the weaknesses of human nature in the process of securing justice. In all, it can be said that equity is more an instrument of expediency than law. The demands of equity rather than those of law go well with the expedient, pragmatic and relativist philosophical disposition of the sophists.

Gorgias juxtaposes two periods referring to equity and law thus: "Mildness of equity: the malignity of law" (DK 82 B5a). What does he intend to achieve by this approach? It appears that in this juxtaposition, he prods the audience to compare the current general conception of equity as shown above and the stringency of law. At the same time, by using 'malignity of law' in the second of the juxtaposed periods, he invokes in the mind of the audience the contemporary and pervading criticisms of law<sup>9</sup> as exemplified in Thrasymachus and Callicles. Given that both "mildness" and "malignity", as used in these periods are value-laden terms<sup>10</sup>, there is a subtle suggestion to the audience as to which of the juxtaposed terms to choose.

Greek, or more specifically Athenian culture seemed to be the last bas-

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.9 136869.

<sup>9</sup> It is probably not rash to suppose that before the Sophists, the majority of the Greeks as well as the intelligensia were well aware of the criticisms of Dracon's code of law (621B.C.). These criticisms are encapsulated in Demades' claim that "Dracon's laws were written not in ink but in blood". (See Bury, *History of Greece* 3rd ed. 1966, pp. 179-180).

<sup>10</sup> This is feasible in view of note 2 above, and the possible 'carry-over effect such terms would have on a mind in transition from predominantly oral culture to a literate one.

tion of absolutism, in which justice was dispensed by reference to standards in the form of statutes. This practice implied in the eyes of the sophists, that these statutes were absolutely known to be valid or true, which was a supposition that jarred on the philosophical sensibility or conviction of the Sophists. In arguing that atemporal standards like those seen in legal provisions, when applied to the practical affairs of men lead to absurd consequences, Gorgias sought to pull down standards – no matter how described – in law and possibly replace them with the expediency of equity. This, as we have seen, soothed the philosophical temperament of the Sophists generally, and Gorgias in particular. In a sense, this juxtaposition of the periods in question, allowed Gorgias to push forward his philosophical convictions which he expected the audience to adopt as they chose equity in preference to law.

*Consideration of Relevant Periods: The Periods on Reason and Law*

The implied attack on absolutism in legal practice identified above is pursued by Gorgias in the way he arranged the next set of periods. He was still preoccupied with eulogizing the fallen heroes, and thus he maintained further that they preferred: “righteousness of Reason to rigidity of law” (DK 82 B 5a). It seems that reason is considered righteous in this case simply because that is what comes to play in deliberation. When we deliberate, available options and reasons for or against each of the options within a context are appraised much in the same way as we weigh reasons for practical actions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> If a person for example, needs a cure for malaria fever, he is likely to reason thus: I need a cure for malaria fever. Chloroquine phosphate cures malaria fever. The obvious conclusion for him is that he should procure and use tablets containing chloroquine phosphate. This conclusion needs not be put in words but instead a practical action of reaching for and swallowing any of the brands of chloroquine phosphate is taken. But before this practical action, he stops a while to consider the relative advantages of each brand of this medicine regarding the readiness to cause priorities. It is reason or some other kind of evaluation through reason, of course, that enables the man or human beings in general to consider the relative merits of a particular line of action towards an end, or of similar means to a particular goal. This is at least a part of the considerations for calling reason righteous.

This is done with a view to determine either which option would have been the best in the case of past events, or which will be the best option to choose in future actions. Equity by nature is predicated on deliberation hence, its mildness.

On the other hand, law is supposed to be applied to cases irrespective of extenuating circumstances. This is especially so for legal positivists who maintain that the letters of the law must always apply. For instance, the Athenian law of citizenship demanded that “the name of no child should be admitted whose father and mother were not Athenian citizens legitimately wedded.”<sup>12</sup> When applied to particular cases in this form, this law excludes Themistocles and Cleisthenes the lawgiver, whose mothers were foreigners, despite the fact that these were among the greatest of Athenians.

Similarly, a great Athenian was liable to ostracism sometimes for very simple mistakes of judgement that led to failure. Hence, Miltiades the hero of Marathon was ostracized because of the failure of his Paros expedition. His shining military records since Marathon could not save him. Themistocles suffered the same fate – his enduring works on the Athenian navy notwithstanding.

The Athenian political system was such that if an appeal to ostracism was made in the assembly against a particular individual and that appeal succeeds, then it had the status of law to banish the person concerned from the city of Athens for some stipulated years. It could be objected that ostracism was a political weapon used against a successful and dominant political figure by his opponents in the society.

Much as this objection can be upheld, it shows that using law as an instrument of politics has a long malignant history.

These facts of history and many more like them were probably not unknown to the majority of the people. There is every likelihood that the intelligentsia of which the sophists were a significant part knew these facts. Thus, these historical facts, as should be expected, give credence to Gorgias' claim that the law is rigid which is what the periods we are considering tend to point out. The fallen heroes rejected this rigidity of law, as Gorgias suggests in the *Epitaphios* in favour of ‘righteousness of reason’.

Gorgias' arrangement of the periods in the speech suggests to the audi-

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<sup>12</sup> Burry, *History of Greece*, p. 365.

ence to prefer ‘righteousness of reason’ to ‘rigidity of law’. This suggestion is made against the background of historical facts and legal practice from which samples of either alternative case could be selected for reappraisal and discussion. The request for reappraisal of the audience’s collective wisdom as shown in its respect for sanctity of law, is weighted heavily against the rigidity of law by Gorgias’ assertion that the eulogized fallen heroes preferred “righteousness of reason” in much the same way as they also preferred “mildness of equity” to the “malignity of justice”. The justice in question here is that achieved through the law of the state. The request for reappraisal is therefore an appeal to the audience to reconsider its near blind reverence for the law.

As a rhetorical appeal<sup>13</sup> this request for the audience’s reappraisal of its reverence for the law “attempts to alter beliefs or commitments of the audience”<sup>14</sup> with regard to the law. Such an appeal as this is made by the rhetorician to “seek accommodation with others seeking change within their commitments.”<sup>15</sup> A rhetorical appeal takes place within the percipient or audience’s consciousness with the result that he or it reconsiders his or its attitudes, beliefs and commitments. This is a kind of “wedge” thrown by the rhetorician into the percipients consciousness. The function of this “wedge” is to invoke in the percipient or audience self-rhetoric<sup>16</sup> or what we can simply call argument with oneself – deliberation, evaluation or re-evaluation of these attitudes, beliefs and commitments. Given this process, the following scenario describes, in my view, what Gorgias is doing with *Epitaphios* speech.

Gorgias makes a statement of some sort – law is rigid – and goes ahead to suggest that the Greek heroes rejected it in favour of “righteousness of reason” as evident in equity. The audience as the percipient hears this statement. If it attends to it, as I think it should, the audience will notice, first,

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<sup>13</sup> See Gorge E. Yoos, “Rhetoric of appeal and rhetoric of response”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 202 1987, p. 107-117.

<sup>14</sup> Yoos, “Rhetoric or appeal and rhetoric of response”, pp. 107-117.

<sup>15</sup> Yoos, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> See, Carroll C. Arnold “John Stone’s “Wedge” and theory of Rhetoric”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 20 (2) 1987, 118-127.



that it agrees or disagrees with Gorgias about the statement, or that it is indifferent to it. Secondly, the audience's awareness of this agreement, disagreement or indifference vis-à-vis Gorgias' statement initiates within him or it a Self-conscious deliberative or evaluative rhetoric. This is more so if there is a disagreement between the audience and the speaker.

The purpose of this self-conscious deliberative rhetoric is to resolve, if possible, the disagreement by reaching a new understanding of the situation. At each point in time, what constitutes this new understanding is not or should not be definite. It depends on how the disagreement is resolved. The resolution or new understanding is necessary because Gorgias' castigation of law as rigid and malignant is also a subtle invitation to the audience to reject it in favour of equity because of its mildness and reliance on righteousness of reason engendered by deliberation on the peculiarities of cases.

This tendency is in accordance with Gorgias' philosophical temperament, which is what he nudges the audience to share with him. He endeavours to achieve this through the deployment of certain clauses or periods antithetically to achieve the anticipated effect. In order to be able to share Gorgias' philosophical inclination, the audience has to engage itself in "critical assessment of self and what is heard."<sup>17</sup> What the audience heard from Gorgias', that "law is rigid and malignant", attacks the audience's previous beliefs about and disposition towards the law.

Thus, it can be said that one distinctive feature of rhetorical appeal is that it attacks awareness and beliefs of the audience. This kind of attack, for a Sophist like Gorgias, is aimed at unsettling the mind of the audience with regard to the possibility of attaining (knowledge of) justice through the current practice and application of law as an absolute standard for justice.

It is perhaps reasonable to say, at this stage, that rhetorical appeal challenges the audience to a reappraisal, a reconsideration of self-perception and beliefs as well as attitudes as nurtured within a particular kind of social and intellectual environment. When thus challenged it is only natural that the audience responds.<sup>18</sup>

Rhetorical response in this case can be understood as explanations the

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<sup>17</sup> Arnold, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> This occurs in much the same way as Carl Wellman articulates in his book *Challenge and Response*.

audience requires from the rhetorician.<sup>19</sup> As such, rhetorical response encompasses such modes as narration, description, logical demonstrations, definitions, comparison and contrast aimed at clarifying what one is saying, and also clarifying what someone else is saying. The audience requires each of these, when relevant, in order to minimize the burden of interpreting the rhetorician regarding his perspectives and persuasion on the matter in question. In this way also, the audience satisfies its own *curiosity* pertaining to the subject matter of discussion or debate.

Normally, in rhetoric, the expression of curiosity excites a kind of contemplation of the matter, which then predisposes the audience to rebuttal and counter argument. Naturally, contemplation of issues is an internal operation of the mind. In the way that it is understood here, the argument that emerges from it when directed towards a case on hand is not *agonistic* or competitive rebuttal like a Euthydemus or a Dionysodorus<sup>20</sup> would have done. Rather it is a collaborative argument in which the effort of the orator in “rhetoric of appeal” and that of the audience in “rhetoric or response” complement each other as in mutually beneficial dialogue.

Given a particular kind of what I call ‘*suggestive premise*’ which a rhetorician builds into his speech on a subject matter, an audience supplies a *collaborative premise* by taking a cue from the rhetorician *suggestive premise*. This *collaborative premise* then appears as the second premise of the argument the audience is contemplating in his mind consequent upon the rhetorician “rhetoric of appeal” on a particular subject. Thereafter, the audience makes the requisite deduction validly or otherwise. A similar process obtains when we deliberate about a line of action.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Yoos, “Rhetoric of Appeal and rhetoric of response”, p. 113. For example, Protagoras myth (in Plato’s *Protagoras*) in a lot of ways is a rhetorical response, for it is put forward to explain how arete can be taught. The rhetorical topos there is that arete is acquired by either physis or nomos. Protagoras argues there that it is acquired by nomos.

<sup>20</sup> The Sophist brothers in Plato’s *Euthydemus* who bamboozled the lad Cleinias with their *tekhnē eristikē* (‘art of disputation’) and *antilogikē*.

<sup>21</sup> For Instance: When you conceive that every man ought to walk (stamp of desire), and that you yourself are a man (stamp of information), you immediately walk... Again, I need a covering (Stamp of desire). A Cloak is a covering (stamp of information). Therefore, I ought to make a cloak (this conclusion is an action). This last act or constructed object is the syllogism and the end of this process of thought is action; no “mental” con-

Given the foregoing background, the arguments suggested by Gorgias' periods in the *Epitaphios* can now be set out thus: each of the antithetical periods – 'mildness of equity and the malignity of justice' can be taken as a *suggestive premise* from Gorgias as he makes his rhetorical appeal. From these premises, two *collaborative arguments*<sup>22</sup> can be derived thus:

- A:     1. Justice is malignant (*suggestive premise* from the rhetorician).  
          2. Law begets justice (Obvious *collaborative premise* from the audience).  
∴ Justice by law is malignant.

The aim of the rhetorician here, it should be emphasized, is not valid reasoning but making the audience to reach the above conclusion by putting (1) and (2) together. In the case of practical reasoning, what would have followed after due contemplation is an action. But because this is mental reasoning or deliberation, the audience having supplied No. 2 goes ahead to deduce "justice by law is malignant".

But before the audience could do this, Gorgias has put forward the first premise of the argument and expects that given the audience's experience as

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clusion need be drawn at all. (See Robert Price "Some Antistrophes to Rhetoric", in Keith V. Erickson ed. *Aristotle: The classical heritage of rhetoric*, New Jersey, The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1974, pp. 78-79. The author maintains that both premises are formed by what he terms perception – intellect through induction. The two are combined and the end of the process is the reasoned fact. However, I would rather say that in a rhetorical situation both premises are formed by (i) a suggestive premise derived from a rhetor's rhetorical appeal, and (ii) a collaborative premise derived from the audience's contemplative response to the suggestive premise when the audience engages itself in a collaborative argument with the rhetoric.

<sup>22</sup> The idea of collaborative arguments used here is the kind Daniel J. O'Keefe calls Argument 2 which is interactive like when it is said "They had an argument" i.e. a situation in which one party in the 'argument' does not normally supply all the required premises for a conclusion. Interactive arguments, like in a dialogue, is one in which the parties supply complementary premises. This is as opposed to O'Keefe's Argument 1 whereby a person supplies all premises for his conclusion aptly described as a person making an Argument 1. See Daniel J.O'Keefe, "Two conceptions of Argument," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 3 (3), 1977, 121-128.

far as dispensation of justice in Athenian society is concerned, it will be able to *collaboratively* supply the other required premise for the conclusion.

The next set of periods in the *Epitaphios* to be considered here are (1) righteousness of reason; (2) the rigidity of law. As in the first set of periods, Gorgias' undeclared focus is on the legal institution. The second of these periods is the *suggestive premise* of the rhetorician. Thus, we arrive at the following collaborative argument:

- B: (i) Law is rigid (suggestive premise of the rhetorician)  
Justice is by law (obvious collaborative premise from the audience)  
∴ Justice by law is rigid.

The suggestive premise – Justice is by law – which makes the deduction – justice by law is rigid – possible is true in the peoples' experience. Consider the example of law of citizenship given earlier on. It is thus not unrealistic for Gorgias to expect that this audience was capable of supplying the missing premise and making the deduction shown above, more so when the supplied premise is obvious.

Now the deductions in arguments A and B above are unfavourable to the legal institution although they are invalid but persuasive. They are therefore capable of undermining the credibility of the legal institution in the minds of the people or audience. They were possibly efficacious in unsettling the audience's mind regarding the suitability of law as the basis, or determinant of justice in the society. It is quite desirable if the rhetorician's arguments in a speech are valid. However, if not, their rhetorical effect is not therefore whittled down but may even be enhanced by their invalidity. What matters to a rhetorician is not so much the validity of his arguments, as his prowess or dexterity in carrying his audience along with him through the speech, and thus persuading it in the process to adopt the rhetorician's preferred point-of-view.

It is conceivable that the sophist sometimes uses invalid arguments not because he is, at that point, ignorant of the fact that the arguments he deploys are invalid, or that he is incapable of coming up with valid ones, but because using valid arguments at that point in time, may not just be suitable

for either his purpose or the mood of his audience. (Consider that Gorgias was the master in *Kairos*: exploiting the opportune moment with requisite materials or speeches).

### *Conclusion*

The argument in this paper is that Gorgias in the *Epitaphios*, tries to lift the audience from the vicissitudes of custom and habit with particular reference to their perception of justice achieved through positive laws. For this purpose, he chooses a suitable moment: the occasion of interning the bodies of fallen heroes, to push through his view regarding the law which the people revere obviously and regard as the epitome of absolute values.

Given his philosophical disposition, Gorgias would want the dispensation of justice through law to be more like the arbitration of equity, which is more attuned to relative and expedient consideration of individual cases. If he succeeds in selling this view to the audience, he would have sown seeds of doubt or skepticism in the audience regarding law as a set of absolute values. In other words, he would have succeeded in introducing sophistic skepticism to the province of law like the sophists had succeeded in extending their skepticism to epistemology, morality and politics.

I have contended here that the way Gorgias artistically deploys certain periods in the speech on the Eulogy of the dead is capable of achieving his aim. He couches favourable and unfavourable views about equity, law and justice respectively in periods. These periods are then antithetically paired off in such a way that the suggested preference<sup>23</sup> even without argument is obvious. But in case someone needs an argument for preferring equity to justice by law, the period is suggestive of what the argument should be. Possibly, the audience taking this cue from Gorgias, supplies from accumulated experience, the obvious but missing premise in the way people normally reason about practical actions. Thereafter, putting two premises together in

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<sup>23</sup> Following Aristotle, it could be argued that “that is good of which the contrary is bad” which means that rational men ought to prefer the former. Now, here, Gorgias has cast equity in good light as against law and justice which are respectively described as rigid and malignant suggesting that rational preference should be in the direction of equity, cf Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1, 5, 1362b10ff.

his mind, the audience arrives at a conclusion, which captures Gorgias' view on the matter on hand. When and if this happens, the rhetorician who in this case is Gorgias, has succeeded in inducing his skepticism in the audience.

In many ways, Gorgias' criticism of law and justice attained through it, as evident in the oration considered here dovetails into the criticisms of the legal institution already identified in Thrasymachus and Callicles. These criticisms were already popular in the literature of the epoch of enlightenment. The net effect of all these criticisms is the enthronement of sophistic skepticism towards any notion of absolute standard of law and justice achieved through it.

## SCEPTICISM, RACISM AND AFRICAN JURISPRUDENCE

### Questioning the problematique of relevance

by William Idowu

*ABSTRACT.* Any serious scholarship on the place of law in African realities must necessarily raise questions about prevailing concepts and theoretical approaches. This is as a result of the fact that the architectural furnishings of jurisprudential and legal researches have been by and large distilled from Europe and American experiences. The questions, however, are why is Africa's complex historical and cultural experience not fully represented in the current corpus of canonical works? Why is there so little, if any, respect for and, as a consequence, interest in African phenomena and their philosophical resonance? Why is it that there is an intellectual numbness and muteness about all that is African? In what ways are the historical and cultural heritage of Africa reproduced, projected and represented in contemporary philosophical disquisition? Looking across the broad panorama of philosophical and legal traditions, there have been series of responses in relation to the 'unrepresentative' nature of the import and substance of African theory of law in general jurisprudence. It argues that beneath the absence of an Afrocentric approach in mainstream, general jurisprudence is the view that mainstream jurisprudence subscribes to a Eurocentric historiography defined essentially in skeptical and racial terms. It examines the views of two prominent philosophers David Hume and Hegel on Africa, contending, as it were, that their views are not in consonance with the temperament of philosophy in general and the central features of their thought.

*KEY WORDS:* jurisprudence, racism, scepticism, social history, philosophy, Africa

*The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this. – John Stuart Mill*

### *Introduction*

Every position has its opposition. Every thesis has its anti-thesis. Every ar-

gument or claim has its counter claim. The depth of truth in all these claims is the view that variety is the spice of life. This variety is reflected in the cultural and material treasures which all cultures and varying societies in the world have to contribute to making the whole of human life worth understanding. It is in this sense that one understands the philosophical import of Mill's conclusion about the need to consider opposing viewpoints not only to determine but also to have the balance of the truth. The beauty of Mill's position, therefore, is not only paramount but also profound. The movement of its importance and lessons for social life and existence far outweighs and outshines the motion, speed and movement of light. It touches most significantly on the virtue of tolerance in social life. In fact, a cardinal point hinted at in John Stuart Mill's opinion is the view that no experience emerging from anywhere is irrelevant in forming our general theory about society and social life.

Significantly, therefore, the only way in which concrete progress can be measured and evaluated in the field of knowledge production – in the arts, humanities, in science, in jurisprudence – consists in the understanding of what every age, culture, society and civilisation has to say with respect to these items of human advancement and hope. It is therefore no misnomer if it is contended that the only way in which humans can make advancement in the area of knowledge production is by making efforts to understand what every culture has to say concerning that area of knowledge production.

However, as good as this idea may seem to be, the fundamental problem of all times is how to ensure that all of human experiences across all ages, civilisation, culture, epoch are made productive for the liberal understanding of a specific fact of knowledge. One specific fact of human knowledge and existence is the idea, theory and notion of law i.e. jurisprudence. Law is one of the greatest institutions and social practices ever developed by man. It represents a major step in cultural evolution. It also presents, in its totality, man's (in the generic sense) experience in the light of his contact with the world within and without. In the light of this philosophy of experience, it is a basic hypothesis that without a comprehensive grasp of all experiences, law can be presented only in an artificial and contradictory way.

Jurisprudence, in general, is concerned with the theory or idea of law. Historically, there have been and there still are different orientations and worldviews in the attempt to understand the nature of law and its function in



every relevant society. This is premised on the fact that men have not always held the same view about law and its overall place in societies. Men's perceptions about the law, and the different orientations that have grown out of these perceptions cannot be extricated from their overall philosophy and experiences. In fact, all kinds of experiences are of relevance and their importance arises from the knowledge they provide for understanding every aspect and sphere of human society. This applies, very crucially, to the idea of law. It is no wonder then that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Junior retorted that

“the actual life of the law has not been logic, it has been experience” (1938: 1).

In the same vein, Karl Friedrich once asserted that:

“Only by taking account of all the different kinds of experience can we give an image of the law adequate to reality and at the same time general. Only then can a comprehensive jurisprudence (emphasis mine) be developed” (1963: 7).

However, unlike some other jurisprudence that is and can be labelled as primarily reactive in nature, African jurisprudence is not reactive. It is not reactive in the sense in which feminist jurisprudence, for instance, can be tagged as reactive in the sense of a revolt against the habit of obedience in societies which treat the female gender and issues of central concern to them as a microcosm of both the well-ordered state and pious congregation with the male standing in for civil authority and divine sanctions. Rather than being reactive, African jurisprudence is engrossed in the requirement or quest for relevance. This quest can be likened to the idea of a restless ghost seeking to unload the burden of memory from a troubled past. It is the restlessness of this quest that animates the present endeavour.

There are three persistent questions in the quest for the nature and substance of African Jurisprudence. These questions form the core of the quest for relevance of African jurisprudence in mainstream jurisprudence. These are the questions to be discussed in this paper. To this end, the structure of the paper shall take upon a thorough discussion of each of these questions that form the core of the historical quest for the relevance of African jurisprudence. The questions are:

1. Is there an African Jurisprudence?
2. What is the substance of African jurisprudence?

3. Why is African jurisprudence not represented in the body of jurisprudential thoughts and reflections?

*Is There an African Jurisprudence?*

The question whether there exists an African jurisprudence is not new. What is new however is the contemporary responses to the age old question. Interestingly, it has a counterpart. Its counterpart in this quest for significance and relevance is the controversy over whether there exists an African philosophy. For over three decades now, scintillating debates over the existence of African philosophy have engaged the attention of scholarship all over Africa, Europe and the Americas.

Drawing from the success of the debate over the possibility of African philosophy, African jurisprudence, which centres primarily on reflections of scholars over the idea and theory of the realities of law in traditional and modern African societies, seems to be engrossed in the quest for pertinence in what can be called a search for the significance of its hidden history. At the heart of this search, it is believed, is the view that the certainty of receiving the significance of the history of any subject or culture consists in the openness of mind. In fact, the significance of that history also lies very tellingly only in the memory of the storyteller.

Even though the memory of the story teller, Africans writing and telling their own history, may be a worrisome burden but then it is believed that this burden only has its explanation in the view that the requirements of history is always awesome. It is in the awesomeness of the requirements of this history that African jurisprudence seeks to locate the quest for relevance.

In my view, four glaring positions are discernible in the responses to the question whether there exists an African jurisprudence. Evidently, these varying positions have their corresponding justifications. In the first place, there are those who claim that there is nothing like African jurisprudence. The second position states that there may be but no one is sure what it consists of. The third position states that African jurisprudence is not too different from mainstream jurisprudence while the fourth response posits that there is an African jurisprudence with its distinctive attributes and substance.

In this paper, I subscribe to this last position but then a quick review of these varying positions is necessary.

In the first place, there are proponents of the view that there exists no African jurisprudence. It was J.F. Holleman (1974: 12) who wrote in a very provocative work that there is nothing like an African Jurisprudence. The great denial in Holleman's work is the view that Africans lack a conceptual and vividly correct analysis of the concept of law. Significantly, the import of this argument has been pushed further in the view that even if Africans had indigenous systems of social control, it lacked substantially, any trace of legality, legal concepts and legal elements. This is also pertinently reflected in the view of J.G. Driberg (1934: 237-238) that

“generally speaking, symbols of legal authority [i.e. police and prisons] ...are completely absent, and in the circumstances would be otiose.”

The attack on the idea of African jurisprudence has been reduced to the idea that African rules of societal control and norms could not be distinguished from rules of polite behaviour. The basis for this assertion and the denial of African jurisprudence, perceptively, can be explained in the light of three reasons: one, the absence of a legislative system, with the existence of a formal courts system and legal officials; two, due to the absence of a recognised system of sanctions; and thirdly, the presence on a large scale of authoritarianism which is not subject and controlled by law. Interestingly, the import of these attacks consists in the view that African Jurisprudence is at best queasy.

On our part, we argue that the attempts to down play the reality of African systems in general and African Jurisprudence in particular has a peculiar history. This history, according to our reasoning, is enmeshed in the projection of Eurocentric superiority. This shall be attempted in the third section. But then it is sufficient to state, as a conceptual and intellectual response, that regardless of how primitive a society may be seen to be, it is human and logical to expect that the survival of this kind of society is an ample pointer to the existence of some form of enlightened thinking on the part of its members. According to Bewaji,

“When we make a critical examination of the diversity of human beliefs in various parts of the world, it seems clear that even the simplest-looking belief system must be

acknowledged to have developed from some form of critical examination of events, things, beliefs, etc. Without such philosophical presuppositions and, indeed, expostulations, on the part of members of these societies, it is difficult to see how such cultures and societies could have survived” (2002).

Again, in a more philosophical approach, Elias debunked the view denying the existence of African Jurisprudence. Connoting abstract linguistic correspondence, Elias retorted that

“it would be difficult for Africans to have continued to enjoy the progress they have even in the face of civilisation if they could not think and feel about the interests which actuate them, the institutions by means of which they organise collective action, and structure of the group into which they re organised.”

Secondly, there are those who contend that there is something reminiscent of law that can be labelled African Jurisprudence but the problem is that one cannot be sure of what the substance is or what it consist of. In this tradition, the view is held strongly that at best what Africans refer to as their jurisprudence or legal concepts are ingrained in customs, very crude and starkly naked in terms of reflective importance. For example, M’Baye (1975) states that

“the rules governing social behaviour in traditional African societies are the very negation of law.”

In the same vein, M. G. Smith (1965) postulated that

“African peoples only know of customs instead of law.”

In fact, Hartland (1924: 5-6) rendered this point in ethnocentrically unmistakable terms when he opined that “primitive laws is in truth the totality of the customs of the tribe. Scarcely anything elides its grasp. The savage lives more in public than we do; any deviation from the ordinary mode of conduct is noted, and is visited with the reprobation of one’s fellows.” However, our argument consists in the view that to be ignorant of a fact or an entity does not deny that fact or entity from its actual existence. Anchoring one’s argument on this kind of reasoning will be to be guilty of one of the incredible instances or the *ignorantiam fallacy*.

The third position on African Jurisprudence consist of scholars who are of the view that African Jurisprudence is not too different from mainstream

Western Jurisprudence hence the question on whether there exists an African Jurisprudence appears unnecessary and a mere superfluity of naughtiness and nothingness. The grand objective of this third position has always been to interpret and apply the nuances of schools of thought in mainstream jurisprudence in the light of the African legal tradition. It is in this sense that one can suggest that the debate in the eighties between Okafor, Taiwo and Nwakeze what these authors have succeeded in doing in their write-ups consist in the attempt to legitimise and justify our view that African legal tradition is simply non-antagonistic to western jurisprudential tradition and as such not remarkably different.

The fourth position is that of scholars who contend that African Jurisprudence embody and incarnate a very substantial aspect of African life, and for that matter, not only exists but also displays and manifests a basic reality that is unique and materially authentic. This position is replete and reflected in the works of scholars such as Max Gluckman, T. O. Elias, P. Bohannan and A. Allot. Their arguments on the existence and reality of African Jurisprudence consist in an indirect form of attack on the denials of African jurisprudence. Elias (1956: 6), for instance, posits that except for the differences in social and cultural environment, laws knows no differences in race or tribe as it exists primarily for the settlement of disputes, and, the maintenance of peace and order in all societies.

In corroboration of this position, Max Gluckman (1972: 173) wrote that the denial of African conception and system of laws is a great mistake stemming from a tradition imbued with enough ignorance about how the law works and thinks among Africans. In his words,

“Africans always had some idea of natural justice, and a rule of law that bound their kings, even if they had not developed these indigenous conceptions in abstract terms.”

Making an improvement on what was echoed in Gluckman’s views, Elias, in a very provocative style, provided a convincing platform on which the abstract purity of African Jurisprudence can be best understood. According to Elias (1956: 33)

“the two chief functions of law in any human society are the preservation of personal freedom and the protection of private property. African law, just as much as for instance English law, does aim at achieving both these desirable ends.”

Whether what is regarded as African Jurisprudence really exist and of intellectual significance can only be treated quite soundly and answered quite correctly when we ponder on the nature and content of African traditional institutions from which their conception and reasoning on the nature of law can be deciphered.

*What is the Content of African Jurisprudence?*

It is often clear that an accurate trace of the history of jurisprudence has been consciously westernised with a rejection of the realities of African conception of law. In modern and universal discussions of law, there is a wholesale rejection of African legal philosophy. This issue has received varied and confusing replies. But then what is the substance of African Jurisprudence?

It may help to identify the following as meanings and contents of African jurisprudence as bandied about by African scholars in contemporary, reflective thinking on the African philosophy of society.

- The contention that laws are instrument of conciliation, compromise and reconciliation;
- The contention that laws are codes of general principles, not of details, for the general guidance of society;
- The contention that the study and understanding of laws and the idea of legal personality in the African milieu transcends the realm of the individual but speaks of group responsibility;
- The communitarian theory of law which expresses the idea that law is a reflection of the communal spirit and bond;
- The contention that laws are recognised operative normative system embodied in unwritten but widely accepted usages and practices in forms of covenants and customs; and
- The contention that there is a thin line of demarcation between law, as a recognised normative system and other recognised normative systems such as morality, religion and culture etc.

Each of these atomic contentions of African jurisprudence shall be explained

in detail.

In the first instance, African jurisprudence encapsulates the proposition that laws are instruments of conciliation, compromise and reconciliation. A unique phenomenon of African life that is of fundamental and immense value is the idea of conciliation and reconciliation. The ideals of conciliation and reconciliation have been discovered to be an integral part of African life, culture and tradition. These ideals have always had their significance in African social, legal, ethical and corporate life.

In fact, the socio-ethical framework in which lives in the African socio-political economy is operated, measured and assessed altogether consists in the search for a form of conciliation and reconciliation. In very drastic nuances, compromise is the ideal of social relations especially when interactions between communities have broken down. It is the ideals of conciliation, reconciliation and compromise that spell clearly the agenda of peace in any intra or inter communal clashes.

These ideals constitute the bedrock of conditions that paves way for the progress of the communities concerned. It is these ideals that Yoruba people have in mind when they often sing that *shemi nbi o ni ogun ore laye* meaning that the bond and therapy of friendship in this world is that of reconciliation after conflict. This aspect of African life and law is echoed pertinently by Abraham when he opined that reconciliation

“is lacking in Western penology (where) the offender is punished without making restitution. On emerging from prison he is reconciled neither to himself, his victim nor to society (1975: 187)”

The beauty of this theory of law can be seen in the fact that law is not principally an instrument of coercion but an instrument of conciliation. This contradicts the adversarial notion of law in the west in which what matters is the search for either the adversary or the winner.

Writing on the philosophical significance of this feature of general African jurisprudence as demonstrated in the judicial process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia, Max Gluckman enthused that

“When a case came to be argued before the judges, they conceive their task to be not only detecting who was in the wrong and who in the right, but also the readjustment of the generally disturbed social relationships, so that these might be saved and persist. They had to give a judgement on the matter in dispute, but they had also, if pos-

sible, to reconcile the parties, while maintaining the general principles of law” (1964: 28).

No other aspect of African jurisprudence and philosophy of society has received cutting and unrestrained criticism as this aspect of African jurisprudence: African law as the quest for the restoration of social equilibrium. Propounded by Driberg, the attack states that, in the light of the quest for social equilibrium, African jurisprudence can be seen only as a positive instrument alone but not a negative one. What this means is the view that African idea of law was not directed towards the punishing of offenders; rather, it is a concern for how people should behave.

As such, law was only used to restore the pre-existing balance in a social set-up. In whatever way this objection is cast, it is still a truism that African law not only exists but can be said to compare favourably with western notion of justice. In fact, according to Roberts,

“That there is a recognised code of law founded on principles of justice is apparent if we examine the native laws affecting murder, adultery, theft and many others...as into the laws governing inheritance, ownership of children, property or mortgage we find much resemblance to those in force in European countries” (1956: 36).

Again, the heart of African jurisprudence can be deciphered in the view that laws are codes of general principles, not of details for the general guidance of society. According to Lambert, this ideal of African jurisprudence is best exemplified in the legal and judicial practices of the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya. In the words of Lambert,

“The widely held view that Africans have not yet evolved a code of law requires some qualification. Every tribe has a code, but it is a code of general principles, not of detail. Every judgement must conform to it, though the principles are applied with a latitude unknown to European law” (1956: 118).

Incorporating the ideal of the African philosophy of society, of which the jurisprudential framework is aptly represented is the view that the understanding of laws and the idea of legal personality in the African milieu transcends the realm of the individual but speaks of group responsibility. In the African context, the main goal of traditional institutions is the maintenance of law and order. But what is of curious interests is the recourse to the responsibility of the entire community in the maintenance of these legal codes



and norms. As argued and enunciated by Echekwube,

“the understanding is rife that the consequences of sin extend beyond the individual offender to his family and eventually to the whole of the community” (2002: 29).

Succinctly, the African philosophy of society is lacking in a purely individualistic cosmology.

And what is more, the African legal tradition is a clear expression of the communitarian theory of law that expresses the idea that law is a reflection of the communal spirit and bond. What do we mean by the communitarian theory of law? The communitarian theory of law inherent in African jurisprudence has been the subject of pertinent attacks and controversy. The attacks not only centre on what is projected as group theory of law but also its implications for any theory of law for that matter.

Some scholars often say that this aspect of African legal tradition beclouds our real judgement of the nature of law. Driberg, for instance, claims that African law is founded on a collectivist organisation (1934: 231). In other words,

“collective responsibility is ... a potent factor in the prevention of crime and in the liquidation of an offence without extraneous pressure (p.238).”

This critique is brought home forcefully in the contention of M’Baye that African theory of law offers only an opportunity

“to live under the protection of the community of men and spirits” (1975: 138)

that there are no individual rights, since the individual has no role to play in legal relations (p. 143).

Even though there is a modicum of truth in this assertion, however, it beclouds the sense of meaning attached to this aspect of African law since it is not the total truth. For one thing, it is true that a purely individualistic agenda is somewhat unpopular in African society, but then it behoves one to state that the group theory does not completely whittle away the power or the weakness of the individual in the whole gamut of legal and social relations in African society. Juristic thoughts among the Yoruba people, for instance, points to the idea of individual responsibility.

In Yoruba juristic thought and philosophy, it is often echoed that *Ika ti o*

*se ni oba nge* meaning that the finger that offends is that which the king cuts. “Individualism”, as argued by Omoniyi Adewoye,

“certainly has a place in Yoruba juristic thought...but the direct fastening of responsibility to individuals in criminal matters, implied in these sayings, does not detract from the collective sense of shame which a criminal’s family would feel. The criminal is punished as an individual, but the reputation of the family would have been tarnished” (1987: 7).

Moreover, to accept the claim that the role of the individual is questionable in African law will mean a rejection of the presence and acceptance of what is called ‘sage’ philosophy amongst certain African philosophers, foremost Oruka.<sup>1</sup> Sage philosophy is not a communal thing, it is purely an individual thing. The practice and potency of sage philosophy points to the importance that the individual commands in African life.

What the group theory of law as evinced in African law states is the view that individualism is not held as a strict ideology that overrides communal interests. Every individual has rights under every dispensation in African philosophy of society, but the beauty of this view of society consist in the fact that rights are and can be surrendered in the pursuit of communal rights and interests. This is reminiscent of the debate between libertarians and communitarians in Western social and political philosophy.

Besides, the group theory should not be held in a negative light for African law. The group is a phenomenon that depends on the level of social development of the clan or tribe. The more the clan develops, expands and interacts with other groups, the less the group cohesion. In fact, according to Elias, the idea of development seems to brighten the group theory since it is obvious that when we have a society or community, we have little of group identity (1985: 85).

In the final analysis, African jurisprudence reflects the proposition that laws are recognised operative normative system embodied in unwritten but widely accepted usages and practices in forms of covenants and customs. The general character of African law as embodied in customs and practices of the people has become the object of pertinent criticisms. But in it bears

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<sup>1</sup> Oruka, H.Odera, 1990, ed., *Sage philosophy: Indigenous thinkers and modern debate on African philosophy*, Leiden: Brill.

some of the striking qualities and features of the African mind. Customs bears out the nature of ontology that is not only reminiscent of the past but also a qualifying ego of the African future. Besides, it incorporates the moral ideals that are relevant in any meaningful discussion of the legal tradition in Africa.

The very idea of customs in relation to the discovery and grounding of knowledge seem to have received a devastating blow in the works of David Hume. The Humean notion of custom is

“everything which proceeds from a past repetition without any new reasoning or conclusion; it operates before we have time for reflection, and is a ‘secret operation’ ” (1978: 104).

However, laws as reflected in customs are never secret operations but critical aspects of what people are found to do and what they accept as binding on them. It is in this sense that Alan Watson argues that

“The nature of custom is quite unlike that of any other source of law. Other kinds of law making are, at least in form, imposed on the populace from above; custom represents ...what people do [and accept] as having the effect of law” (1984: 1).

The customary nature of African law is thus a fundamental aspect of African ontology. Arguable, at least from the ontological point of view, is the fact that there is always a thin line of demarcation between the realm of the legal and the realm of the moral in African philosophy of society. Whereas positivism and its jurisprudence holds as separable the relation between law and morality, African jurisprudence not only sees both law and morality as inseparable but also posits that laws have a moral framework which makes them inseparable one from the other.

In Yoruba philosophy of law, for instance, laws bear a moral dimension that makes it inseparable. Placed within a theistic metaphysics, Yoruba Jurisprudence posts the view that law is an epiphenomenon of morality. It is along this line of thought that Adewoye posits that

“law in the traditional Yoruba society cannot be divorced from the moral milieu in which it operated...law in the Yoruba society derives its attributes from this moral milieu. It is this milieu which also endows law with an authority sufficient to dispense with the mechanics of enforcement.”

In fact, as argued by Okafor, only a law with an ontological foundation would be a law of the people for the people (1984: 163). The ontological foundation of African law is discernible in its moral foundation. In his penetrating conclusions, Okafor submits that

“The province of African jurisprudence is thus large enough to include divine laws, positive laws, customary laws, [ etc.] (...), provided such laws are intended for the promotion and preservation of the vital force... What is considered ontologically good will therefore be accounted as ethically good; and at length be assessed as juridically just” (1984: 163).

*Why is African Jurisprudence not Represented in the Body of Thoughts on Jurisprudence?*

The difficulty of representing and picturing African legal tradition in its various philosophical, cultural and anthropological expressions is emphatically not a new enterprise in African philosophy and African studies. That the African philosophy project, of which African jurisprudence hopes to build its claims, is a success can be consented to entirely without any modicum of doubt. But then, any serious scholarship on the place of law in African realities must of necessity raise questions about prevailing concepts and theoretical approaches. This is as a result of the fact that the architectural furnishings of jurisprudential and legal researches have been by and large distilled from Europe and American experiences.

The questions, however, are why is Africa’s complex historical and cultural experience not fully represented in the current corpus of canonical works? Why is there so little, if any, respect for and, as a consequence, interest in African phenomena and their philosophical resonance? Why is it that there is an intellectual numbness and muteness about all that is African? In what ways are the historical and cultural heritage of Africa reproduced, projected and represented in contemporary philosophical disquisition?

Looking across the broad panorama of philosophical and legal traditions, there have been series of responses in relation to the ‘unrepresentative’ nature of the import and substance of African theory of law in general jurisprudence. Our concern here is with a critical analysis of some of the perceived notions about the salience of African jurisprudence. In a simple

sentence, our contention is the view that there is a display of scepticism with respect to the knowledge of the idea and concepts of the law that completely deflects from the idea of scepticism about law and its nature often manifested in mainstream jurisprudence. This brand of scepticism can be branded racial scepticism. It is this kind of racial prejudice and Eurocentric scepticism with respect to the African understanding and postulations or conceptions on the notion, functions, idea, scope and the limits of law that this paper promises to probe into. In specific terms, the paper identifies this racial scepticism to be represented in the thoughts of leading figures such as G.W.F Hegel and David Hume in the history of Western philosophy. It is the racism in their thoughts and their tantalising effects on the representation of African realities that we shall set out in the remainder of this paper.

There are at least three sets of factors that are generally adduced in any meaningful, scholarly work, as having contributed to the unrepresentative nature of African legal theory in general jurisprudence and legal scholarship. The first derives from the alleged question or fact of ignorance about the ability of the African to ratiocinate and thus engage in conceptualising the notions of law or even any subject of intellectual endeavour for that matter. The second stems from what is often regarded as the absence of any written work of intellectual worth. The third stems from what can be regarded as the resilient paradigm of cultural, anthropological prejudice about African realities of life.

While not contending that these reasons are irrefutable, our view is that a rebuttal to each of the arguments beggars the belief that general, mainstream jurisprudence represents and depicts a bend towards a Eurocentric historiography which tends to define the past in the light of its history. In this light, it is thought necessary to have a critical look at the presuppositions on which each of these views are based in order to establish where they do not really capture the heart of the matter.

About the best capture of the heart of the first two factors hinted at above is that proffered by T. O. Elias and A. A. Allot. For both scholars, African legal theory appears underrepresented in the body of works and thoughts in general jurisprudence arising from ignorance in the first instance and the problem of written records. Essentially, there seems to be a connection. According to Allot, for instance, silence about African law stems from the opinion of ignorance by outsiders who lack sympathy and knowledge. In his

words,

“Some deny the character of law to Africa altogether; others declare that, if there were legal rules in African societies, those rules and their administration are or were characterised and dominated by belief in magic and the supernatural blood-thirstiness and cruelty, rigidity and automation, and an absence of broader sentiments of justice and equity” (Allot 1960: 55).

For Allot, these expressions of ignorance about African law have been partial for two reasons: in the first instance, such accounts only tell part of the story and secondly, their expression concerning these set of laws apparently have been coloured by one form of prejudice or bias or the other whether consciously or unconsciously (1960: 55).

On his part, Elias attributes the ignorance, and hence, the under-representation of African legal theory to three factors: the predominance of missionaries in the field of education in Africa; the aping of western mentors by educated African elites concerning their own societies and their place in it and; the absence of political consciousness, pride of ancestry and cultural heritage on the part of the African (1963: 7-9). But then, as argued before, to be ignorant of an entity does not preclude the existence of that thing nor does it deny it of vitality and the substance that it has.

More precise, however, is the view that the recourse to ignorance as a potent factor in the under-representation of African legal theory does not capture the merit of its absence. As a matter of fact, the display of ignorance about African realities projects more than the absence of superlative knowledge about Africans and their world view. Our feeling is that ignorance does not seem to lie all alone in this task. It has a connection and counterpart in the projection of ideological and cultural superiority that, for us, is aptly traceable to the kind of historiography that Western jurisprudence subscribes to.

But then, analysis must go beyond this. Clearly related to the above is the issue of the absence of written records about African legal realities. Elias sums it up in the following observation. According to him,

“the absence of writing has therefore deprived the Africans of the opportunities for recording their thoughts and actions in the same systematic and continuous way as have men of other continents” (1963: 21).

Interestingly, this factor has commonly been appealed to in the denigration of not only African legal worldview but also philosophical reasoning. The question is must a body of thoughts about law or any other field of human endeavour be written before ascribing a jurisprudential nature to it?

However, the peculiarity and absurdity of this argument can be located in the terse but profound statement that to be able to theorise, conceptualise and philosophise on problems of life is one thing and to have written down such reflective thinking and postulations is another matter entirely. The absence of the former does not preclude the latter and conversely, the absence of the latter does not equally preclude the presence of the former. Each stands as an atomic and independent truth and fact on its own.

But then what is yet to be explored in the critical sense as a credible explanation for the under-representation of African jurisprudence in systematic reflection on general jurisprudence, for us, is the peculiar historiography which the western world cooks up for itself. It is believed that Eurocentrism has a peculiar historiography that is antithetical to African realities. It is this Eurocentric historiography that calls for urgent analysis and critical assessment altogether. Imbued in this kind of historiography are relentless racist and sceptical attacks, often justified by the invention of curious and spurious philosophical arguments and reasoning, on African realities.

Eurocentrism, both in its present and past forms, relies heavily on the development of what Grosz calls positive historiography in demolishing the rich influx of non-western ideas. Just like positivist historiography, which interprets the past in its own image, in a similar way, Eurocentrism has interpreted American-European values, relations and conceptions in law, jurisprudence, morality, justice in non-western (pre-modern) societies as lacking and incomplete as compared to positivism which Western society sees as the apex of development as far as relations in jurisprudence and conceptions of law are concerned. The epistemological implications and fallout of positivism especially as championed in science breeds, imperceptibly, a kind of anthropological scepticism and racism.

Trenchantly, what is suspected as responsible for the varying shades of the evils of Eurocentrism is the view that it subscribes to a positivist historiography that defines the past by its own image, inevitably leading to the absurd conclusion that realities, conditions, perceptions and values in non-western societies are inherently lacking and incomplete when compared to

western society seen as the apex of development.

Implied in this kind of positivist historiography of course are reckless bend, relentless reliance and excessive dependence on the Comtean positivist tradition which absolutised progress and science. If positivist historiography interprets the past in its own image, it follows that imbued in this image is what Comte referred to as progressive evolution which was to him “an ultimate law governing historic phenomena” in which science, as a human activity, has defined for itself the essential role of the solver of all social problems including moral ones (see Brecht, 1989: 171).

In this Comtean socio-positivist worldview, an impartial understanding of social reality can only be obtained when proper scientific methodologies are applied. In this positivist inclination, only the methods of observation and measurement by an objective, impartial observer, some say spectator, can help us arrive at indelible and impeccable truth about social reality. Observation is here construed as a search for what is hidden, not just because it is hidden, but because its exposure will facilitate an intimate, sustained and productive relationship with the world.

Whether in science, ethics, sociology or law, it is very clear that the very object of positivist attack is the explicit rejection of the unbridled sway of metaphysical systems and doctrines. For Comte, social reality and history in general were at their worst when human progress were subjected to the marching parameters of metaphysics in an epoch which can be best described as nothing more than speculative and unscientific. The scapegoat, clearly, was metaphysics and theological systems.

Again, the views of the Neo-positivists against metaphysics were unsparing and unequivocal. Their physicalists propositions put metaphysics to a dead end, it seemed. Metaphysics and propositions drawn there from such as “there is a God who is imperceptible to human senses” or that “the soul of man is immortal” are neither true nor false. They are simply meaningless. Implicit, also, in the positivist attack on the idea of naturalism in legal discourse is the rejection of metaphysical doctrines in our analysis of legal concepts.

But then, in the general sense, an exploration of the metaphysics of a people is a way of demonstrating what is intelligible to them. This metaphysics not only establishes the basis of intelligibility for them, it also helps us in understanding their theory of meaning, the framework of meaning and



the whole structure of thought on which certain basic elements of their life are explainable in general. Hence, a recourse to their metaphysics. This metaphysics cuts across and explain their basic thoughts and beliefs with respect to human nature, human action, human hope and beliefs etc.

Often, it is no wonder if this kind of metaphysical outlook and structure is classified as the people's methodologies or way of knowing (epistemology). It serves as a way of understanding their philosophy. In this kind of outlook it is not a misnomer to state that what is philosophical for them is also methodological. That is why Sodipo, for instance, contended that within this kind of structure and metaphysical outlook,

“philosophy is reflective and critical thinking about the concepts and principles we use to organise our experience in law, in morals, in religion, in social and political life, in history, in psychology and in the natural sciences” (1973: 3).

According to R.G. Collingwood (1940), the task of metaphysics in every age consists in the framing, the decomposition and the analytic exposition of the lines and parts of each cultures worldview. That is why Collingwood considers metaphysics to be the historical science that aids us in uncovering the Absolute Presuppositions of each culture in every age and epoch.

Understandably, science has revolutionised the world in terms of its contribution in our understanding of the world and social reality. It is however obvious that there are several limitations inherent in this Comtean positivist inclination. In the first instance, since it is the goal of this brand of positivism to predict and control social reality, the possibility of restricting or limiting different groups' access to the means of gaining knowledge is heightened beyond proportion.

Again, questions of value cannot be solved by this positivism because moral problems, for instance, cannot be solved by science simply because scientific method cannot even state what the moral goals of societies and individuals should be. Besides, when societies advance moral goals for the guidance of each society, it is conclusive that what are needed to attain to such moral goals are not scientific decisions entailed in this positivism but moral decisions. Societies attain to these moral goals not by scientific methods but by recourse to ultimate value judgements.

And what is more, the positivist agenda in general whether in law or in science ignores some possibilities open to human understanding: one, the

existence of realm in which the facts therein are inaccessible to human senses; two, the recognition of some facts about the world which are not reportable in a sensory manner or by reference to sensory perceptions. But to disregard such statements as meaningless because they do not conform to the verification principle as held by the Neo-positivist is at best to be engaged in one form of the *petitio principii* fallacy.

The scepticism and racism inherent in Eurocentric historiography, especially as it relates to its programme of exclusion of African realities, has its foundation in the works of many great Western philosophers whose philosophical temperament have been coloured by racial prejudice. Of central interest is the racist thought of David Hume. Hume had contended very strongly in one of his classical works the denial of any item of great significance among the Negroes and Africans in general. In his words:

“I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences... there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho’ low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly” (Hume 1854: 228-9; toponyms in all caps altered).

However, the obvious inconsistency in the thoughts of David Hume concerning human nature in general can be validated in the fact that five years before he made the assertion above, Hume had written that human nature with respect to mental attitudes, cognitive abilities and dispositions knew no bound and distinctions. In his words:

“It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: the same events follow the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit: these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprises, which have ever been observed among mankind. Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English” (Hume 1988:

77-8).

What clearly and specifically are the major themes in Humean rejection and neglect of the realities of Africa in general? In the significant sense, Hume's racial theory or law became the point of justification for claims of superiority of white over blacks. In fact, four themes emerged in popular coinage in legitimating the issue of slavery all over Europe. These four themes are as follows:

1. That mental and moral capacity of non-whites differs markedly from whites (Linnaeus 1806);
2. That being non-whites was an essential defect on its own; the normal, natural condition of man was whiteness but due to some unfortunate environmental factors, some humans have lost their whiteness and with it, part of their normal human nature (Buffon 1817: 207; Blumenbach 1969)
3. Some beings that look human are not really so but are lower on the chain of being and thus represent a link between humans and apes (Long 1976);<sup>2</sup>
4. That there are several theses that separate human lines of creation and/ or evolution with Caucasians being the best (Brackman<sup>3</sup> 1977;

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<sup>2</sup> See Long, L. *History of Jamaica; or General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of that Island: With Reflection on its Situations, Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate,, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government*. New ed. with a new intro by George Metcalf, v. 3, London: F. Cass, 1970. On page 356, Long advocated the view that Negroes are lower on the chain of being than the rest of mankind. They are closer to orangutangs than to other men. In Long's view, a white moron is closer to the philosophical definition of man than a black genius, or as he put it, the "wisest black, red, swarthy, or sooty individual."

<sup>3</sup> Brackman cites the Talmud as the source for the Afro-phobic "Ham" curse.

"Ham is told by his outraged father that, because you have abused me in the darkness of the night, your children shall be born black and ugly; because you have twisted your head to cause me embarrassment, they shall have kinky hair and red eyes; because your lips jested at my expense, theirs shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked."

Bracken 1973).<sup>4</sup>

Armed with these theories, it is to be noted that Hume became an infamous proponent of philosophical racism when the slave trade was going on in England and his racial outbursts at that time were used by racists to justify slave trade. What is of interest and curious to us is that Hume's philosophical racism and the very basis on which they stand are at variance to his avowed principles of empiricism which are experience and observation. In fact, as argued by Eric Morton, Hume's views about Africans and Asians had no empirical foundation. In his words:

"Hume's notions about Africa and Africans, Indians and Asians were not based on factual, empirical information which he had gained by "experience and observation." No, his empirical methodology did not fail him nor did he fail it. The issue is that he never had an empirical methodology to explain racial and cultural differences in human nature. He only pretended that he had. I argue that the purpose of his racial law was not one of knowledge, but one of justification for power and domination by some over others" (Hume 2002).

But then, Hume is not alone in this procession of philosophical racism. The same can be said of the German philosopher, G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel's philosophical racism was notorious. The pertinent question is why is there so little, if any, respect for and, as a consequence, interest in African phenomena and their philosophical resonances? The answer to the question must not be found to consist in the fact that Africa holds no promising philosophical itinerary nor should it consist in the view that philosophy itself is not interested in what Africans think, say or do. These explanations do not portray the heart of the matter. Imbued in the peculiar absence of African phenomena in the field of philosophy, and impliedly, in the area of jurisprudence, is the politics of social history. In Olufemi Taiwo's language, the peculiar absence of Africa in the tradition of Western philosophy and jurisprudence lies

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See Brackman, H., 'The Ebb and Flow of Conflict. A History of Black Jewish Relations Through 1900', Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Los Angeles: University of California, 1977, pp. 79-81.

<sup>4</sup> Bracken cites a number of scientific and anthropological theories which sought to make racism scientifically respectable. See Bracken, H., 'Essence, Accident and Race', *Hermathena*, 116 (1973): 91-96.

in the chilling presence of Hegel's ghost and in the continued reverence of that ghost by the descendants of Hegel. In Taiwo's words:

"I submit that one source for the birth certificate of this false universal is to be found in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*... The ghost of Hegel dominates the hallways, institutions, syllabi, instructional practices, and journals of Euro-American philosophy. The chilling presence of this ghost can be observed in the eloquent absences as well as the subtle and not-so-subtle exclusions in the philosophical exertions of Hegel's descendants. The absences and exclusions are to be seen in the repeated association of Africa with the pervasiveness of immediacy, a very Hegelian idea if there be any" (1998).

This can be validated in the writings and submissions of Hegel about Africa. According to Hegel,

"Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained-for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World-shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself-the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition" (Hegel 1956: 91).

From the above, the necessary deduction is that Europe, in the words of Hegel, sees the African world as not only existing without a history but is essentially not part of world history. This is because the central ideas of universality and rationality do not exist in Africa. What exists is Africa's and African's attachment to nature which is at best an astounding display of the absence of the quality of universality and rationality. One of the promising items of universality, according to Hegel's narrative, is the possession of transcendence. One way of describing this is what can be referred to as "the unacknowledged African being" courtesy of Hegel. Because the African lacks being, he is condemned to have no significant achievement in world history.

This explains why no accurate representation is given of Africa in the areas of ethics, law, metaphysics and epistemology. Africa's and African's contributions to areas of knowledge production such as anthropology, political science have, in recent times, being consigned to what is dubiously called "African Studies." Even then, the metaphysic or the ontology of difference between the 'supreme west' and 'Africa' is often trumpeted. Also worrisome is the view that even where it is glaring that African scholars are

at home with some of the aching questions on the subject of justice, truth, political obligation, immortality of the soul and philosophy, their answers are often despised as having no philosophical application. Taiwo's language is pungent in its apt capture of the lamentation of the African mind. According to Taiwo,

“All too often, when African scholars answer philosophy's questions, they are called upon to justify their claim to philosophical status. And when this status is grudgingly conferred, their theories are consigned to serving as appendices to the main discussions dominated by the perorations of the “Western Tradition” (Taiwo 1998).

Having succeeded in banishing the African reality, possibility and cast from the rest of the world, the sum of Hegel's conclusion about Africa can be pictured in the terse but profound statement that Africa falls short of the glory of man. Hegel's conclusion in this respect is disturbing. He says:

“From these various traits it is manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of the Negroes. This condition is capable of no development or culture, and as we see them at this day, such have they always been. The only essential connection that has existed and continued between the Negroes and the Europeans is that of slavery ...” (Hegel 1956: 98).

In the significant senses, therefore, Humean and Hegelian notions and prejudice about Africa is not founded on anything empirically true – not on observation, experience and empirical history. They derive their foundation on the issue of slavery and the distorted interpretations of history. Significantly, the history of slavery in relation to Africa is not a product of the unhumanity, man-less-ness and irrationality of the African mind or psyche but in the history of what can be tagged “our dependence on and dominance by others.” Dependence and dominance, in their full import, do not contribute to the making of authentic interpretation of Africa's participation in history.

### *Conclusion*

The problem of the twentieth century, as William DuBois conceives it

“is the problem of the colour line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of man in Asia and Africa, in America and the Islands of the Sea.”

Beneath western historiography is the attempt to depersonalise and dehumanise the identity of the African. One of the several attempts by which this project has been carried out is the subjection of philosophical ideas and doctrines to the prevailing socio-political and economic conditions which characterise the age in which they were invented. This is no doubt true in the philosophical thoughts of David Hume and Hegel concerning the African and Africa in general.

Today, the task of constructing African scholarship in ethics, jurisprudence, philosophy and even politics through his history is not only challenging but made more intellectually stimulating given the wealth of analysis afforded by a growing community of scholars in not only interrogating what is considered as anomalous but also in unearthing the facts about the African past. In most cases, the wrong perception of African jurisprudence, for instance, stems from a deliberate neglect and misunderstanding of the symbolic and practical logic of a community viewed from the normative perspective of the community concerned. Much of this sceptical and racist trend characterised the heart of anthropological perspectives and reports emanating from the west. No empirically sound general theory of law has been and will be elaborated in general jurisprudence unless this brand of philosophical scepticism (about Africa and its jurisprudential imprint) imbued and energised by racism is done away with.

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## NOETIC VALIDITY IN AESTHETIC INTERPRETATION

by Gerald Cipriani

*ABSTRACT.* Can an explanatory theory of the subject be an appropriate means to understand what it is to live a moment of meaningful form in art – to which corresponds what I shall call ‘the figural experience’? Isn’t such a theory, in spite of its critical and relativist impulse inexorably inclined to impose a set of pre-conditions that are incompatible with the nature of the experience itself. And vice versa what is the relevance of any phenomenologism when it comes to understand the subjective formation of knowledge? In order to answer these questions I critically refer to several classic phenomenological challenges on Kant’s transcendentalism (Critique of Pure Reason), from Merleau-Ponty’s work on perception (Phenomenology of Perception) to the aesthetics of Dufrenne and Sartre (respectively Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience and Psychology of the Imagination). From this ensues the following argument. The subject imposes different frameworks when approaching the figural from various view-points. It is by understanding the motivations behind the subject’s position that the particular nature of objective knowledge that may be established can be explained or analysed. The validity of such a stance seems however to be restricted to ‘objectifying subjectivities’, and it may well become irrelevant to understand the subject’s attitude while experiencing artistic sense in all its disruptive and unexpected dimension. In this light, a descriptive noetic approach would complete the task in a more faithful manner. The question is therefore not about the possibility of an explanatory theory of the subject, but its appropriateness, and subjectivism should thereby be replaced by an ethical theory of the subject.

*KEY WORDS:* subjectivity, meaning, phenomenology, experience, Merleau-Ponty

*RESUME:* Validité Noétique dans l’Interprétation Esthétique – Une théorie explicative du sujet peut-elle être le bon moyen pour comprendre ce qu’est, dans sa dimension vécue, le moment où la forme artistique se met à signifier – ce à quoi correspond ce qu’il est convenu d’appeler “l’expérience figurale”? Une telle théorie n’est-elle pas encline, malgré ses aspirations critiques et relativisantes, à imposer un ensemble de conditions préconçues, lesquelles sont incompatibles avec la nature de l’expérience même? Et inversement, quel est l’à-propos de tout phénoménologisme, dès lors qu’il s’agit de comprendre la formation subjective de la connaissance? Afin de répondre à ces questions, il se doit de se rapporter de façon critique à plusieurs ouvrages classiques de phénoménologie, qui ont remis en cause le transcendantalisme de Kant (Critique de la Raison Pure), allant des travaux de Merleau-Ponty sur la perception (La Phénoménologie de la Perception) aux esthétiques de Dufrenne et Sartre (Phénoménologie de l’Expérience Esthétique et L’Imaginaire, respectivement). L’argumentation est la suivante. Le sujet impose diffé-

*rents cadres lorsqu'il aborde le figural à partir de tel ou tel point-de-vue. Ainsi, comprendre les motifs qui se cachent derrière le positionnement du sujet permet d'expliquer ou d'analyser la nature propre de la connaissance objective. Une telle approche ne semble néanmoins se justifier que dans la limite des "subjectivités objectivantes", ce qui ne saurait s'appliquer à une compréhension de l'attitude du sujet dont l'expérience du sens dans l'ouvrage d'art a lieu en tant que rupture, et de façon inattendue. C'est en cela qu'une approche descriptive noétique aboutirait plus fidèlement à une telle compréhension. Le problème n'est donc pas de remettre en cause la possibilité de l'explication théorique centrée sur le sujet, mais plutôt son à-propos. Le subjectivisme devrait alors laisser la place à une théorie éthique du sujet.*

*MOTS CLE: subjectivité, sens, phénoménologie, expérience, Merleau-Ponty*

*Special motives are required to make the theoretical attitude possible ... (Husserl)<sup>1</sup>*

Can an explanatory theory of the subject be an appropriate means to understand what it is to live a moment of meaningful form in art – to which corresponds what I shall call ‘the figural experience’? Isn’t such a theory, in spite of its critical and relativist impulse inexorably inclined to impose a set of pre-conditions that are incompatible with the nature of the experience itself.

To subsume the event of meaning in art to pre-established modes of thought, to be engrossed into the question of its possibility by confining it to a set of prerequisite subjective conditions, would be to behave like Narcissus who Juno wisely condemned to fall in love with his reflected image for ignoring Echo, his loving nymph. Echo’s voice would still be there, somewhere, telling us to spend more time with her image. Narcissus on the contrary can only see himself, immutably. He cannot be transformed by the Other, he cannot be told any message as he only sees what he expects. This Other, needless to say, is here the work of art. There is no moment of meaningful form for the one who finds in the image the confirmation of a system.

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<sup>1</sup> Husserl Archiv B 1 32, Nr 17, trans. D. Moran in *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 183. The original version is in the unpublished Husserl-Archiv text in Louvain:

‘Es gehören besondere Motive dazu um theoretische Einstellung möglich zu machen, ...’.

Any anticipation is an act that transforms art into a means or a relevance, and such a subjectification runs the risk of imposing its own image on what is perceived. However, the mistake would be as well to ignore reflections on what is happening on the side of the perceiver during such an experience. Any ‘theory’ of the subject that aims to be as faithful as possible to the experience itself must relinquish its mastering and a priori features. This is what a mere description of the perceiver’s attitude strives to do. It preserves the vital inter-dependency between noesis and noema without establishing a hierarchical relationship of causality. This means that the very conception of theory of the subject in the sense of explanation becomes for such an undertaking irrelevant.

At this point it is worth noticing what may appear as being one of the most extraordinary paradoxes of contemporary Western culture. Far from having overcome the question of subjectivity when it comes to understanding the formation of meaning in art, the Western world has radicalised the same subjectivity into various forms of self-centered relativism. This has led to the postmodern implosion of the subject, which has very often produced unfaithful and therefore disrespectful attitudes when it comes to relate to the work of art, or simply when the artist relates to the world. The modern mastering subject has been replaced by the postmodern denigrating agent, or to put it differently the objectifying subject has given way to the subjectifying subject. And the question becomes, how can the role played by the perceiver during the moment of meaningful form in art be worked out without denigrating that of the Other, or to put it more adequately, that of the Thou (viz. ‘you too’)? This is once again what a description of the ‘figural attitude’ can provide, making thus the very conception of subjectifying subjectivity unacceptable. The argument here is therefore not only against any theory that seeks to recover in the subject the nature of artistic experience, but also when subjectivity is expressed by negation in the form of self-addressed deconstructionism. Neither constituting nor self-constituted consciousness allows for one of the essential features of artistic experience to take place, that is to say our considerate relationship to the disruptive Thou.

Constituting consciousness is precisely what Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* most famously rejects. (Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* and Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* are his targets, but also the rationalisms of Leibniz and Spinoza). The dominant subject does not open

any world but presupposes it, and we end up with a subject-related set of rules for meaning in its phenomenality to be possible. The nonsense of such an approach pre-constructing what has to be experienced in its immediate and unexpected dimension is self-evident. The subject cannot be before the world that it pretends to grasp, because it cannot be disengaged from the environment in which it lives – the subject is always situated. Neither should it use its cognitive capacities to determine what the world is like, as if human beings were pure disembodied consciousness. The subject should not be treated as ‘beyond’ its embodied, finite life if one is to avoid this transcendence giving shape and structure to meaningful experience. This would be to reinvent an intellectualistic dualism running from Plato to Descartes, Kant and beyond. The ideal of a pre-constructed world goes against any notion of human involvement in what is experienced. To define in a Kantian manner a set of a priori rules which makes the phenomenon possible is not conceivable. The idealist subject is as disembodied as ‘mentalistic’. It presents itself in clear opposition to what it seeks to know, viz. the ‘object’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant’s aim in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (ed. & trans. P. Gruyer & A.W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) is to show how the subject, with its a priori (necessary and universal) characteristics can know the world. Knowledge is conditioned by the combination of two a priori: the capacity for sense-experience (‘intuition’), and the possession and capacity to apply certain ‘concepts’ (causation, existence etc.) appropriately to that experience. These concepts or ‘categories’ are necessary for the subject to have access to the knowledge of the world – they are imposed by the subject’s ‘understanding’. Kant argues for a synthesis of different experiences of the same object (experiences which occur chronologically in space) in order to have the knowledge of this object. It would be nonsensical, for Kant, to have the experience of something without implicitly having available the principle of causation (for example), because one would not be able to establish links between several temporal events whose synthesis should lead to the understanding and the knowledge of what is experienced. But where, for Kant, this notion of a priori categories aims to show how knowledge is possible, for Husserl it only contributes to define the essential structures of experience. To put it this way: Kant uses these subjective features in order to show how knowledge is possible. Husserl only ‘describes’ the essential structure of experience. Kant on the contrary sees the subject imposing structures on its experience of the world which then appears as we must know it. For Kant, we must understand how we arrange and impose the categories in order to become aware of the kind of knowledge we can have of the world. Kant’s known world is perceived by the subject as an independent external world. Unlike Husserl, Kant is in a

Of course this criticism of the ‘pure subject’ is not restricted to Merleau-Ponty. Sartre in *The Transcendence of the Ego* questions Husserl’s notion of the pure ego when it comes to working out the notion of experience. The problem of the primacy of the subject’s consciousness is also a feature of the first part of *Being and Nothingness*, where the notion of ‘being’ is introduced to replace that of idealistic significance of the object. Like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre rejects Husserl’s transcendental idealism by describing the experiences of subjects embodied and involved in the world, at a particular time. In fact, according to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre’s differentiation between ‘in-itself’ and ‘for-itself’ (reflective consciousness) also implies some degree of intellectualism by tending to transcend the particular temporal dimension of our relationship to the world. The ‘for-itself’ cannot give access to the ‘pre-reflective’ nature of consciousness that characterises a truly engaged and embodied experience. A phenomenologically described world is bound to change in time precisely because of the temporality of any subject involved in the world, and it is this mutating characteristic that a faithful philosophy of experience must address. Although Sartre acknowledges the temporality of both subject and world, Merleau-Ponty contends that the distinction between for-itself and in-itself prevents the former from taking this mutating dimension into account, that is to say the embodied aspect of experience or the living-in-the-world. In other words, bearing such a dichotomy is no more than a form of intellectualism that must be avoided at all cost.

The same difficulties are encountered when one uses predetermining factors in the spectator in order to work out the moment of meaningful form in art, and this without any reference to the specificity of the artistic experience itself. The constituting subject pulls out from the immediacy of meaning with the purpose of defining it, and cognitive capacities are used to determine what the moment of meaningful form is like. This kind of approach will always run the risk of disengaging the spectator from what is experienced. While for Merleau-Ponty there is a problem when knowledge is removed from sensory-experience, for us there are questions to ask when the phenomenal nature of the figural in the form of disruption of the already

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way attracted to ‘a form’ of objectivism (in fact the things ‘in themselves’ – the noumena – cannot be known).

known, or creation of the yet-to-be-known is not taken on board. The estranged dimension of meaning cannot be pre-figured by the subject. There is no figural attitude for the intellectualist in the sense that Merleau-Ponty understands it – only a figuring attitude. To confine perception to an interpretative, judgmental process that excludes the sensory dimension or the pathos of what is experienced cannot be satisfactory. To apply a set of preconceived rules in order to define what the moment of meaningful form is would transform the unexpected into the expected, presentation into representation, a shared event into a confirmation for-us. There is certainly an active dimension in the figural attitude but this activity cannot, and therefore should not attempt to originate the unexpected. Although the perceiver is the home of the event of meaning, the former must remain available to such a phenomenon for it to happen at all.

Objectifying approaches and their corresponding frames of mind, which seek to read artistic configurations in terms of forms, set of signs, manifestation of the unconscious, representations of class, of gender divisions, or of a historical period, must become aware of what they bring onto the work of art in the light of what remains elusive because of its unexpected nature. To be alert to what is pre-conceived in the subject has obvious ethical consequences: it awakens us to what cannot and therefore should not attempt to capture in the moment of meaningful form, i.e. its astonishing dimension. An explanatory and consequently disembodied theory will always overlook this essential aspect of artistic experience. For this reason it is only by adopting a ‘letting-be’ attitude or by being available to the Thou, as respectively Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel would have it, that we will become more faithful and respectful to the phenomenal nature of art.

However, is this to suggest that we have to give up any investigation of what is happening on the side of the spectator during the ‘actual’ experience of the moment of meaningful form? Certainly not, but only an un-forceful and thus descriptive approach to the figural attitude will be as close as possible to the experience of the unexpected and eventful nature of meaning. Indeed, any explanatory strategy as to the subject would establish the latter as the origin of such an experience when in fact no room is left for a separation between subject and object, and when we are left with a witness and an event.

A theory of the subject acquires all its significance when it relates to an



object as it must be known, as it is explained or analysed from a particular view-point such as, for example, form, gender, the unconscious, the political or historical. Nevertheless, the same strategy becomes inappropriate when one tries to grasp, or rather communicate, the object-less phenomenon of meaning. It does not make much sense to reflect on the conditions that would make the unexpected possible; nor to undertake a methodology of objectifying approaches in order to figure out the phenomenal nature of the moment of meaningful form as it must be known. This is of course also what Merleau-Ponty challenges when referring to Kant's notion of 'a priori' and his attempt to establish how knowledge is possible.<sup>3</sup> For the latter there is no contingency but a necessity – the principle of causality for instance, which conditions our experience of the world. Kant's transcendentalism is based on objective presupposition against which Merleau-Ponty argues because of the contingent nature of the relationship between concept and experience.<sup>4</sup> Of course, one could argue that the former's critical subjectivism finds its *raison d'être* when relating to objects of knowledge, whereas the latter's argument is justified but only with regard to what it strives to highlight, i.e. our pre-theoretical condition as being-in-the-world. This problem of appropriateness of argument is also what we face when it comes to reflecting on the nature of the experience of meaning in art.

The question of subjectivity and its a priori conditions must be addressed in the light of recognisable categories such as form, the unconscious, gender, the political and so on, in other words what constitutes the world of 'objectivity'. But when it comes to dealing with the contingency that brings together spectator and work of art, or artist and world, the very conception of a priori conditions for particular categories to be recognised proves to be not only irrelevant, but also overpowering. The moment of meaningful form

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, for Merleau-Ponty, the 'a priori' should be replaced by 'contingency': 'The unity of the senses, which was regarded as an a priori truth, is no longer anything but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world – the diversity of the senses, which was regarded as given a posteriori ... appears necessary to this world ...; it therefore becomes an a priori truth ... The a priori is the fact understood, made explicit ...; the a posteriori is the isolated and implicit fact.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. Colin Smith, London: Routledge, 1992), 221.

<sup>4</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, 'Sense Experience' (ibid.), 207-242.

reveals its nature precisely by disrupting what is pre-established, conditioning, or a priori in the subject. It constitutes a subject-less experience as it 'happens' to the human agent who must be available for it. Its possibility cannot therefore be objectively known according to such or such a frame of mind. No epistemology can conceive the phenomenal nature of artistic meaning as it must be known. Rather, the figural disrupts what we already know and can only be differentially explained – after hand, according to various subjectively established categories. This leads us to reject the assumption that we should go back to the subject in order to explain the essence of a moment of meaningful form in art. Any attempt that seeks to retrieve causes in the subject's mind, or even in the object of perception establishes by the very nature of its method a hierarchical relationship between the former and the latter. In fact, to be rigorous, descriptive accounts do not fully overcome the problem either, but they are at least more faithfully part of the experience, to the point that the figural attitude itself could be understood in terms of an un-communicated descriptive stance. No intellectualisation of interpretation or psychology of perception can do justice to the moment of meaningful form in art. Under no circumstances should a noetic description become a theory of the subject, if one is to think of artistic experience as a relationship between subject-less availability and disruptive event.

In another context this is precisely the basis on which Mikel Dufrenne in his *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* criticises Roman Ingarden, for defining the role of 'signification' in the literary work of art by separating the word from what it signifies. There is on the one hand 'rational meaning', and on the other the reader's attitude which is framed according to a system of 'strata'.<sup>5</sup> For Dufrenne it is when signification is conveyed within the word, for instance in poetry, that the 'aesthetic' literary work distinguishes itself from the ordinary text. This is also what brings music close to poetry,

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<sup>5</sup> For an insightful account of Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* (trans. R.A. Crowley & K.R. Olsen, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (trans. R.A. Crowley & K.R. Olsen, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), see Shusterman, Richard. 'Ingarden, Inscription and Literary Ontology', *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* Vol. 18, No. 2 (May 1987): 103-119.

and to any form of art whose disruptive nature discloses a certain meaningful ‘opacity’.<sup>6</sup> And the same lack of awareness is argued against Waldemar Conrad for whom an object becomes ‘aesthetic’ only when the spectator finds the right way to perceive it, for example in a certain light or from a particular angle for a sculpture, at a precise distance for a painting, with an appropriate way of moving for architecture, and so on. It becomes a disembodied ideal object, which disappears as soon as there is no adequate perception or performance any more, and which reappears in the right conditions.

Their approaches not only work against Dufrenne’s notion of ‘aesthetic experience’, but they also close the door to a number of vital concepts such as disruption, revelation, or availability. They cannot conceive the phenomenality that a moment of meaning can trigger, and whose sensuous dimension is lived in its uniqueness as it surprises, transforms, and enriches the one who is willing to take a considerate attitude. Idealism would approach meaning in terms of signified conveyed by signifier, begetting thus not only a separation between the medium and what is represented, but also between the object of representation and the means by which this object is represented, that is to say consciousness itself. The experience of the moment of meaningful form in art entails on the contrary an aspiration towards a unity between mind, meaning and medium. In fact, the term that Dufrenne uses to describe the work of art ‘aesthetically perceived’, viz. the ‘aesthetic object’ is to this extent misleading. In experience subjectivity tends to disappear to make the objecthood of what is perceived an unwelcome concept. No entity stands against the perceiver whose attitude can only be partially transgressed by means of description.<sup>7</sup> There should be no question of ‘intellect-

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<sup>6</sup> Quoting De Schloezer in his study on J.S. Bach:

‘The musical work is not a sign for something else but signifies itself. It is what it says to me, its meaning being immanent within it. And the meaning exists as embodied, not as signified, in the work’. B. De Schloezer, *J. S. Bach* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Dufrenne’s ‘aesthetic object’ is supposedly about a unity that brings ‘together both the signified and the signifying elements in the work’. Mikel Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (trans. S. Casey, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 214.

tual object' that would correspond to the subject's frame of mind or preconceived categories.

As a matter of fact both Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty pledge in their own ways against the same thing: intellectualist approaches lead to disembodiment. The 'being' of Dufrenne's 'aesthetic object' is potentially already there although waiting for the 'subject' to actualise it in a sensuous manner, in perception itself.<sup>8</sup> When for him the potential 'aesthetic object' is the 'work of art' in its objective dimension, for Merleau-Ponty 'objective reality' is the potential 'perceived world', or to put it differently the 'invisible world' is the potential for the 'visible world' to be. This surely should imply that the relationship between subjectivity/objectivity and the experiential nature of meaning is one of complementary difference, triggering thus the genuine issue of appropriateness of approach to adopt depending on what is to be, respectively, retrieved in the object of consciousness or discovered from what is experienced. It is at this point that what one may call an ethical hermeneutics could prove to be invaluable.<sup>9</sup>

Now, the clear inadequacy of the intellectual attitude cannot be resolved either by relying on mere imagination as this would inexorably lead to another form of idealist and therefore disembodiment of subjectivity. For Dufrenne this constitutes a noticeable weakness in Sartre's aesthetics, in spite of the latter's efforts to bring what is perceived with what is imagined together.

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<sup>8</sup> For Dufrenne,

'the being of the aesthetic object is not the being of an abstract signification. It is rather, the being of a sensuous thing which is realized only in perception' (ibid.), 218.

<sup>9</sup> The conception of ethical hermeneutics should invoke really a meta-ethical mode of inquiry. As A. C. Grayling puts it:

'Ethics is the study of theories about moral values, and the concepts we use in identifying and asserting them. An important distinction is required here: a theory which prescribes how we should live is called a "first-order" or "normative" morality. Reflective inquiry into assumptions, concepts, and claims of such first-order moralities is often called "metaethics" ' (A.C. Grayling, *Philosophy: A Guide through the Subject* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

Indeed, for Sartre the aesthetic is neither a mental representation nor a thing in itself; neither belonging to the psychological world nor to the real world.<sup>10</sup> The ‘real physical’ element (the paint, the bronze, or the video screen as a material) is negated by perception to give rise to the ‘unreal aesthetic’ element (the significance or what is represented). The work of art becomes an ‘analogon’ (the real as perceived, the colours, textures, or sounds), which is arranged in such a way that the spectator’s imagination makes it appear as a meaningful form. Aesthetic experience has then and certainly very much to do with a fortunate association between the perceived and the imagined, but it remains nonetheless a disembodied separation between the one and the other – the same separation that Merleau-Ponty sees happening between the ‘in-itself’ and the ‘for-itself’.<sup>11</sup> For Sartre the ‘essence’ of aesthetic experience is a matter of imagined subject-matter in its contingent relationship with perceived form. Any form aesthetically perceived is the mental recreated representation of some-thing that belongs to the objective world. A true phenomenological move would on the contrary acknowledge the embodied nature of the relationship between object and subject in aesthetic experience. Dufrenne’s approach for example is to conceive the referred object, whether real or ideal as being neutralised to the point that his ‘aesthetic object’ becomes bracketed. Thus, instead of letting imagination correspond with an external subject-matter for the experience to be meaningful, it is rather from the work of art itself that meaning emerges with the necessary presence of the perceiver. It would then be fair to talk about a subtle conjunction of ‘representation’ and ‘expression’, an ‘expressed meaning’ that is neither imagined, unreal, or represented.

In fact, Dufrenne himself is not truly faithful to the phenomenal nature of aesthetic experience. The very concept of ‘aesthetic object’ is a contradiction in terms, if the work of art aesthetically perceived is understood as being a

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<sup>10</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of the Imagination* (trans. H. Barnes, London: Routledge, 1995). And for a critical point of view: Bossart, W. H. ‘Sartre’s Theory of the Imagination’, *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (January 1980).

<sup>11</sup> As Dufrenne puts it: ‘the relation between a real and an unreal thing cannot be the essentially contingent connection between the perceived and the imagined. The relation must be the connection between the sign and signification’ Dufrenne (1974, op. cit.), 203.

constituting part of an embodied experience. Objectifying approaches must be in tune with what is sought after, as much as any phenomenology must be in harmony with what is dealt with. In this sense the recent postmodernist argument against the foundational nature of phenomenology can only be justified when the latter is used for the wrong things, when it becomes a systematising abstraction. An ethical eclecticism for a concrete philosophy is of course what is here beginning to be drawn, echoing perhaps what Paul Royer-Collard and Victor Cousin amongst others attempted to do in another context in another time.<sup>12</sup> Previous examples of pre-conceived and conditioning frames of mind that make the experience of the moment of meaning in art possible or contingent in a disembodied manner, are clear cases of systematising abstractions. Another obvious example is psychologism. Figurality understood as lived, noticeable and therefore disruptive meaningfulness is one of the constituents of a particular type of experience, which in turn is always the experience ‘of’ something. This is an aspect that explanatory subjectivism such as psychologism can only ignore, simply because no account is taken of the ‘thing perceived’. One ought to recognise that the subject’s psyche remains a necessary and yet insufficient condition for the event of meaning in art to be understood.

When Merleau-Ponty maintains that philosophy should be concerned with description and not explanation or justification it is Kant’s concept of ‘a priori’ that is targeted. But what is also questionable in the former’s argument, is not to have acknowledged the appropriateness of a critical theory of the subject that lies in its ability to disclose the conditioning factors in our quest for objective meaning. Admittedly, for these factors not to become determinant one ought to start from the object in order to look into the subject, or, to put it differently, it is when the transcendental method becomes

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Royer-Collard and Victor Cousin were the main representatives with Théodore Jouffroy of the so-called eclectic movement in French philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century. They were strongly influenced by François-Pierre Maine de Biran although the idea of ‘choosing out’ (in Old Greek *eklegein*) beneficial dimensions from various systems was fully developed by the formers. See for instance P. Royer-Collard, *Les Fragments Philosophiques de Royer-Collard* (Paris, 1913); V. Cousin *Fragments Philosophiques* (Paris, 1826); and *Du Vrai, du Beau et du Bien* (Paris, 1837); T. Jouffroy *Mélanges Philosophiques* (Paris, 1833); and *Nouveaux Mélanges Philosophiques* (Paris, 1842).

transcendentalism that a theory of the subject becomes inappropriate. As is well known, this last point constitutes one of the fundamental differences between Husserlian methodology and the Kantian critique.

No ethical eclecticism of course is possible without becoming aware of the particular ‘theoretical lens’ that we are using. In other words there would be two stages: reflexivity, and application. During the first stage the subject reflects on the ‘a priori’ conditions that make something be perceived as it is, and during the second stage the same subject applies the method according to its relevance. This is perhaps how a harmony between method of investigation and investigated object can be reached. The theoretical lens must be highlighted as a preconception that may or may not suit what is imported from the moment of meaningful form. If one is to objectify meaning in art, one ought to be aware of the implications of the corresponding subjectivity. How could for instance formalism be a relevant ‘lens’ that would do justice to the so-called figural experience when the latter implies a fusion of form and content? What would be the positive adequacy of structuralism when it comes to doing justice to the conception of moment of meaningful form, understood as disruption of a structured systems of signs? When critical, psychoanalytical, and historical explanations and analyses can provide useful objective accounts of the significance of art, they would be wrong to confine understanding to the preconceived specificity of their subjectivity by ignoring the ‘special motives’ behind. More paradoxically, this applies not only to accounts that tend to reduce the matter to the experiential nature of our relationship to meaning in the name of description, or even better phenomenologism, but also to recent attempts to systematise the deconstruction and therefore disclosure-by-negation of subjectivity itself. In all cases we are dealing with untimely forms of abstraction, which have forgotten the need to look at themselves in order to realise what they potentially miss in the Other. Any mode of ‘constitutive consciousness’, even the most unsuspected ones such as phenomenologism and deconstructionism should strive to recover their motives to let the imported meaning be considered. A subjectivism that reflects on its will to power ought to be ethical.

Once again it would be misleading to think that the need to bring to light the variety of theoretical lenses in use including the brain itself, would be justified in order to determine what could be known. Have we ever witnessed somebody wearing glasses, taking them off and looking at them in

order to figure out what can be seen through them? Such a situation is too absurd for words. It would however make perfect sense to look at the glasses to figure out the way things are seen. Formalism, political theory, or psychology, is a lens used with the intention to correct perceptual relationships, to focus on particular angles, or to make initially unsuspected dimensions appear. They all strive to retrieve themselves in what is perceived and create the same 'distance' between subject and object that Merleau-Ponty condemns. It goes without saying that the greater the distance the more corrective the lenses will be, and the more in need we will be to know how correcting they are and what are their modes of operating.

The case of the experience of the meaningful form in art highlights the problem. Regardless of how informative a disembodied theory of the subject can be, it should take care of the spatiotemporal difference that separates itself from the actual experience of meaning precisely in order to avoid the temptation of becoming determinant. The various frames of mind previously mentioned call for a critical philosophy of the subject, not because of their objective partiality, but because of their inability to grasp a priori the meaningful phenomenality or eventful dimension of the figural. Even Sartre's aesthetics, which ascribes to imagination the power to negate the material world for the mind and the analogon to meet contingently, can be accused of ignoring that vital moment of embodiment on which any subjective attitude depends.

Critical reflexivity is certainly required for the subject to be aware of its potentially projective nature, but also and above all of what it cannot grasp by means of objectification, bringing thus a vital ethical dimension into the question of how to think the subjective attitude. It goes without saying that the very notion of subjectivity entails its corresponding object of knowledge, and the one who undertakes a critique of the former is already outside the experience of the moment of meaningful form itself. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that there is only a difference in degree between the subjectivity involved in experience and the one at work in explanation or analysis – a point that perhaps Dufrenne could have made to justify the term 'aesthetic *object*' for something that is perceptually *experienced*. As a whole the question remains the same: a theory of the subject must be appropriate. When objectifying forms of subjectivity require critical reflexivity for ethical purposes with regard to the phenomenal, what may be called experiential



subjectivity asks for an account as close as possible to experience itself, i.e. a phenomenological description of what is happening on the side of the subject during the moment of meaningful form.

More concretely and at a methodological level, the subject imposes different frameworks when approaching the figural from various view-points. It is by understanding the motivations behind the subject's position that the particular nature of objective knowledge that may be established can be explained or analysed. The validity of such a stance seems however to be restricted to 'objectifying subjectivities', and it may well become irrelevant to understand the subject's attitude while experiencing artistic sense in all its disruptive and unexpected dimension.<sup>13</sup> In this light, a descriptive noetic approach would complete the task in a more faithful manner. The question is therefore not about the possibility of an explanatory theory of the subject, but its appropriateness, and subjectivism should thereby be replaced by an ethical theory of the subject.

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<sup>13</sup> The disruption applies to the breaking of evaluative choices. To experience a moment of meaningful form in an art gallery or a museum challenges our way of seeing things in our ordinary life. It makes a 'special case' out of certain aspects of the world that we take for granted. It 'brackets' certain elements such as medium, form, colour, expression, emotion, idea, appearance, and by doing so it renews and enriches our way of being in the world.



## **QUEST *laboratory*:**

**QUEST Colloquium ‘The transcultural framework for the  
construction of African knowledges’ 23 March 2004 /  
Colloque QUEST ‘Le cadre transculturel pour la construc-  
tion des connaissances africaines’ 23 mars 2004**

for an introduction to this colloquium, see the Editorial, above, pp. 10f /  
pour une introduction à ce Colloque, voire l’éditorial, ci-haut, pp. 10s.



## SHOULD INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY TAKE OVER FROM ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF CULTURE?

In reaction to Wim van Binsbergen's *Intercultural Encounters*

by Pieter Boele van Hensbroek

*ABSTRACT.* This article provides a critical analysis of the argument in van Binsbergen's book *Intercultural Encounters*. In a radical and comprehensive exposition, *Intercultural Encounters* provides epistemological, knowledge-political and moral arguments to discard Anthropology as a mode of intercultural knowledge production. Analysing van Binsbergen's claims, it is suggested that, rather than discarding Anthropology altogether, a hermeneutically more sophisticated and self-reflective Anthropology is called for. It is further suggested that van Binsbergen does not establish how Intercultural Philosophy can actually do the job of replacing Anthropology and include in Philosophy the empirical study of culture. Finally, it is suggested that van Binsbergen's greater objective of establishing a truly intercultural knowledge production requires attention to the political economy of knowledge production. Intercultural knowledge production requires that the actual production of cultural knowledge is democratized and 'decentered' all over the globe.

*KEY WORDS:* Intercultural knowledge production, Intercultural Encounters, Anthropology, Intercultural Philosophy, Hermeneutics, Political economy of knowledge production.

*RESUME :* Analyse du livre de Wim van Binsbergen *Intercultural Encounters*. Dans ce livre, par voie des arguments épistémologique, morale et politique de connaissance, l'ethnologie est disqualifié comme méthode interculturelle de production de la connaissance. L'article argumente qu'on a besoin d'une Anthropologie plus herméneutique et plus auto-reflexif, sans disqualifier l'ethnologie en principe. En plus, van Binsbergen ne démontre pas si la Philosophie Interculturelle peut déplacer l'ethnologie comme science empirique. Finalement, il est suggéré que le grand objectif d'établir une vraie production interculturelle de la connaissance fait nécessaire des analyses de la économie politique de la production de la connaissance, voir, la démocratisation de la production des connaissance culturel – mondial et décentré.

*MOTS CLE:* production de savoirs interculturels, Intercultural Encounters, ethnologie, philosophie interculturelle, herméneutique, économie politique de la production des savoirs

Criticism of Anthropology and self-criticism of the discipline are not new. In fact, since the exposure of its role in colonial rule and in fostering Eurocentric prejudice about so-called ‘primitive’ peoples, Anthropology has developed to be one of the most self-critical disciplines in the academia. However, the criticism that Professor Wim van Binsbergen advances in his recently published book *Intercultural Encounters* goes beyond all this. Himself a distinguished anthropologist of religion, his fundamental criticism leads him to desert the discipline of Anthropology and shift to Intercultural Philosophy. Such a criticism deserves careful attention because, if it holds, then it cannot remain without consequences for the intellectual landscape in the Human Sciences, as it would put Intercultural Philosophy central stage in academic concerns with culture.

The present article investigates whether Anthropology can be repaired after van Binsbergen’s criticism. My angle of approach is narrower than van Binsbergen’s. I limit myself to considerations from the point of view of the Philosophy of Science.

*Intercultural Encounters* is a captivating book. It recounts van Binsbergen’s personal intellectual development through a presentation of his own key publications over a period of thirty years. The original texts are enriched with his comments and analyses produced today. *Intercultural Encounters* thus reconstructs the story of van Binsbergen’s discovery of a range of internal contradictions in Anthropology. The book mixes the theoretical discussion of these methodological issues and Gordian knots of the discipline with the personal drama of living through these contradictions. And a drama it is, because both professional and personal integrity are at stake. The thirty years of intercultural encounters recounted in the book raise not just methodological or professional issues, but also political, moral and biographical ones. Finally, in van Binsbergen’s view, it raises the question of personal integrity as a person living in an intercultural world. Honesty and authenticity in constructing one’s own deepest convictions and relating with cultural others in an unprejudiced way requires a rejection of Anthropology and a radical conversion towards Intercultural Philosophy.

The various levels of the argument in *Intercultural Encounters* can be outlined as follows. A first level concerns epistemological and methodological questions related to Anthropology, especially anthropological fieldwork.

Van Binsbergen discusses these with reference to the history of his own intellectual production and his own fieldwork experience. At a second level, the book addresses questions of the politics of knowledge and the justification of, what he calls, a “North Atlantic” knowledge practice. The hegemonic position of North Atlantic knowledge traditions is itself an issue, but this obtains extra weight when these traditions address other parts of the globe. How does this North Atlantic knowledge relate to the self-interpretations produced elsewhere? What knowledge is produced when, for instance, an ethnographer fully participates in another form of life, and how is this knowledge affected when such experiences are reported in academic writing? How to decide which interpretations are more valuable? How even to reach a situation where the agent’s own interpretations are taken seriously? The politics of knowledge thus leads to a third level of questions relating to fairness, honesty towards fellow humans, and authenticity of oneself. Are the honest and open human relations in the fieldwork situation betrayed by having a second agenda of representing the cultural experience in a foreign paradigm? Can the anthropologist be true to her/ himself when incisive cultural experiences, roles played, and friendships solidified are ignored after the fieldwork period in favour of interpretations fitting the regular scientific paradigm?

Van Binsbergen’s argument is complicated because it addresses all three levels of the argument and concludes that Anthropology is seriously problematic at all these levels. It is epistemologically naïve, has a knowledge-political bias towards the North Atlantic, and leads to unfaithful attitudes to both one’s fellow humans in the field work situation and to oneself. Nevertheless, all these elements of criticism connect together into one line of reasoning which I will represent below. For van Binsbergen the train of dilemmas have an important biographical dimension as well, because he became himself a locally qualified healer in the Southern African tradition of Sangoma. As an anthropologist, such experience as a Sangoma healer is respected, but the discipline expects finally a rendering of such fieldwork experiences in terms of regular anthropological theorizing. Here van Binsbergen protests, both for personal and for professional reasons. Why should he become unfaithful to Sangomahood, his fellow healers and himself, and why should the North Atlantic paradigm of understanding automatically demand precedence in explaining Sangoma healing practice?

The core of van Binsbergen's argument is an epistemological criticism of Anthropology.

The enterprise of Anthropology is built upon gathering ethnographic data, where fieldwork is the instrument and ethnographic monographs and articles are the result. The idea of fieldwork is that the foreign context of meaning is captured by immersing oneself into the form of life concerned. Thus cultural phenomena can be understood from within the cultural context of meaning and can be experienced as they really are, in an 'emic' way, from within. Having gained understanding of cultural phenomena, then the issue is to present the results carefully and honestly in academic writing.

Van Binsbergen points out that, despite all due attention to anthropological professionalism and unprejudiced attitudes, the idea of fieldwork is a case of naive inductivism. First of all, because of the assumption of gaining access to the cultural facts as they really are; second, because of the assumption that the framing of these findings in academic textual forms is not distorting. Anthropologists tend

“to improvise their way when it comes to epistemological and methodological foundations”. (497).

If both the problems of access and of representation were given due attention, then we would have to move to different modes of intercultural knowledge production instead of Anthropology, he argues.

As for the problem of access, the empiricist claim ignores the constructivist aspect of empirical science and experience in general. There cannot be a complete shedding of one's original mindset, linguistic conditioning and cultural attitudes. On top of that, by formulating the specific research questions and scope of one's study, choosing concepts, theories, and other study-specific arrangements, the observer adds to the construction of the object of research. Even with a completely *emic* approach, including the continuous validation of the ethnographer's interpretations in day to day acting and communication of a community, one cannot claim to reach an unproblematic, untainted understanding. We need to replace a classical objectivist model of knowledge acquisition, where the subject gains unproblematic access to the object, with a communicative model, where the people studied can 'speak back' and interpretations are questioned, confirmed or adjusted.



In the words of van Binsbergen:

“Ethnographers (...) can only claim credibility provided that, in their fieldwork and in the production of published texts, ample provision has been made to turn their ethnography into a form of ‘communicative action’.” (504)

As for the problem of the representation of findings in academic vocabulary, using scientific notions and following textual forms that are standard in the discipline, here too Anthropology has naïve assumptions, according to van Binsbergen. He describes this act of representation as a certain form of appropriation, of aggression, and of expressing power differences. Ethnography ignores these problems. Van Binsbergen argues that, in fact, Ethnography is not even neutral but is based upon a preliminary choice for North Atlantic worldviews. Where beliefs and interpretations under study differ from the North Atlantic worldview, there the last one remains unchallenged and the worldview under study needs to be explained in terms of what is considered sensible in the North Atlantic. For instance in the case of witchcraft, the standard idea of the non-existence of witches is not questioned, it is only the witch belief that needs to be explained from factors that are acceptable in the North Atlantic.

Thus, the epistemological criticism immediately results in a knowledge-political argument, because if access and reporting are less than neutral, then of course questions arise as to whose biases and paradigms dominate the knowledge process. Van Binsbergen calls ethnography ‘Eurocentric’ because it does not treat the collective representations of other cultures on a par with the North Atlantic ones. The representations that have to be explained, that are put into question, are always those of the society studied. Those of our own are not questioned, they are even taken as the criterion for identifying what needs to be explained in the foreign culture. The explanatory vocabulary is automatically that of the North Atlantic. Thereby, basic norms of openness and fairness in intercultural communication are breached, and the hegemonic position of North Atlantic paradigms is confirmed. This unreflective representation in academic texts is a case of “subordinating objectification” (509).

Moral questions also derive immediately from this argument. The participant observer is unfaithful to the communicative interaction and shared experiences within the community. The dishonesty is that the participations

in the community and personal interactions are, finally, only instrumental. It is a practice of

“joining them in the field and betraying them outside the field” (507).

Finally, the persons in the host community are not taken seriously, social roles and friendships are betrayed and the full meaning in the local life is sacrificed to a rendering in academic formats. In addition, van Binsbergen maintains, the ethnographer is dishonest to him/ herself. Authentic experiences of oneself may be ignored or denied. In the case of van Binsbergen’s experience as a Sangoma healer this was a vital observation, because he considered it betrayal of his own authentic experiences and the Sangoma worldview to practice the expected professional distancing in order to fit this Sangoma truth into an acceptable ethnographic format.

I will here investigate van Binsbergen’s argument only from the point of view of Philosophy of Science. For that purpose, I first try to locate the problems he raises within the range of issues addressed in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences. Van Binsbergen’s criticism raises in particular two kinds of issues. First, the problem of the outsider gaining access to, or understanding of, the meaningful behaviour of others. Within this problem domain, van Binsbergen accuses ethnographers of naive empiricism (regarding the status of fieldwork data and regarding possible distortions in framing cultural experiences in academic formats and vocabularies). The second problem area concerns the theoretical framework of the interpreter her/ himself. Within this problem domain, van Binsbergen accuses ethnographers of an uncritical attitude towards their own, North Atlantic knowledge practice and metaphysical assumptions. The first point relates directly to van Binsbergen’s moral complaint about Anthropology, the second relates to the knowledge-political complaint concerning the hegemonic attitude of North Atlantic academic paradigms.

In view of these problem domains, I ask the question whether the failings that van Binsbergen accuses Anthropology of are necessarily part of the discipline (and should thus lead to abandoning it), or can they be overcome by a more sophisticated practice of the discipline (and should thus lead to a repair operation). I am not concerned with the factual question of whether anthro-

pologists sometimes, frequently, or even always commit the crimes indicated. After all, van Binsbergen's argument does not build on such a factual statement but on the principled one that ethnography is a misguided enterprise.

*The possibility of a sophisticated cultural hermeneutics*

The issues of understanding cultural others in Anthropology can be placed in the general chapter in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences concerned with the interpretation of thought and action, the chapter of Hermeneutics. Such questions of interpretation become especially urgent when it concerns interpretation across boundaries of time (as in the historical sciences) and culture (as in Anthropology). In how far, and with what methodological precautions, is such interpretation possible? In how far will our own vocabularies, agendas and paradigms always distort results? And can such interpretations of the foreign, the 'other', really challenge our own theoretical and metaphysical assumptions? These questions have been discussed in highly interesting work in Philosophy, the Theory of History, and in the Theory of Cultural Studies. From these discussions I will tap to assess van Binsbergen's argument.

A preliminary observation is necessary here. For interesting discussions of these fundamental methodological questions we have to turn to the philosophically more sophisticated discussions on the Social Sciences and History. Such discussions take seriously the fact that acting human beings, the objects of study, are themselves interpreting their own actions, and do so within a specific historical context of action. We cannot understand their action without grasping the interpretations that actors themselves have of their situation. This self-interpretation of social actors raises the issue of the 'double hermeneutics' involved in doing Social Science. The academic analyst interprets human action, but the action cannot be understood without, again, interpreting the self-interpretation of these actors. It does not suffice to explain human action from a purely third-person point of view, referring to objective factors such as calculable benefits, dangers, and possibilities in the situation. We need to trace how the actors themselves perceived these

benefits, dangers and possible courses of action. Thus, we have to recover the intentionality of the action, as we say in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences. Of course one can try to model human action and motivation, for instance by assuming that humans are use-maximalist or that they have a certain standard understanding of their world. This can often be a useful strategy for practical purposes and is used in much social science research, but it is a shortcut that avoids the difficult issue of reconstructing people's life-world and motivations.

Motivations and interpretations of actors are not directly assessable through observation. That makes Social Science a difficult science. The work to be done is hermeneutics, the reconstruction of the meaning of the action or ideas concerned through understanding the context of meaning, the life-world of the actors and (in the case of individual actions) the specific intervention that the person under study intends to make. Different strategies of hermeneutics have been tried. A basic difference concerns, for instance, hermeneutics conceived of as empathy, as a psychological identification with the actors concerned, or hermeneutics conceived of as the reconstruction of contexts of meaning, as an almost linguistic exercise.

Anthropological fieldwork is a hermeneutic technique. The immersion in the other cultural context which is pursued creates a very low threshold for gaining understanding, and the participation in actual interaction provides "a unique function of validation", as van Binsbergen calls it, because the appropriateness of the interpretation is immediately put to test in actual social action and communication. At the same time, van Binsbergen warns that it is naïve to assume that fieldwork therefore results in unproblematic and reliable data and interpretations. Despite anthropological techniques, the paradigms, assumptions and biases of the fieldworker who is coming from a different society cannot be blotted out. The questions of getting a good grasp of the data and of attaining sufficient fit of ones interpretations with the data are still on the agenda. The unavoidable constructive activity of the observer makes that the validity of the fieldwork results cannot be assumed. Van Binsbergen's conclusion is that, finally, validation

"cannot be done without involving them",

i.e. the actors.

I make two observations at this point. First I would note, contrary to van Binsbergen, that this kind of hermeneutics is not basically a moral issue. Trying to recover people's interpretations and swapping between the roles of participant and analyst (insider and outsider) is not wrong as such. The whole idea of studies across cultural boundaries can be viewed as an attempt to move, in some way, understanding of social or mental phenomena from cultural context A to context B (say from the Azande to Western Europe). This exercise may involve for the investigator playing different roles in A and B. But it is symmetrical in the sense that an investigator from context A would have to make similar moves, but then starting from the other side, when investigating cultural context B.

The hot issue in understanding across boundaries is the quality of the understanding, namely the issue how we can be sure that our interpretations actually fit the meanings of action and ideas of the actors themselves. In Historiography this problem of "fit" appears for instance in the problem of 'anachronism'. We easily make sense of observations by projecting our own mode of understanding onto the data. Sometimes such an interpretation can clarify a range of other phenomena and thus seem a successful explanation. Nevertheless, it will still be deficient if the interpretation assumes on the part of the actors information, understanding, concepts or motivations that they could not possibly have had. Just like historians applying anachronistic interpretations, investigators of culture may apply interpretations to cultural actors that they could not have shared.

Thus, the issue in studies of culture is if the interpretation finally produced by the analyst can plausibly "fit" with that of the actors. The historian Quentin Skinner provides a sophisticated discussion of this problem in his famous article "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas". Skinner notes that approaching the material with preconceived paradigms is both inescapable and dangerous. It is inescapable, for instance, because of the vantage point, and the linguistic, theoretical and problem contexts from which the observer engages in the research. There is, for instance, always a tendency to apply one's own familiar criteria of classification and discrimination. The observer

"may 'see' something apparently ... familiar ... and may in consequence provide a misleading familiar-looking description" [Tilly 1988, 45].

Also,

“the observer may unconsciously misuse his vantage point in describing the *sense* of the given work” [Tilly 1988, 47].

According to Skinner, there may always be different interpretations rendering the facts, however, these should at least be compatible with what the meaning of the action could have been for the actor. Thus, there is a strong negative requirement, namely to

“exclude the possibility that an acceptable account of an agent’s behaviour could ever survive the demonstration that it was itself dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself” [Tilly 1988, 48].

Notions, ideals and motivations etcetera that were not available in the context of action of the agent cannot have been part of his motivation. He states the positive equivalent of this requirement as:

“any plausible account of what an agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing” [Tilly 1988, 48].

This “in principle” is vital especially for the historical sciences. It cannot be more than a hypothetical test to what the motivations or views of the agent could at all have included.

In another formulation, Skinner states that:

“no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done” [Tilly 1988, 48].

Interestingly, Skinner’s criterion for an acceptable interpretation gives the objects of research the right, in principle, to respond, to speak out. Although, like in the case of history, this is a hypothetical response, there is some ‘speaking back’. Skinner seems to indicate here requirements for a hermeneutical approach that avoids the criticisms of naïve empiricism that van Binsbergen directs at Anthropology. This suggests that Anthropology can, at least in this respect, in principle be repaired. In Action Research approaches to Social Science this element of ‘speaking back’ of the agent, the check of the investigated actors, is given a central place.

The second problem domain in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences which van Binsbergen addresses is that of the status of North Atlantic theoretical and metaphysical frameworks. Van Binsbergen accuses Anthropology of uncritical acceptance of such frameworks. Again, my discussion is limited to the question if such uncritical acceptance is inherent in the discipline and again my conclusion is that with a more sophisticated hermeneutical approach the weaknesses of Anthropology may be repairable.

In order to present a more sophisticated version of Social Science, I refer to the interesting views of who may be called the father of modern hermeneutics, namely Hans-Georg Gadamer. In his view of hermeneutics, Social Science is necessarily a self-questioning tradition, a process of self-reflection, of attaining self-knowledge. At the same time, however, the specific historically and culturally situated character of Social Science knowledge is not something that can be overcome, because it is part of our human condition.

In Gadamer's view, any hermeneutics necessarily involves a "Vorverständnis" (a pre-understanding) by the interpreter of the object. Again, because this Vorverständnis changes over time (if only through the results of academic works of interpretation, but also because of cultural and political processes of change), hermeneutics is, finally, a never ending process. Hermeneutics throws light on the object of research in ever new ways, from an ever shifting starting position. Hermeneutics in this philosophical form is an exercise of always redefining our relation to the historically (or culturally) 'others'. In this sense, it is an indirect way of questioning ourselves, of attaining self-knowledge.

The history of the anthropological study of "traditional systems of thought" may illustrate that Anthropology may learn something from Gadamer and that investigations in the Vorverständnis involved would have helped. One can think here, for instance, of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl who analysed the difference between 'primitive' thought and science in terms of the mental make-up of the humans involved. Or of E.E. Evans Pritchard whose final assessment of the knowledge system of the Zande people, in his famous study *Whichcraft and Oracles among the Azande*, is that Zande thought is not based upon fact, as, supposedly, Western science is. Or of Robin Horton's assessment of indigenous knowledge systems as being 'closed', i.e. not aware of different knowledge systems and not exposed to a process of criti-

cism, as supposedly Western science is. In its own hyperbolic way, this history of western theorizing tells more about shifting views of Anthropologists about themselves than it tells about the others, the ‘primitives’. Part of the implicit *Vorverständnis* is a constantly shifting conception about what Western thought or Western science is. From Lévy-Bruhl's idea of Western man with a scientific mental make-up, to Evans Pritchard's positivistic idea of science as based upon fact and Horton's Popperian idea of science as critical rationality. It could be noted that subsequent developments in Science Studies, which stress the social construction of knowledge, again suggest different interpretations of the thought of cultural others.

This example confirms van Binsbergen's accusation of anthropologists' uncritical acceptance of North Atlantic paradigms. However, it also shows that a more critical, hermeneutical approach to Social Science that takes note of Gadamer's reflections upon hermeneutics would include a clearly self-reflective element. So again, my conclusion is that the failures that van Binsbergen indicates are not inherent in the discipline. Anthropology may at first sight seem a one-sided process of subjecting others to one's interpretations, it seems possible, however, to practice a hermeneutically sophisticated Anthropology which involves both dialogical elements in advancing interpretations and a self-reflective attitude towards Western paradigms.

### *The Challenge of Intercultural Knowledge Production*

The previous argument addresses van Binsbergen's conclusions as to Anthropology. However, it does not yet do justice to the broad and challenging problematic which he advances so forcefully, namely the future of intercultural knowledge construction. Even when we conclude that Anthropology as a discipline does not need to be discarded on methodological grounds, then it could still be valid to argue on other grounds that we need to advance to new forms of knowledge production which better fit the present globalised intercultural world. Van Binsbergen's effort to table the issue of the production of knowledge about culture (as well as his related attack on the idea of cultures as distinct units of analysis) is a very important one. On the one hand, in studies of culture we are still struggling with a complicated colonial heri-



tage, and on the other hand contemporary processes of cultural globalization cry out for strengthening of the cultural impact ('cultural citizenship') of intellectuals in the South.

In van Binsbergen's account, the road towards truly intercultural knowledge production involves replacing Anthropology by Intercultural Philosophy, thus substituting a communicative knowledge practice that avoids asymmetries for a naively inductive and hegemonic one. This is a challenging, revolutionary project which raises question both about the knowledge practice that is deserted, namely Anthropology, and about the one adopted, namely Intercultural Philosophy. I will conclude by making a few remarks about both.

I would suggest that intercultural knowledge production today requires both Anthropology and Philosophy. Anthropology in sophisticated hermeneutical forms as illustrated above, but also Anthropology-expanded. This need for expansion derives from a concern with the political economy of knowledge, rather than with epistemological, political and moral criticisms as raised by van Binsbergen. We have to raise questions about who produces knowledge, where, addressing what questions, and in the framework of which projects or objectives? From this point of view, anthropological studies should be conducted by both Northerners and Southerners, locating the studies both outside and within the North Atlantic and contributing with their studies to critical assessments of views held in their own cultural context. Such an expanded agenda for Anthropology involves what could be called a counter-Anthropology which may focus on the North Atlantic, and/or may be practiced by those from outside the North Atlantic. As such this is not so new. Studying pockets of Western societies with anthropological methods, even anthropological studies of scientific research communities, are already being done, and contribute much to a more realistic understanding of the West and of science. The importance of a focus on the political economy of knowledge production is that a renewed and truly intercultural knowledge production cannot be expected without addressing the incredible global imbalances, in terms of dominance of Western paradigms as well as in more material terms of who produces knowledge and discourses, where and in what social and cultural environments. With almost all centres of knowledge production located in the North Atlantic, the cultural biases observed by van Binsbergen in Anthropology may simply be repeated in the

new discipline of Intercultural Philosophy.

With a more sophisticated anthropological practice as a first leg of intercultural knowledge production, and counter-Anthropologies as the second, then Intercultural Philosophy may be the third. But what is this thing Intercultural Philosophy?

For van Binsbergen, the prime attraction of Intercultural Philosophy is that it is basically a communicative, dialogical form of knowledge production. It does not involve the model of the subject gaining knowledge about the object. Philosophy seems to be based upon interaction and equality. Such statements about Philosophy tend to be highly idealistic, as if suddenly power-free communication reigns if we pretend to be philosophers, and as if we can rise above the violence, commercial interest and manipulations which shape the world of discourse and power. To seek the advantages of Intercultural Philosophy in that direction would certainly be mistaken. However, Philosophy is a different form of discourse from the Social Sciences, where reflexivity about such methodological problems such as acquiring knowledge and representation of knowledge in the framework of theories (van Binsbergen's two basic methodological criticisms of Anthropology) receive all attention. Furthermore, the basic form of interaction in Philosophy is discussion, which may facilitate better the dealing with knowledge-political issues. Hegemonic positions and cultural biases, which certainly will always be there, will more easily be challenged in Philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The assessment of van Binsbergen's argument in this paper suggests some

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<sup>1</sup> Two questions relating to Intercultural Philosophy remain unaddressed by van Binsbergen. First of all, it remains unclear how the Intercultural Philosophy can include empirical studies. Philosophy being the discipline that addresses presuppositions as well as consequences of empirical studies, but not being an empirical discipline itself. Second, van Binsbergen did not explain why a new type of Philosophy, Intercultural Philosophy, should be invented to be the vehicle of intercultural knowledge production. Given his own argument that "Cultures do not exist", it does not seem to make sense to speak of 'intercultural' as if cultures exist as identifiable units. Rather, we would need regular Philosophy sensitized to addressing issues of cultural difference.

diversion from his own conclusion. His epistemological, knowledge-political and moral arguments do not force us to discard Anthropology all together. Rather, a hermeneutically more sophisticated and self-reflective Anthropology is called for. At the same time, van Binsbergen's greater objective of establishing a truly intercultural knowledge production can itself be strengthened by considerations about the political economy of knowledge production. Intercultural knowledge production requires that the actual production of cultural knowledge is democratized and 'decentered' all over the globe. This is a necessary basis for counter discourses and for a challenging Anthropology, or counter-Anthropology. Finally, it remains unclear in van Binsbergen's argument in how far Intercultural Philosophy can actually do the job of replacing Anthropology and include empirical study of culture. The argument in this article suggests that a much greater role of Philosophy (Intercultural Philosophy if you like) is called for in intercultural knowledge production. Firstly in order to put conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues much more in the forefront of discussions than is presently the case, and secondly in order to foster communicative modes of knowledge which can make knowledge production about culture itself an intercultural exercise.

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## ENTRE LE MARTEAU ET L'ENCLUME

Ou la dialectique *être proche / faire des analyses* dans la recherche du terrain

par Julie Duran-Ndaya Tshiteku

*ABSTRACT. The privilege of knowledge has long been a privilege of the western world. Renowned anthropological scientists have produced insights that are recognizable to Africans, but ever so often these scientists have used theories and methods conceived in a world that is utterly alien to the world they studied. The writer of this article is an African woman who sees no option but to use the same methods and theories, since they constitute the standard of quality in scientific work. In this connection, the challenge is to avoid habitual methods like interview and participant observation. Although these methods are common in the western scientific world, they are appreciated as violently intrusive by African subjects of study. From an African perspective, these methods impose upon the interrogator a sense of obligation towards his interviewees that is most often left unredeemed. By contrast, the method used by the present author is often plain conversation, underlining the equality of researcher and her empathy with the research subjects. In such encounters there is no sense of superiority; they are facilitated by the fact that, in this case, the researcher and the researched share the same roots. Such highly personal methods, however, pose the danger on the one hand that the researcher may become too involved with the research subjects, or, on the other hand, that she may be exposed and accused of hypocrisy. Yet the conversational method advocated here may go some way to solve the African researcher's dilemma of wanting to be accepted by the intercontinental scientific establishment and, at the same time, staying faithful to her own people that are the subjects of the research.*

*MOTS CLE: Ethnologie; méthodologie et concepts des scientifiques, dilemme du chercheur autochtone*

J'ai choisi délibérément dans le titre de mon intervention les termes marteau et enclume. Je l'ai fait ainsi pour faire ressortir la difficulté que j'ai eue lorsque la possibilité m'a été présentée de faire une thèse de doctorat en ethnologie. Pour une chercheuse autochtone dans cette discipline il n'est pas aisé de trouver une méthodologie adéquate permettant de saisir les transformations sociales, objet de mon étude pour laquelle j'ai pris comme cadre les

femmes congolaises lettrées qui deviennent membres d'un mouvement religieux.

Ce tiraillement sur comment fonctionner dans un cadre scientifique occidental en restant congruente avec moi même se traduit dans une constatation faite par l'anthropologue néerlandais Arie de Ruijter dans la revue *Internationale Samenwerking* (1999), suivant laquelle même si l'idée de la hiérarchie de la culture a été abandonnée depuis l'époque coloniale, beaucoup de scientifiques européens, inclusifs des anthropologues pensent toujours avoir le privilège de la connaissance. Surtout lorsque les africains commencent à penser comme eux, alors tout ira bien avec eux. L'idée de me réaliser sujet des attentes complexes m'étranglait. Il me fallait fonctionner dans la tradition des recherches ethnologiques, avec certaines méthodologies et certaines exigences d'objectivation avec des concepts que je n'oserais pas prétendre maîtriser. Et même si je les maîtrisais, je n'oserai pas les utiliser sans me faire violence. Bien sûr qu'écrire une thèse de doctorat est un processus de transformation mais l'idée de transformation signifie surtout devenir ce qu'on est. Ce qui était aussi le leitmotiv de mon étude sur ma culture, en marchant dans les traces des différents penseurs qui ont fouillés avec beaucoup d'efforts, dans des conditions parfois difficiles les mécanismes d'idées éloignées en vue d'obtenir des données et puis de les objectiver dans certaines formes des traditions théoriques et des méthodes scientifiques.

Grâce à ces savants, les réalités africaines sont devenues perceptibles et les africains peuvent même se reconnaître dans beaucoup de discours. Mais il y a aussi des écrits qui présentent certaines facettes de cette culture comme quelque chose de puérile, y adjoignant des connotations négatives comme on peut le lire dans leurs yeux. En effet différents scientifiques africains (Mudimbe, Buakassa, Houtoundji) ont reproché à leurs pairs occidentaux et à leurs acolytes autochtones d'étudier la réalité africaine au travers des lunettes des théories et méthodes confectionnées dans des contextes étrangers, parfois hostiles et ayant une aversion à l'égard des peuples qu'ils étudient. Mudimbe par exemple dans ses récusations amorcées dans *l'autre face du royaume* et poursuivies aussi bien dans *l'odeur du père* que dans *'the invention of Africa'* présente l'ethnologie comme une science coloniale, née et au service de la colonisation, incapable, de part ses préjugés et son processus de production, de fournir une compréhension adéquate de la société africaine. Ces échos se retrouvent aussi chez J.M. Ela qui dénonce l'aliénation et

l'étroitesse des concepts fondamentaux utilisés par les sciences sociales occidentales pour rendre compte des formations sociales de l'Afrique.

Tous proclament un changement de discours, pour reprendre l'expression de Kizerbo, un changement de l'instrument linguistique de connaissance et de production scientifique, car

'la dépendance commence par le verbe'. Mudimbe demande aux africains de 're-analyser les appuis contingents et les lieux d'énonciation, de savoir quels nouveaux sens et quelle voie proposer à nos quêtes pour que nos discours nous justifient comme existences singulières engagées dans une histoire, elle aussi singulière';

afin de ne plus penser par procuration ou de ne plus rechercher ce que Mudimbe a appelé 'la filiation spirituelle et méthodologique'.

Ces constatations des penseurs africains traduisent bien le dilemme dans lequel je me suis trouvée et surtout l'idée d'être prise en sandwich. Mais les discours des spécialistes africains se limitent souvent au niveau des protestations et des contestations. Il existe toujours un vide théorique effroyable qui ne cesse de se creuser chaque jour davantage. La dépendance économique oblige de s'aligner dans un certain ordre. Un proverbe néerlandais ne dit-il pas *wiens brood men eet, diens woord men spreekt*.<sup>1</sup>

Devant ce vide conceptuel et aussi vu l'absence d'un cadre africain privilégiant la promotion des recherches et des connaissances, comment ne pas être une amphibie, participant à la communauté des savants et porteuse de l'influence de ma propre forme culturelle? Comment écrire un livre qui vaille la peine sans être accusée de trahison? Et puis que faire de mes souvenirs personnels? Ma première source de connaissance n'est-elle pas la maison de mon père? Les savants font une distinction entre la perspective interne émique et celle savante 'étique' qui est l'objectivation de la réalité des autres. Comment faire la lecture d'une autre vie comme si la mienne n'était pas tout à fait parallèle?

Dans cette intervention j'aimerais montrer les solutions qu'une telle étude m'a forcée de rechercher dans l'accès à l'information et leur analyse.

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<sup>1</sup> Littéralement: 'On parle la parole de celui dont on mange le pain'; c'est-à-dire, on ne peut pas s'exprimer avec toute liberté dans une situation de dépendance économique, sociale, ou mentale.

*L'accès à l'information*

J'avais des raisons très personnelles pour vivre de l'intérieur un mouvement charismatique des femmes congolaises. Je pensais qu'avec certains atouts comme être congolaise, ayant différents éléments socioculturels (la maîtrise des plusieurs langues du Congo, la participation à certaines pratiques de solidarité patriotique, la conscience de la manière dont les relations se construisent et s'entretiennent, la connaissance de la façon dont les femmes congolaises communiquent) et armée de mon expérience d'il y a quelques années auprès des tziganes à Bruxelles. Mais étant donné que cette recherche concerne les problèmes ayant trait au domaine des forces occultes, il fallait être prudente car il s'agit là des questions appartenant à la sphère de ce dont on ne parle en milieu congolais qu'avec des personnes très familières en qui on a confiance. Car, lorsqu'il s'agit du *kindoki*, comme je l'ai vécu dans la maison de mon père, c'est une porte ouverte de demander à quelqu'un '*crois-tu à la sorcellerie?* L'obligation de se montrer évoluée intervient et pousse à ce qu'on réponde négativement, pendant qu'un nœud se forme dans les tripes et qu'on est pris à la gorge.

Et puis les accusations de sorcellerie créent des ruptures qui se reproduisent de génération en génération entre les familles, les habitants d'un village, les voisins, les amis.

Consciente de tout cela, je savais qu'il y avait aux Pays-Bas et à Bruxelles différentes communautés congolaises de prière. Je savais aussi comme je l'ai vécu parmi les tziganes qui m'appelaient soit '*gadgot*' soit '*petite dame chocolat*' qu'il y avait parmi les ressortissants congolais en Europe une dichotomie langagière, séparant les gens qui prient et ceux qui ne prient pas *bato ya lusambo* (les gens qui prient) *batu ya mokili* (les gens du monde). Ceux qui prient nomment ceux qui ne prient pas les gens du monde, les païens. Ce qui est une manière de créer des barrières et la limitation des fréquentations. On doit être identifié comme membre d'un groupe localisé pour être accepté.

Et puis il y a une méfiance entre les congolais due aux actions relatives au contrôle de la véracité des histoires racontées par les migrants à L'IND<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Service d'Immigration et de Naturalisation', branche de l'administration étatique néerlandaise avec rélevance particulière pour les Africains vivants en diaspora.



(*Immigratie en Naturalisatie Dienst*) lors de leur demande d'asile aux Pays-Bas. Les Congolais qui sont actifs dans la société néerlandaise sont considérées comme des agents d'information dont la tâche consiste à vérifier les motifs politiques de la migration donnés par ceux qui se disent poursuivis politiquement au Congo.

En étant consciente de ces obstacles, je souhaitais fonctionner normalement et c'est pour cela que j'ai opté pour l'expérimentation. Entre 1998-2002, j'ai commencé à suivre assidûment mes copines aux activités de leur communauté religieuse aux Pays-Bas et en Belgique. Je ne me suis pas d'abord présentée comme chercheur parce que je ne voulais pas subir un traitement spécifique. Un tel statu pouvait me faire courir le risque de glisser vers des comportements subjectifs de la part de mes copines, c'est à dire, infléchir d'une manière consciente ou inconsciente la manière de parler. Je me comportais comme membre du groupe, en participant autant que possible aux diverses situations de la vie de mes compatriotes adeptes du mouvement religieux, en partageant les repas, les boissons, la musique, les danses, les soucis, en rendant des services. Grâce à ma maîtrise du néerlandais, je jouais des rôles d'interprète auprès des écoles et des crèches, en écrivant ou en traduisant des lettres, auprès des tribunaux, lors des accouchements.

C'est à travers des causeries qui ont eu lieu dans ces différentes situations que j'ai récolté le matériel nécessaire pour écrire mon livre.

### *Pourquoi les causeries*

L'importance de la communication en anthropologie a été largement signalée par différents africanistes comme Wim van Binsbergen et Johannes Fabian. Fabian (1990: 4) insiste dans la majeure partie de ses travaux sur la primauté du dialogue sur l'observation comme il l'indique dans l'extrait ci-dessus:

'Je reviens sur ma réflexion convaincante que l'ethnologie est essentiellement et non accidentellement communicative et dialogique; conversation et non l'observation doit être le moyen de conceptualiser la production des connaissances ethnologiques'.

Mais lorsqu'on survole la littérature ethnologique au sujet de la méthodo-

logie de recherche, on a l'impression que l'interview et l'observation participante sont les outils les plus utilisés par les chercheurs dans leur récolte des données. En même temps bien d'africanistes se disent réellement intéressés à connaître les personnes des sociétés qu'ils étudient. C'est pour cela qu'il arrive même que les ethnologues se marient avec une femme autochtone pour pouvoir fonctionner comme une personne normale. Mais comment peut-on connaître une personne en adoptant une technique de communication qui est associée dans sa culture à une interrogatoire devant le tribunal? Comme si il était question d'une torture. Le terme même '*pourquoi*' qu'on emploie souvent dans ces types de contact met l'interlocuteur sur la défensive.

Par l'interview, non seulement on ne se rend pas compte qu'on fait violence, mais aussi que s'installe une dette et ce dernier point est écœurant.

Dans les pays du tiers monde le blanc est associé à l'aide. Les africains pensent que les aéroports occidentaux foisonnent des bienfaiteurs, qui attendent de les prendre en charge de suite qu'ils ont franchis les bureaux de l'immigration.

Sans que celui qui interviewe s'en rende compte, il laisse flâner l'impression d'être investi d'une mission de redresser la situation de ceux qu'il interroge; un peu avec un air '*je vais vous débrouiller ça!*' L'européen est considéré comme représentant du monde civilisé, qui rapportera à sa société la vie médiocre des gens qu'il étudie afin qu'elle soit améliorée. Récemment, lors d'une journée d'étude organisée au centre d'études africaines F. de Boeck présentait un interview fait à Kinshasa dans le cadre de son nouveau livre *The possibilities of the impossible: Kinshasa and its heterotopia* (2004). La réponse de son interlocuteur, un écrivain congolais, selon laquelle 'la ville appartenait à chaque homme de bonne volonté' trahit les attentes voilées dans ses mots. Ainsi je voyais défiler devant moi les souvenirs de mon enfance et mon travail dans les organisations de développement. Où j'ai vu des chercheurs et des coopérants au développement, armés des papiers, des caméras, des enregistreurs, des boîtes de sardines et de *corned beef*, posant des questions sur la vie, mettant l'interviewé sous une pression insupportable ou s'adonnant à l'observation participante comme s'ils s'amusaient avec la réalité des autres pour finalement partir et ne plus rien laisser entendre d'eux.

Mon étude concerne la souffrance des autres, des femmes qui contrairement à moi-même ont des problèmes de réalisation de soi. Qui suis-je pour

encore les agresser dans ce qu'elles sont en empruntant des façons pour extraire l'information qui humilient d'avantage? J'ai choisi de causer (*kosolo-la*) avec mes copines. Causer c'est être en plein dans la réalité congolaise. Les causeries (*masolo*) mettent l'accent sur le désir de vouloir se connaître réellement à travers l'interaction au sein de laquelle l'égalité et la notion d'empathie (Rogers 1968) sont au centre. La causerie insinue que l'entretien est un échange entre une ou plusieurs personnes au sujet des vécus respectifs; au cours duquel on se raconte des choses sans sentiment de supériorité.

Ces causeries n'étaient pas programmées d'avance et je n'avais pas à l'esprit une structure précise pour les diriger. Et puis il ne s'agissait pas du simple jeu question/ réponse, mais une interaction qui valorisait au moins psychologiquement la position des personnes et donnait le sentiment de reconnaissance et non l'installation du gêne.

Je n'ai rien noté en présence des personnes, sauf lorsque les circonstances de la participation à l'initiation l'exigeait. De même que je n'ai enregistré que lorsque cela était possible lors des rencontres publiques.

C'est lors de ces causeries et les différentes communications que j'ai pu rassembler différents récits des femmes, leur motif d'adhésion et leur histoire sociale.

Il est certain que cette manière de travailler demande un grand investissement de temps et qu'elle présente plusieurs dangers. Il y a d'abord le danger d'enracinement. J'ai la position de luxe d'avoir des contacts réguliers avec mes compatriotes et de fonctionner incognito. Ces contacts ne se limitent pas seulement à la recherche. Mais les moments les plus délicats sont ceux au cours desquels on est obligé de prendre position comme lorsque j'ai été malade et que je devrais me faire soigner par le mouvement que j'étudiais. Bien que je pouvais bien me projeter dans la vie des autres, je ne partageais pas les solutions qu'on leur proposait. Le danger d'enracinement peut être solutionné par un bon encadrement familiale et académique.

Et puis il y a aussi l'hypocrisie qui pourrait être attribuée à cette manière voilée de faire les recherches. Mais l'hypocrisie est assez vite découverte et peut avoir des conséquences désagréables pour le chercheur. Des exemples de scientifiques qui ont été chassés de leur terrain sont légions.

Ce qui est important dans mon choix de l'expérience d'adhésion et les causeries, c'est d'abord le désir de connaître, puis de savoir que les personnes sont respectées dans leur être et surtout de ne pas avoir créé des attentes.

*L'objectivation et ses pièges*

Comme on l'aura remarqué dans la partie ci-dessous mon étude à une large dimension ethnographique empirique. Il n'est pas seulement un travail d'archive. Mais pour comprendre les entendements des autres les académiciens ont créé des exigences. Il y a des règles d'interprétation qui stipulent le recours à des concepts analytiques comme points de repères pour tout travail qui se veut scientifique. C'est en partant de l'interprétation des données du terrain dans la lumière des différentes terminologies que se sont créées des arènes pour les débats, chacune avec une orientation particulière pour renseigner.

Comment interpréter mes données en partant de l'opposition faite par les savants occidentaux entre ce qu'ils nomment le sens commun et le sens savant fut un grand obstacle. Le sens commun est présenté comme interne, c'est à dire, les petites idées autochtones, emiques, liées à la manière dont les personnes expliquent leur chose en s'inspirant des codes de leur culture construite par l'histoire; et le sens savant c'est l'étiq, les grandes idées des savants occidentaux modernes. Mais comme l'écrit Olivier de Sardan (1989: 127-135) les concepts qu'ont produit les académiciens pour faire leurs analyses sont issus de leur propre contexte culturel, en partant d'une compréhension empirique du réel fondée sur les catégories perceptives et cognitives qu'ils partageaient avec ceux qu'ils observaient. C'est alors évident que ce sens savant ne peut être qu'ethnocentrique, avec des représentations subjectives. Ma tension s'est développée entre ces deux tenants construit comme une conjuration ayant comme objectif de me faire peur et de m'éloigner de ma propre réalité, avec ma sensibilité locale et des idées que j'ai reçues comme idéologie. Utiliser sans critique les concepts me semblait alors une trahison, une tentative de m'éloigner de ma culture.

Et comme mon étude concerne les transformations sociales et a comme cadre un mouvement religieux, je vais montrer un exemple, inspiré de mon récent séjour de travail à Kinshasa, ma lutte avec les concepts et la manière dont je l'ai résolue.

*Conversion, syncrétisme ou repentance?*

Lorsqu'on survole la littérature sur la naissance des mouvements religieux en Afrique, on a tendance à utiliser comme concept analytique les terminologies syncrétisme et conversion entre guillemet de Horton (1971, 1975), en invoquant le système d'étage dans la structure de la pensée africaine, la cosmogonie lié au microcosme et Dieu associé au global, de même que la continuité et la discontinuité du noyau cognitif du mode de pensée des africains. La conversion de Horton a lancé la communication entre différents observateurs des cultes syncrétiques africains,<sup>3</sup> chacun s'est positionné surtout sur l'aspect d'oscillation de tout genre des sujets africains se butant aux ouvertures des horizons et qu'à travers la religion apparaissent des nouveaux types de structure d'autorité, des nouvelles sociabilité, des nouveaux systèmes économiques et aussi les couches plus profonde dans les nouvelles idées sur l'homme et la femme. Beaucoup de choses ont été dites dans ce débat, mais même des années plus tard j'ai difficile à intégrer les termes conversion et syncrétisme comme concept analytique dans la réalité que j'ai rencontré. Ces mots contiennent quelque chose de religieux là où suivant nos observations la dimension 'religieuse' des mouvements religieux congolais n'est qu'apparence. Ce qui est essentiel c'est ce que devenir adepte est une transformation qui exige qu'on incarne les nouvelles attitudes et les nouveaux comportements dans la vie quotidienne.

*Exemple: la transparence des revenus de la femme*

En milieu rural congolais la division du travail est telle que dans le foyer, l'homme et la femme ont chacun des rôles pour assurer le bon fonctionnement du ménage. Ils sont complémentaires et collaborent dans la production des biens de consommation. Par exemple l'homme doit assurer l'habitation et certaines dépenses de luxe comme l'achat de la viande et de l'immobilier.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Peel 1968a, 1968b; Fisher 1973; van Binsbergen 1981; Geertz 1986; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991 – en particulier, chap. 6, 'Conversation and Conversion', pp. 243-251; Ranger 1993, etc.

La femme produit certains vivres, avec des activités agricoles et du commerce (N'Dongala: 1982: 191). Une femme qui n'est pas productive est déconsidérée.

La littérature signale même que la femme avait un grand rôle économique. Van Wing rapporte que dans les sociétés pré coloniales, la répartition des tâches était telle que c'était des femmes que dépendait la réussite économique, familiale et sociale du foyer. L'expression consacrée aux femmes dans la société Kongo met bien en valeur cela. Elles furent appelées *mbongo muntu* ou créatrices des richesses (N'Dongala 1980: 381).

Je l'ai mainte fois constaté dans mon entourage, les femmes ont d'habitude leurs propres biens (élevage, produit des champs ou autres activités commerciales) dont elles peuvent disposer à leur grés. Si la femme vend le surplus de ses produits de champ ou de son petit élevage, l'argent que cela lui rapporte et qu'elle noue dans une corde/ poche en dessous de ses pagnes autour de ses reins est son argent. Elle en dispose à sa manière comme par exemple acheter les ustensiles de cuisine. L'homme ne se mêle pas de l'argent de la femme et ne s'ingère pas dans ses affaires. D'ailleurs un homme congolais qui s'immisce dans les affaires des femmes est considéré comme un sous homme.

Mais dans les ménages dits modernes, et en occurrence en milieu urbain, un ménage idéal est celui où le fonctionnement de la maisonnée dépend du salaire de l'homme, chef du ménage. Il doit rapporter de l'argent 'frais' qu'il gagne grâce à ses activités. Les femmes, surtout les femmes lettrées ont appris dans les écoles missionnaires qu'il faut rester à la maison pour plier les chaussettes du mari. L'achat des vivres est l'affaire de l'argent que son mari lui donne. Mais les femmes sont actives et gagent de l'argent d'une ou d'une autre manière qu'elles cachent bien dans leurs soutiens. Les époux congolais n'ont pas l'habitude d'avoir des comptes en banque communs dans lesquels l'homme et la femme peuvent s'approvisionner. Même si la femme gagne quand même quelque chose, l'homme doit donner l'argent à son épouse pour l'achat de la nourriture et subvenir à tous les autres besoins du foyer. Lorsqu'il manque à ce rôle, la femme peut acheter les vivres dans son absence, les préparer, manger avec ses enfants et laver les casseroles. L'argent que gagne la femme, elle le considère comme n'étant pas essentiel au fonctionnement du foyer.

Les femmes congolaises sont très entreprenantes et ont actuellement un

pouvoir économique qui dépasse celui des hommes depuis le délabrement du système administratif congolais. Lors de ma récente visite à Kinshasa (juillet-août 2004), capitale grouillante du Congo, j'ai eu différentes causeries avec le couple Kalima, tous les deux conseillers conjugaux dans un groupe charismatique. D'après L. et N. Kalima,  $\frac{3}{4}$  des conflits qui leur sont soumis par les couples qui viennent chercher l'aide dans leur groupe de prière ont comme sujet l'argent. Les femmes ont plus d'argent que les hommes. Les ménages qui dépendaient en grande partie de la rémunération que les hommes recevaient comme employés des bureaux sont dupes des habitudes congolaises. Beaucoup de travailleurs congolais sont aujourd'hui impayés. Ils utilisent les bureaux pour parler de la politique pendant que les femmes sont actives sur les marchés et osent prendre des risques.

Dans un livre collectif publié sous la direction de Théodore Trefon (2004), l'article de A. Nzeza Bilakila (33-45) aborde une des dimensions de cet entrepreneuriat féminin remarquable dans la capitale congolaise. Les femmes passent des journées au port (*beachi*), voyagent partout au dessus des camions pour chercher des produits à revendre. L'apparition des nouvelles destinations de commerce comme les voyages vers Dubaï et la Chine pour se procurer de la marchandise est visible par les produits de l'orient vendus dans des petites boutiques qui sillonnent la ville; côtoyant les montagnes d'immondices et des sachets en plastic. C'est d'ailleurs pour montrer les obstacles à cet entrepreneuriat féminin que le chercheur congolais Thierry Nlandu souligne le danger des conflits armés sur l'activité commerciale des femmes. A cause de l'insécurité et l'incertitude provoquées par la guerre, les femmes ne voyagent plus ou restent longtemps hors de leur foyer.

Les femmes ont pris le dessus dans plusieurs ménages congolais. De leur revenu dépendent des dépenses pour le paiement de la location, l'achat des parcelles, l'envoi des enfants à l'école etc... Tâches normalement réservées aux hommes. Dans cette situation de renversement de rôle, disait madame Kalima, l'argent de la femme est devenu indispensable à la survie du ménage. Mais cette situation crée un déséquilibre et des tensions parce qu'il est anormal que la vie du ménage dépende de la femme quand elle est mariée et son mari est présent.

Les hommes dans ce type de situation et ils sont nombreux au Congo, ont un complexe d'infériorité parce qu'ils ne supportent pas d'être considérés comme des 'sous hommes', des '*mario*', terme qui est un métaphore

d'un homme qui vit grâce au confort offert par une femme. Mais les femmes ont surtout tendance à cacher leur argent et ne pas le montrer à leur mari, attendant que celui-ci entretienne le ménage sans qu'il en ait les possibilités. Certaines femmes qui sortent leur argent pour faire des dépenses dans la maison regardent leur mari avec dédain et le considèrent comme un vaurien.

Ce changement des rôles demande qu'on éduque les femmes et les hommes à ne pas considérer leur situation comme anormale comme me l'a assurée L. Kalima. L'extrait d'une prêche que je reproduis ici montre la manière standard dont on enseigne aux femmes de se conduire envers leur mari:

qu'il soit petit et toi grande, donne lui du respect, que tu aies le papier (entendre permis de séjour) et lui pas, donne lui du respect...

*Ndenge toza awa na, ça peut arriver que muasi nde azosala, mobali asalakate. Yo muasi ozotinda bongo epa na bino, sans koyebisa mobali nayo. ba réponse oza kopesa kaka ya mabe.*

Comme nous sommes ici, ... ça peut arriver que c'est toi la femme qui travaille, l'homme ne travaille pas. Toi la femme tu envoies l'argent chez toi sans dire à ton mari. Les réponses que tu lui donnes sont seulement mauvaises...

Que ça soit toi qui paie le loyer, tu dois respecter ton mari.

Dans les enseignements qu'on donne aux femmes comme cette prêche, on insiste pour que la femme soit respectueuse, même si c'est elle qui a l'argent. Qu'elle mène un combat pour la transformation de ses anciennes habitudes. La transparence du revenu, au lieu de cacher l'argent dans les soutiens. Les femmes doivent savoir qu'on construit le ménage à deux, qu'elles doivent aider leur mari. Les propos d'une congolaise dans la revue *Amina* (juillet 2004: 66) montre cet appel à la transformation de mentalité:

'heureusement il y a en République démocratique du Congo de nombreuses femmes vertueuses qui aident leur mari.'

Actuellement les hommes congolais paient les loyers et achètent des maisons grâce aux enveloppes que leur présentent leurs épouses.

Lorsque je considère les différentes attitudes des hommes et des femmes congolais, comme présenter l'argent au mari, les autres genres de famille élargie, la soumission aux responsables de leurs groupes de prière, je préfère



utiliser comme concept analytique le terme repentance (*kobongwana*) que les Congolais utilisent eux-mêmes. Ce mot est proche du redressement, connu dans la société congolaise pour corriger les femmes qui sont renvoyées dans leur famille par leur mari suite à leur mauvaise conduite dans le ménage. Elles sont considérées comme ayant subi une mauvaise éducation et doivent être rééduquées. Le terme repentance a alors un rapport avec la resocialisation comme redressement de conduite. Il y a ainsi une reproduction d'une réalité sociale vécue, comme ensemble des expériences et de mémoire sociale accumulées par les sujets et leurs expériences, dans l'histoire familiale et sociale.

*Conclusion: créer mes limites*

Ecrire une recherche est un processus de transformation et j'ai écrit au début de cet article que la transformation est un processus de devenir soi-même. C'est pour cela que je me suis donnée la liberté d'écrire ou de dire les choses de ma propre manière en restant dans les limites du compréhensible et au reconnaissable pour les congolais, en déployant un effort pour faire la paix avec la diversité des façons dont les êtres ont été vus et ont été considérés.

Créer son propre texte est un geste d'auto-libération. Mais j'ai conscience du fait que je dois essayer de m'émouvoir en prenant la liberté devant les conventions de la tradition africaine et les conventions scientifiques. L'astuce a consisté à naviguer entre ce que les académiciens nomment l'éthique et l'émique, sélectionner les termes qu'il vaudrait mieux utiliser et utiliser ceux que les autres rejettent pour construire et parler de la vie des autres. Ce jeu des limites se construit parfois d'une manière impensable. C'est une recherche de la congruence avec moi-même. Dès lors je ne me gêne pas de devoir me défendre.

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## La dialectique *être proche / faire des analyses* dans la recherche du terrain

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READING WIM VAN BINSBERGEN'S RECENT BOOK  
*INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS*

by René Devisch

*ABSTRACT.* The author offers a critical though sympathetic assessment of Wim van Binsbergen's recent book *Intercultural Encounters: African and anthropological lessons towards a philosophy of interculturality*. Realising that van Binsbergen's argument hinges on a passionate critique of the academic reification and estranging formalisation of cultural others, the author has chosen the greatest possible informality and intimacy for his own address: that of a personal letter as among friends. He understands the book as replete with multi-layered and multi-centred Janus-like texts, journeys and undertakings, in which the sustained field-work experience of over three decades is combined with an emergent intercultural politics of knowledge – taking issue with the sacrosanct positions of anthropology as well as with the political correctness governing North-South intercultural debate. A specialist in Central African religion – notably divination – himself, the author recognises his own ethnographic and analytical struggles most in van Binsbergen's chapters dealing with Southern African tablet divination and the ecstatic cult. A kaleidoscopic short review of twentieth century philosophy brings the author to recognise both the resonances in van Binsbergen's work, and the missed chances, especially those of linking up with feminist and Lacanian approaches. Suggesting that the book's struggle for 'intercultural encounters' aims at a sharing of the sciences at the borders, and at the linking of borders on the intercultural plane, the author advocates the psychoanalytical-artistic work of Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger as a further road ahead.

*KEY WORDS.* border, border linking, Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, critique of anthropology, divination, feminist philosophy fieldwork, *Intercultural Encounters*, intercultural philosophy, Janus, Lacan, multi-centredness, multi-layeredness, scientific knowledge

Leuven, 22 March 2004

*Dear Professor van Binsbergen, dear colleague, my dear friend Wim,*

I hope that by addressing you this letter rather than a scholarly essay I might better live up to the spirit of your most innovative writing in *Intercultural Encounters*. Is a letter to a dear friend not a genuine mode of encounter? In

reading your path-breaking *magnum opus* I have relived the rich exchanges that we have shared over the past years. Itself an expression of a deeply ethical intercultural commitment, your book interweaves, in very subtle ways a number of poignant issues regarding the intercultural encounter and its elucidation. First, your work reflects a sustained effort to rethink the constitutive grounds of your hermeneutic-philosophical endeavour. This endeavour is, second, revealingly placed in confrontation with your passionate ethnographic sensitivity that resonates with the sociality, numinous powers, inventive governance and healing arts displayed and deployed by your many hosts. Third, the work gives full expression to your lucid, postcolonial interrogations regarding our ethnocentric blockage vis-à-vis open-minded intercultural encounter and science-sharing – whether in academia or cyberspace – between and across North and South and South and North. You thus invite us, as colleague anthropologists and philosophers, to rethink, in and from a multicultural variety of social scenes and epistemological presuppositions, our by definition limited and biasing modes of understanding reality and representation, meaning and agency, and culture and power, as well as space, place and time (or locality and belonging, identification and history).

Let me confess at the start how much I am both intimidated and fascinated by your *oeuvre*. And allow me to speak quite frankly in expressing my hope that my letter to you, dear friend Wim, may soon find itself enfolded somewhere in your book and thereby, I presume, escape the oblivion that might befall an all too sketchy scholarly essay relegated to the shadow of your fifteen solid chapters. Your relentless quest, chapter after chapter, to elucidate and theorise where you stand and from which perspectives and neo-colonial contexts of inequality you might speak, is part of your ethical positioning in the North-South encounter. All too much simplification and ethnocentric disfigurement has already occurred in the discourse that the North has shamelessly formulated with regard to the South. And in the present-day world context of both the wars of the sciences and increasing global interdependence accompanied by massive asymmetry, it is undoubtedly only the qualities of friendship, political solidarity and lucid expertise, such as yours, regarding anthropology's or philosophy's presuppositions and proper conceptual spaces, that might possibly offer the expatriate-anthropologist or -philosopher a legitimate forum for intercultural dialogue.

*1. First let me try to formulate how I understand your philosophical-cum-anthropological epistemic endeavour*

As announced by its cover drawing, your book is replete with multi-layered and multi-centred Janus-like texts, journeys and undertakings. These unfold in a spiralling movement between multiple scenes and voices that witness to various modes in which African societies develop, systematise and share knowledge in and through their world-making.

On the one hand, I as a reader am dazzled by your sharply designed and incisive debates (particularly in chapters 2 to 4, 9, and 12 to 14) regarding the opposition between endogenously heuristic perspectives and ethnocentric or exogenously imposed epistemes, whether in Africanist ethnography or intercultural philosophy. Your witty discussions range in focus from R.A. Mall to Mogobe Ramose's *ubuntu* philosophy, or move from reflection on Emmanuel Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement to analysis of Information and Communication Technology. Spurred by Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, your chapters 7 and 15 aim at re-designing some of Africa's knowledge contribution, in particular that of geomancy, to Global Cultural History. Again and again you put forward a lucid socio-political macro-analysis of post-colonial and post-apartheid Africa. Throughout, your book forcefully un-masks many sexist, gender-biased, racist and patriarchal power constellations and hegemonic modes of world-making as they are reflected, in particular, in the Centre-Periphery inequalities in internationally accepted knowledge production, or in the modernist disregard for the numinous, for human frailty, or for the paradoxical and the heterogeneous. And, you cannot but acknowledge that an unprejudiced polylogue has not yet gotten off the ground between, on the one hand, western-borne modern science (whose development owes much to the sciences of other civilizations) and, on the other, authentically non-western, civilisation-specific epistemes and sciences. Among the latter one thinks of Amerindian, Arabic-Islamic, Bantu, Persian, Ayurvedic, Hindu or Han-Chinese sciences, and other elaborate knowledge systems that entail diverse geometries and mathematics, each of them based on partially heterogeneous metaphysical assumptions regarding nature, the universe, time and logic.

On the other hand, I very much cherish your chapters successively dealing with

- shrines and saints' cults in northwestern Tunisia,
- Nkoya girls' puberty rites in western-central Zambia,
- tablet divination
- and with *Sangoma* in Francistown and across Botswana and South Africa.

These chapters vividly transmit something of the haunting unruliness and muddled intersubjective transferences – and in particular of the fleshy and seductive or at times disempowering intercorporeity – that typify the ethnographic encounter, as well as the physicality of knowing as a continuous becoming.

I confess, dear Wim, that your traineeship and practice as a *sangoma* deeply challenge me. I cannot help but surmise that you consider me, a hybrid ethnographer-psychoanalyst, as a disembedded and unfulfilled Africanist scholar. Yes, unlike cult initiates and healers such as yourself, I am as yet unable trans-subjectively, and hence intercorporeally, to bind myself, or for that matter the afflicted others who occasionally seek my help in Kinshasa, with the ancestral or healing cult spirits. I find myself capable only of poetically evoking the spirit realm of my Yaka hosts in southwestern Congo, and am not enabled to link up existentially with the most potent 'invisible realm', namely that of *ngoongu*, which I – all too romantically perhaps – depict in my writings on the Yaka as their primal maternal life-source, which ceaselessly and rhythmically oozes from the womb of the earth. Could we perhaps imagine the 'invisible' in Bantu cultures as the ever virtual? Moreover, would not the invisible and cunning realm of nameless ghosts (seemingly involving an imaginary similar to that of the North-African realm of *djiins*), imbricating as it does with the more institutionalised ancestral and cult spirits, be best understood as setting out the primordial axioms of a people's life-world? In the popular life-world of the Yaka, ghosts and spirits namely appear as the great organising unsaid. Through their cunningly unsettling effect on people's dreams and moods, spirits and ghosts – it appears to me – to a great extent offer people an imaginary space to externalise whatever is frustrating and alienating. Yet they thereby create an in-between or virtual, as yet unthought-of, space for exploring ever-new conduct.

Nonetheless, your endeavour by no means represents a surrender to a



romantic or *New Age*-type of escape away from globally accepted scholarly standards in the social sciences. It is preoccupied, rather, by the very humbling question confronting any social scientist, namely: in which domains do the models of the social sciences and philosophy make our worlds more predictable, first, and second, more communicable and consensual on the intercultural level?

Your book maintains a spiralling Janus-like tension between the contradictory impulses at work in the intercultural encounter envisaged by the social scientist: it reflects, on the one hand, the pull towards clarity of thought and, on the other, the more empathic fascination for the inexpressible, invisible, and hence numinous. Yet your work, perhaps in line with more classical anthropological traditions, aims at establishing a reliable point of view and a trustworthy hermeneutic, or even at achieving a voice of scholarly authority if not with regard to truth then to some ultimate nature of our social worlds. On the one hand, you are calling towards ever greater discursive scrutiny and polylogue in intercultural philosophy while, on the other, you share with us your intimate involvement with Nkoya puberty initiation, with fieldwork as initiation (in your novel *Een buik openen – Opening a belly*), as well as with initiation into divinership (which you describe in your *Becoming a sangoma*, chapter 5). Here, your highly sensorial, hence sensual, metaphoric depiction of such initiations, seen both as something *produced* and as an *affective weave embracing you*, is perhaps most genuine there where it conveys to us the Bantu mediumnic divination and healing arts. Unlike an objective sociological analysis, your sensual metaphoric and self-engaged depiction does not entail that the empathic anthropologist obnubilates what it is intersubjectively and intrasubjectively that his or her sentences report or discuss. On the contrary, such open-minded depiction lies perhaps at the very heart of the most valid form of intercultural encounter between the participant anthropologist and the host community. Indeed, the latter transferentially negotiates, produces and reciprocally corrects a real story, which then is simultaneously locally and transculturally relevant. Such mutually entrusted anthropological 'story' critically investigates and discloses – primarily from within the community's rationale but nonetheless for an external audience – the community's genius in the production and self-correcting of a reliable social knowledge, in brief, in world-making. From here, I would radicalise your intercultural endeavour and argue that all valid knowledge,

including science, is first of all local or site-specific knowledge, before it can be shared interculturally on a larger, and thus more dislocated, scale by means of a polylogue across heterogeneous epistemes. Across the globe, communities or networks generate intellectuals – some of whom we may call informal intellectuals – who seek self-critically to uncover their world, life and society along genuine and potentially most insightful lines.

## *2. Let us then revisit your ethnographic fieldwork*

Dear Wim, am I fair when I sense in your book some ambivalence vis-à-vis ethnography? You quite evidently favour minute ethnographic specificity. Although you are tired of superficial and spectacular empiricism and a fetishisation of the local, you nevertheless urge your ‘local’ scientific interlocutors – be they African or Asian, Flemish or Zambian scholars, to debate and theorise until a consensus is achieved via clearly-defined analytic tools.

Although your at times very loquacious book and your introspective confession espouse to some degree your own society’s televisual conditions of social reality production, and comply to the mere text-bound production of highly-coded and extravert knowledge in North-Atlantic academia, your acute visionary sense, however, constantly struggles to untie these very text-bound, if not socio-culturally specific, intersubjective and discursive conditions of knowledge production. Beneath these resistances that I sense, to my mind the basic question that your book poses is this: in which fields exactly does fieldwork occur? In other words, in which intersubjective and trans-world spheres – partly nondiscursive – of drives and desire, memories and longings, power relations and shifting identities, numinous presence and delusions, does the ethnographic participant observation of initiation and divination, healing and trance-possession, for example, occur?

Radical feminist post-structuralist and post-Lacanian approaches – such as those advanced by Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Gail Weiss and Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, who break with Lévi-Strauss’ and Lacan’s so-called phallogocentrism – depict the largely non-representational and nondiscursive fields of intercorporeity and intersubjective encounter as unruly fields of *forces*. Fits of undirected and multisensory empathy, abet-

ted by shifting consensual and dialogical  *finesse*, can be said to make the encounter, and not least the encounter envisaged in anthropological, intercultural, fieldwork. The notion of forces is understood here both in the Freudian sense of impulse (want, desire, *drift*, *Trieb*) and in line with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the sensory and affective relational body. Unlike the Lacanian notion of desire, 'forces' evoke the embedding in the *flesh* of affects, wants and imaginaries. The French notion of *con-naissance*, literally co-birth, renders the sensuous intercorporeal and responsive encounter and comprehension so dear to you, Wim, much more aptly than the all too cognitively-oriented concept of knowledge. Your chapters on Nkoya puberty rituals and *sangoma*, in particular, demonstrate how much the encounter unfolds as a complex transferential and counter-transferential embroidery of approval or disapproval, information or exclusion, affection or rejection. Such encounter, based on the participants' embodied intersubjectivity, forges and re-forges their affects, old and new imageries, sensitivities and intimate memories, just as it does the anthropologist's insider's understanding of local idioms, conventions and practices.

Seen from this post-structuralist and post-Lacanian perspective, the 'real' is what the subject (such as the participant anthropologist) experiences and imagines as a relevant event, a piece of information, an intent. The 'real' arises out of both a libidinally-driven and a discursive transactional setting of fellow-subjects who share some *con-naissance*. According to Kristeva, the 'real' in an intersubjective encounter, such as the one that produces well-grounded intercultural knowledge, is more akin to Lacan's co-implicating orders of "the *real*, the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*", rather than to the empiricist's nude *facts*, depicted as they are by the inductive sociological account of their observable constituents and plots. Moreover, the bifurcation between the contingent (singular, place-bound) experiential, on the one hand, and the time-based (historical) discursive individual consciousness, on the other, constitutes perhaps the crucial founding moment of modern philosophy. It enabled the reduction of the real to forms of consciousness, experience and mental attitudes (subjectivity and agency) that underpin identity, meaning, process and history.

You yourself have been able to escape being seduced by a modernist historical perspective and the notion of the great universal river of western science inasmuch as your Africanist experience has led you to contest the

very basis of much modern thinking regarding what constitutes both the purity, impartiality and universality of scientific research. Indeed, your anthropological work is witness to that predilection of African societies to favour people's multi-sited knots, webs and weaves as the very tissue of becoming, rather than focussing on temporal developments or the subject's autonomy across the march of time. Becoming is then the process of spatialisation or localisation of transformation, articulation and embedding that a subject traverses across the space of existence. Life in Central Africa is a becoming, an intercorporeal, intersubjective and trans-world weaving of the threads of life.

*3 . Your intercultural encounters aim, it would appear to me, at a sharing of the sciences at the borders and at the linking of borders on the intercultural plane*

Though moved by sociology's founding desire to know the nature of social and political reality from the site-specific perspective of the collective actor, your book profoundly problematises ethnography's classical status insofar as it has been defined as a window on the real and the Other. Indeed, you have been a most committed fieldworker. Anthropological fieldwork in Africa, and the scholarly reporting it is assumed to produce, entail major dislocations or shifts from the centrality of the interactional or the verbal and the observable, to the transactional, the interior and the invisible. In these shifts, such as they occur in your various ethnographic fields, you have been led to impersonate some of the generative symbols and values that mobilise the intersubjective co-implication at play in the host group's leadership models as in their hermeneutic devices or mediumnic divination and healing. With regard to the anthropological report, you again and again allude to the detours imposed upon us in anthropological or philosophical writing. Indeed, classical-academic dissertation urges us to cleanse our text of all traces of unruliness, puzzles and doubts, chaotic desires, anxieties, subjectivity, and those transferential and invisible phenomena which are so much at play in our fieldwork. But, as you demonstrate, an ethically committed anthropologist cannot *a priori* exclude from the intercultural encounter whatever ap-

pears to be at odds with hegemonic modes of scholarly knowledge production. Entrenched in intercultural encounter, your book's horizon is beset by a host of concerns, of which I will here attempt to sketch only three.

An initial concern that underlies your writing is this: how can vital world-making practices of particular communities or networks – such as the cult of saints, puberty initiation rituals, tablet divination, initiatory healing (of, say, deeply depressed initiands), as well as communitarian modes of decision-making or sharing responsibility – breed in rhizome-like ways as webs or matrices across linguistic, cultural, intellectual and socio-political borders? In particular, can or should the compassionate anthropologist espouse the distress or the beauty, hence the dignity and numinous inspiration, of the host by way of a becoming part of himself or herself?

In spelling out another concern of yours, I rely heavily on Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger's (1999, 2000) grasp of matrixial border-linking. This concern might be posed as the question under what transactional conditions and along which intersubjective and epistemological tracks may an intercultural encounter yield a truly trans-subjective and transmuting border-zone that would allow for some measure of an in-depth border-linking of culture-specific knowledge practices? Such border-linking is neither a mere hegemonic or counter-hegemonic modality of colonising border-crossing, nor the postulate of a third or hybrid space of 'interbeing' or becoming-the-other. Your book again and again interrogates your readers as to the conditions under which a genuine intercultural encounter might come to unleash a dialectic and full accreditation of transsubjective and transmuting border-linking. How does the encounter yield a self-critical yet non-colonising knowledge-sharing that is able to move beyond the endless stereotypes to which alien societies and ways of life so easily fall prey? Such processes of science-sharing or knowledge-sharing perhaps entail the mutual acceptance that civilisation-specific sciences are to some degree society-bound institutional crafts seeking to unravel indices of quality of being and clarity of knowledge in parallel with the quests for reason and truth.

I know from our many encounters how much you are concerned with looking back from your African experience at your native society and the habitus of North-Atlantic scientists. Like you, I wonder whether the anthropologist returning home to the North, and perhaps embracing psychoanalysis or intercultural philosophy, is able precisely to unravel the unthought or

deeply suppressed in mainstream North-Atlantic consciousness, namely that which escapes the slipstream of ongoing scientific research? Is it not the particular role of anthropology and intercultural philosophy to privilege what French semiologists, such as Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, have labelled as *signifiance*, in referring to processes of interactional and fluid meaning production that move beyond rigidity, known grounds and simulacrum? Such anthropological attention attuned to the intercultural encounter, both away from and back home, may thus come to grasp and endorse the as-yet-unthought-in-thought, the ever virtual as well as the ceaselessly unfolding and indeterminable, polymorphous fields of *connaissance* and intersubjectivity that so inevitably evade the snares of institutional power and the predefined tracks of knowledge.

Indeed, intercultural research may examine, for example, how emotions, knowledge or inequalities of power, as well as conceptual patterns of truth, help, crisis, pain, redemption or normalcy, and their opposites, are articulated in culture-specific ways. In the border-zones in-between communities or networks, to put it in Deleuzian terms, both difference and inventiveness are favoured in their own right, as they are manifested in such phenomena as ecstatic pilgrimage, cult initiatory identity, feminine hospitality or the healing cults. On a more daily basis, affective expressions such as tears of sharing loss, laughter and humour all yield intercorporeal energy and explore such border-zones. Here, one is situated in a fold of inter-being, of unstable body-self morphing, of inventing and inhabiting multiple subselves, of ties and places of sharing confidence or strategic resistance.

### *Conclusion*

You will have perceived, dear Wim, how the many journeys and shifts in your work have led me to rethink the anthropological endeavour and its research methods and theory. Many of your points have certainly brought me further along rhizome-like hermeneutic tracks towards more lucid intercultural border-linking. You have left us a most rich, colourful and dense intellectual embroidery, and this work is an important scholarly legacy. I thank you so much for having associated me in this celebration extending a new lease of life to *QUEST*, and hope that our exchange may become even more

challenging and rewarding.

*Van harte* – Cordially,

Renaat

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## ***Reviews Section***

SAMUEL OLUOCH IMBO, *ORAL TRADITIONS AS PHILOSOPHY:  
OKOT p'BITEK'S LEGACY FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY*

Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002, xxi + 181 pp. (ISBN 0-8476-9772-X)

A Review by Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo

Okot p'Bitek is amongst Africa's best known authors, although as Samuel Oluoch Imbo laments,

“the full influence of his legacy has not been appreciated, ...his views on important philosophical issues remain unexplored” (xviii-xix).

Yet p'Bitek's efforts of linking poetry and everyday living to philosophy could benefit contemporary discussions in African philosophy. In his aim of revamping and generating more interest in p'Bitek's views, Imbo has no doubt used his efforts resourcefully. The text not only locates p'Bitek's views very well within African philosophy, but will also provoke and stimulate African philosophers to search for African philosophy in oral traditions as well. Though the author heavily relies on p'Bitek's *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, *Africa's Cultural Revolution*, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, his other essays are representatively discussed. Therefore, in reading *Oral Traditions as Philosophy* one gets a holistic purview of p'Bitek's views.

In the debate regarding the nature of African philosophy, the so-called professional school would *prima facie* find the title of Imbo's text somewhat inappropriate. On the other hand, upon reading the text, ethnophilosophers would be very uncomfortable with it because of its emphasis on logos. However, the novelty of the text lies within this enigmatic stance. The ethnophilosophers are discredited for having imposed visions of what Africa is, whereas the professional philosophers are castigated for being myopic and

restrictive in their definition of philosophy (18). Imbo adapts a middle way in the antagonism.

In Chapter two, Imbo ably supports p'Bitek's controversial position that Western assumptions about what constitutes the philosophical, the religious and the spiritual is inappropriate in African contexts. Using Luo tales, Imbo argues that the narratives are best apprehended by a holistic approach that sees the spirits, the living, and the unborn as members of the same extended family. The reader is cautioned that the experiences of African life are impossible to meaningfully parcel out into these disparate pigeon holes (44).

Chapter three discusses the Western assumption of privileging the written over the spoken, of denying that the spoken word can sustain analytical and rigorous philosophical dialogue. Imbo in supporting p'Bitek's view *mutatis mutandis*, postulates that the spoken word plays an important role within philosophy and as a result

“the discipline of philosophy must become porous enough to let in wordsmiths such as poets, novelists and storytellers” (49).

The question of “What is a Text?” is also addressed. Here, Imbo explicates the weakness of the logocentric view that cordoned off the realm of text to exclude everything except writing. According to Imbo the realm of texts includes the oral as well as material culture, such as textiles, sculptures and masks (51). At any rate, as p'Bitek asserts,

“a song is a song whether it is sung, spoken or written down” (47).

Imbo is emphatic that

“Western prejudices prevent a rose by any other name from smelling just as sweet” (60).

He therefore advises,

“it is more fruitful to realize that the oral stories are just a means of transmitting the culture's rigorous intellectual traditions. Philosophy is the extraction of meaning from the accounts of the oral traditions. That extraction is made richer by the admission of oral traditions as texts” (68).

The chapter on “Roles for Women in African Oral Traditions” is refreshingly novel and would confound most so-called African feminists. The ques-

tion that Imbo grapples with is:

“Are oral traditions inherently misogynistic. Or do they merely lend themselves invariably to misogynistic interpretations?” (72).

A perusal of the chapter reveals that Imbo thinks that it is the latter. Though the role of women is ambivalent, he cautions that one should not lose sight of the fact that the central role of African traditional culture is the promotion of social harmony and the provision of a framework for interpreting real biological differences as making men and women different and equal. Therefore, any theorizing on any issue in traditional Africa ought to begin with a firm planting of both feet in African traditions (89). This, according to Imbo, is the mistake of the feminist movement and it is for this reason that African women are reluctant to describe themselves as feminists.

Chapter five is based on one of p’Bitek’s favorite themes: “Western Scholarship and African Religions”. According to Imbo, p’Bitek’s position is that philosophy and religion are inseparable in traditional Africa, and anyone who wants to understand traditional African ways should observe the ordinary person in the village. The folly of anthropologists and missionaries was that they looked for African metaphysicians and theologians for answers (93). The reader is also told that p’Bitek’s other quarrel with Christianity is the manner in which it was introduced in Africa. Its introduction ruled out dialogue, yet dialogue presupposes the ability and a willingness of all involved to listen to each other. This scenario resulted into intellectual smuggling even amongst African nationalists and intelligentsia –

“they surreptitiously imported alien themes and concepts into African context and then claimed these...as indigenous to Africa” (100).

The problem involved in translating Western concepts into African languages is discussed in Chapter six. Imbo explicates some of the problems that p’Bitek encountered in translating his works. Imbo then offers some principles that would lead to a good and fairly representative translation. In Chapter seven, Imbo agrees with p’Bitek that Westerners have distorted the authentic African selfhood. The views of Frantz Fanon, Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye on African selfhood are also explored. Imbo then presents what he thinks is the only meaningful interpretation of the idea of an African personality (149-150). In the last chapter, Imbo poses the question: “What

do we do now?" Borrowing from Ngugi wa Thiong'o, he believes that

“the Devil, who would lead us into the blindness of the heart and into the deafness of the mind, should be crucified, and care should be taken that his acolytes do not lift him down from the cross to pursue the task of building Hell for the people on Earth” (153).

In this endeavor, Imbo singles out the African philosopher. Since philosophy has been ably employed in the African continent as the handmaiden of ideology, the African philosopher has a special political responsibility of addressing the imbalance created by the past (and the present) practice of philosophy.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter of the text, its potential readership is indeed wide. The book is meant not only for African and Africanist scholars, but it would interest African political leaders both in Africa and the diaspora. Western scholars who have the interest of Africa at heart will find the book to be an indispensable companion. The manner in which the ideas are presented and the book written is refreshing, even to those who may be familiar with the ideas.

## TED HONDERICH, AFTER THE TERROR

*Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, Pp. vii + 160*

A Review by Lansana Keita

The attack on the New York Trade Center that took place on the eleventh of September 2001 was an event that shocked a great number of people. On account of the lives lost in spectacular fashion and the massive damage to property much ethical debate has ensued. And indeed, given that ethics is one of the central planks in the enterprise one would expect that some philosophers would venture to offer elucidating analyses. Ted Honderich's *After the Terror* is such an example.

In a brisk style somewhat reminiscent of Hume's *Enquiry* Honderich appraises the interesting moral questions raised by September 11. Honderich's analysis is provocative and would no doubt raise many heated ethical questions. Honderich's thesis is this: there are good lives and bad lives. Good lives are lives that last longer and is one of the list of goods that characterize good lives. The others have to do

“with freedom and power of various kinds, to which can be added safety. There is also respect and self-respect, and private and public relationships with others, and the satisfactions of culture, including religion and diversion” (5).

Honderich also tells us that

“more of these five great goods is better than fewer of them, and more of each one is better than less” (5).

According to Honderich the major ethical problem facing the world and instantiated by the terror-inspiring events of September 11 is how to improve the quality of bad lives. According to Honderich bad lives are lives that are so short that they may be characterized as half lives, quarter lives and “under

fives” for those children that die under the age of five primarily on account of economic privation. For Honderich, individuals who live full lives inhabit for the most part the nations of Western Europe and North America, and those that live bad lives are found principally in nations such as Malawi and Mozambique. Honderich instantiates this fact by pointing out the vast disparity between average incomes of those who lead full lives and those who lead half lives and less. The comparison is between \$24, 000 and \$200.

Recall that Honderich’s task in his text is to mount an

“inquiry into terrorism and ourselves, although one brought on by the shock of September 11, 2001 when all television sets were present for the killing” (10).

His first query concerns the easy assumption on the part of those who might want to argue that the cause of terrorism as exemplified by September 11 is economic privation. Honderich points out that the terrorists did not originate from the countries with the lowest comparative incomes but from a set of nations whose average income approximates \$4, 000. Did it have to do with pride or religion? (15).

But regardless of relative economic privation or other cause, Honderich argues that the terrorist acts of September 11 cannot be supported by any moral argument whatsoever. For Honderich the acts themselves achieved no positive end and more importantly flouted what may be taken as an *a priori* principle of human existence, the principle of natural morality of humanity. As he put it:

“One true reason why the killers of September 11 rightly have our revulsion is that they violated the natural fact and practice of morality” (117).

This is the basis on which Honderich founds his theory of ethics, an ethics that rejects other ethical theories such as libertarianism and liberalism. Both theories cannot have a universalist reach for all of humanity because they are not anchored on the fundamental principle of ethics for humans—the principle of humanity.

What follows from this assumption is this: although the violent act of September cannot be justified a moral responsibility must be borne by those whose omissions are causally linked to the existence and persistence of bad lives in the world. It is the positive obligation of those who lead good lives, acting on the unavoidable principle of humanity,

“to change the world of bad lives, and not just to make more terrorism against us less likely. The first is our greatest obligation, but it is fortunate that the two go together” (147).

But according to Honderich the good lives are nourished by capitalism and as a result are

“ignorant, stupid, selfish, managed and deceived for gain, self-deceived and deadly” (147).

The solution is to appeal to our moral intelligences and thereby embrace the principle of humanity. This principle of humanity is what leads to the reciprocal recognition of the universal human desire for the six great goods (153). A less than a full embrace of such is to resort to half methods such as charity. Honderich writes:

“Charity is a refuge from obligation, something like Sartre’s bad faith” (152).

We are also told that the recipients of the acts of specious obligation can see

“what we have done to them, and what we are doing to them. So our question of what to do, and also their question of what to do—neither of these will ever go away” (153).

The central issue posed by Honderich’s text is how to reconcile two important theories of contemporary ethics, that of the principle of humanity according to which all human agents are intrinsically of equal moral worth hence equally worthy of being regarded as ends in themselves and not means to other ends, and that constructed on the principle of utility. This latter principle is the assumption on which utilitarianism with its attendant dilemmas of “the greatest satisfaction for the greatest number” and “the maximization of expected utility, “ in the form of theoretical neoclassical economics is founded. And neoclassical economics in practice is what we call capitalism. According to Honderich the practioners of capitalism

“as business persons are self-interested and seem to have no general *moral* principle at all. Nothing that is true to the basic stuff in the natural practice of morality” (140).

Appealing to the principle of utility – as capitalism – for a causal explanation of September 11 leads us to a world where economic considerations are of paramount importance in the political behavior of nation states. In the

imbroglio that produced September 11 human beings have been reduced to mere chips on the game board of *Realpolitik*. Yet the players themselves are human beings, much to the dismay of those whose ethics is founded on a principle of humanity rather than on “no general *moral* principle.”

And this is the argument implicit in Honderich’s thesis. His portrayal of those who endure bad lives is so stark that it leaves little scope for agency on the part of such persons. Is there a hint of an unintentional paternalism on the basis of an unrecognized exaggeration? Consider the facts that the vast number of abortions in the West are undertaken for economic reasons thereby leading to the claim that millions of potential lives of unknown quality are lost and that the vast disparity of per capita incomes in the areas of less than full lives is mitigated somewhat by communitarian considerations and free agricultural produce (in rural areas in Africa fruit and vegetables are easily obtained at very little cost).

Given his critique of capitalism and the recognition that the agents of September 11 targeted one of the symbols of world capitalism, one would have expected Honderich in his prescriptions to have raised probing questions about the role of capitalist institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank in their creation of bad lives. A major task at hand for those want to transform bad lives is to bring effective political pressure for the transformation of institutions such the IMF and the World Bank. Yet there are limitations on what may be achievable by those who would want to “save people from bad lives.” The principle of humanity endorsed by Honderich as the basis for a human ethic is founded on the assumption on the intrinsic equality of humans as dispositional agents. In this connection bad lives can be transformed only by those who experience such according to principles of rational response. Such principles would include concerted political action in those areas where bad lives proliferate. The required political action would then lead to qualitative economic transformations on the part maximally of the affected agents themselves. Sending more NGOs or “donor money” are not much more than bad faith charity as a refuge from obligation, as Honderich might say.

September 11 woke up certain elements in the West from their dogmatic presuppositions about the West and the “Others.” But this awakening only provoked the bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq and an increase in the num-



ber of bad lives, as a kind of negative consequentialist morality. Honderich's *After the Terror*, on the contrary, is an insightful and alternative analysis and set of prescriptions about how to proceed.



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