



AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY, MYTH AND REALITY

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I must emphasize that my theme is **African philosophy, myth and reality**, whereas one might have expected the conventional formula, **myth or reality?** I am not asking whether it exists, whether it is a myth or a reality. I observe that it does exist, by the same right and in the same mode as all the philosophies of the world: in the form of a literature. I shall try to account for this misunderstood reality, deliberately ignored or suppressed even by those who produce it and who, in producing it, believe that they are merely reproducing a pre-existing thought through it: through the insubstantiality of a transparent discourse, of a fluid, compliant ether whose only function is to transmit light. My working hypothesis is that such suppression cannot be innocent: this discursive self-deception serves to conceal something else, and this apparent self-obliteration of the subject aims at camouflaging its massive omnipresence, its convulsive effort to root in reality this fiction filled with itself. Tremendous censorship of a shameful text, which presents itself as impossibly

transparent and almost non-existent but which also claims for its object (African pseudo-philosophy) the privilege of having always existed, outside any explicit formulation.

I therefore invert the relation: that which exists, that which is incontrovertibly given is that literature. As for the object it claims to restore, it is at most a way of speaking, a verbal invention, a *mythos*. When I speak of African philosophy I mean that literature, and I try to understand why it has so far made such strenuous efforts to hide behind the screen, all the more opaque for being imaginary, of an implicit 'philosophy' conceived as an unthinking, spontaneous, collective system of thought, common to all Africans or at least to all members severally, past, present and future, of such-and-such an African ethnic group. I try to understand why African authors, when trying to engage with philosophy, have so far thought it necessary to project the misunderstood reality of their own discourse on to such palpable fiction.

Let us therefore tackle the problem at a higher level. What is in question here, substantially, is the idea of *philosophy*, or rather, of African philosophy. More accurately, the problem is whether the word 'philosophy', when qualified by the word 'African', must retain its habitual meaning, or whether the simple addition of an adjective necessarily changes the meaning of the substantive. What is in question, then, is the universality of the word 'philosophy' throughout its possible geographical applications.

My own view is that this universality must be preserved - not because philosophy must necessarily develop the same themes or even ask the same questions from one country or continent to another, but because these differences of content are meaningful precisely and only as differences of content, which, as such, refer back to the essential unity of a single discipline, of a single style of inquiry.

The present chapter will therefore endeavour to develop the conclusions of the first two. In particular, it will attempt to show, first, that the phrase 'African philosophy', in the enormous literature that has been devoted to the problem, has so far been the subject only of mythological exploitation and, second, that it is nevertheless possible to retrieve it and apply it to something else: not to the fiction of a collective system of thought, but to a set of philosophical discourses and texts.

I shall try to evince the existence of such texts and to determine both the limits and essential configurations, or general orientations, of African philosophical literature.

The popular concept of African philosophy

Tempels' work will again serve us as a reference.¹ We will not summarize or comment upon it again but will simply recall the author's idea of philosophy, the meaning of the word 'philosophy' in the phrase 'Bantu philosophy'. More than once Tempels emphasizes that this philosophy is experienced but not thought and that its practitioners are, at best, only dimly conscious of it:

Let us not expect the first Black-in-the-street (especially if he is young) to give us a systematic account of his ontological system. Nevertheless, this ontology exists; it penetrates and informs all the primitive's thinking and dominates all his behaviour. Using the method of analysis and synthesis of our own intellectual disciplines, we can and therefore must do the 'primitive' the service of looking for, classifying and systematising the elements of his ontological system. (p.15).

and further

We do not claim that Bantus are capable of presenting us with a philosophical treatise complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our own intellectual training that enables us to effect its systematic development. It is up to us to provide them with an accurate account of their conception of entities, in such a way that they will recognize themselves in our words and will agree, saying: 'You have understood us, you know us completely, you "know" in the same we "know"'. (p.24).

It is quite clear, then: the black man is here regarded, in Eboussi-Boulaga's words, as the 'Monsieur Jourdain of philosophy'.² Unwitting philosopher, he is the rival in silliness of Molière's famous character, who spoke in prose without knowing it. Ignorant of his own thoughts, he needs an interpreter to translate them for him, or rather an interpreter who, having formulated these thoughts with the white world in mind, will accidentally drop a few crumbs which will inspire the Bantu, when he picks them up, with boundless gratitude.

We have already mentioned Césaire's criticism. That very necessary political critique, we said, stopped short because it failed to follow up its own theoretical implications. To aim cautious criticisms, 'not at Bantu philosophy, but at the political uses to which it is being put',³ was to avoid questioning the genealogy of the concept itself and to treat its appearance in scientific literature as an accident, as though its only function

were this very political one. It was, in fact, tantamount to shying away from an exposure of the profoundly conservative nature of the ethnophilosophical project itself.

It follows that not only **Bantu Philosophy** but the whole of ethnophilosophical literature must be subjected to an expanded and more profound version of Cesaire's political criticism. For if, as a result of what might be called the ethnological division of labour (a sort of scientific equivalent of the military scramble for the Third World by the great powers), Tempels can pass for the great specialist in the Bantu area, and if, too, his reconstruction of African 'philosophy' is the more sensational because of his one-to-one contrasts between this African pseudo-philosophy and an equally imaginary European philosophy,⁴ similar attempts have been made by other European authors for other regions of Africa. To quote only a few, Marcel Griaule has devoted to the Dogons of the present-day Republic of Mali a book currently regarded as a classic of Dogon wisdom, *Dieu d'eau*,⁵ followed by another, in collaboration with Germaine Dieterlen, entitled *Le Renard Pâle*.⁶ Dominique Zahan has made known to the world the religion, the spirituality and what he calls the 'philosophy' of the Bambara.⁷ Louis-Vincent Thomas has carried out painstaking research among the Diola of Senegal and has expatiated on their wisdom, their system of thought or, as he calls it, their 'philosophy'.⁸

As might have been expected, the example of these European authors has been widely followed at home. Many Africans have plunged into the same field of research, correcting on occasion - but without ever questioning its basic assumptions - the work of their Western

models. Among them is the abbé Alexis Kagamé of Rwanda, with his *Philosophie bantou-rwandaise de l'être*,⁹ already cited. Then there is Mgr. Makarakiza of Burundi, who published in 1959 a study entitled *La Dialectique des Barundi*.¹⁰ The South African priest Antoine Mabona distinguished himself in 1960 with an article entitled 'African philosophy', then in 1963 with a text on 'The depths of African philosophy' and finally in 1964 with a meditation on 'La spiritualité africaine'.¹¹ In this concert Father A. Rahazarizafy has sounded the note of the Great Island by trying to define Malagasy 'philosophy' in an article of 1963 on 'Sagesse malgache et théologie chrétienne'.¹² In 1962, François-Marie Lufuluabo, a Franciscan from the former Belgian Congo, appeared in the firmament with a booklet, *Vers une théodicée bantoue*, followed in 1963 by an article entitled 'La Conception bantoue face au christianisme', signing off in 1964 with another booklet on *La Notion luba-bantoue de l'être*.¹³ Then, in 1965, his compatriot, the abbé Vincent Mulago, devoted a chapter to African 'philosophy' in his *Visage africain du christianisme*.¹⁴ The former Protestant clergyman Jean-Calvin Bahoken, of Cameroun, was clearing his *Clairières métaphysiques africaines*¹⁵ in 1967, and two years later the Kenyan pastor John Mbiti, probably fascinated by his own childhood, revealed to the world in a now classic work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, the fact that the African ignores the future hardly knows the present and lives entirely turned towards the past.¹⁶

Before we go on with the catalogue, let us note that all the

authors we have just quoted are churchmen, like Tempels himself. This explains their main preoccupation, which was to find a psychological and cultural basis for rooting the Christian message in the African's mind without betraying either. Of course, this is an eminently legitimate concern, up to a point. But it means that these authors are compelled to conceive of philosophy on the model of religion, as a permanent, stable system of beliefs, unaffected by evolution, impervious to time and history, ever identical to itself.

Let us now turn to the lay authors, with, here again, only a few examples. We cannot but mention Léopold Sédar Senghor, whose chatty disquisitions on 'negritude' are often buttressed by an analysis of what he called, as early as 1939, 'the black man's conception of the world', a phrase which he later replaced, under the influence of Tempels, with the 'black metaphysic'.¹⁷ There are also the Nigerian Adesanya, author of an article published in 1958 on 'Yoruba metaphysical thinking',¹⁸ the Ghanaian William Abraham, author of a book which is remarkable in many ways, *The Mind of Africa*¹⁹ (I believe that a book can be instructive, interesting, useful, even if it is founded on erroneous assumptions); the late-lamented Kwame Nkrumah, whose famous *Consciencism* can hardly be regarded as his best publication,²⁰ the Senegalese Alassane N'Daw, who devoted several articles to the subject,²¹ the Camerounian Basile-Juleat Fouda, author of a doctoral thesis defended at Lille in 1967 on 'La Philosophie negro-africaine de l'existence' (unpublished),²² the Dahomean Issiaka Prosper Laleye, also the author of a thesis, 'La Conception

de la personne dans la pensee traditionnelle yoruba',²³ presented in 1970 at the Catholic University of Fribourg, in Switzerland; the Nigerian J.O. Awolalu, author of an article entitled 'The Yoruba philosophy of life'.²⁴ And there are many others.²⁵

Without being motivated quite so restrictively as the church ethnophilosophers, these authors were none the less intent on locating, beneath the various manifestations of African civilization, beneath the flood of history which has swept this civilization along willy-nilly, a solid bedrock which might provide a foundation of certitudes: in other words, a system of beliefs. In this quest, we find the same preoccupation as in the negritude movement - a passionate search for the identity that was denied by the colonizer - but now there is the underlying idea that one of the elements of the cultural identity is precisely 'philosophy' the idea that every culture rests on a specific, permanent, metaphysical substratum.

Let us now ask the crucial question: is this the usual meaning of the word 'philosophy'? Is it the way it is understood, for instance, in the phrases 'European philosophy', 'nineteenth-century philosophy', etc.? Clearly not. It seems as though the word automatically changes its meaning as soon as it ceases to be applied to Europe or to America and is applied to Africa. This is a well-known phenomenon. As our Kenyan colleague Henry Odera humorously remarks:

What may be a superstition is paraded as 'African religion', and the white world is expected to endorse that it is indeed a religion but an African religion. What in all cases is a mythology is paraded as 'African philosophy', and again the white culture is expected to endorse that it is indeed a philosophy but an African philosophy. What is in all cases a dictatorship is paraded as 'African democracy', and the white culture is again expected to endorse that it is so. And what is clearly a de-development or pseudo-development is described as 'development', and again the white world is expected to endorse that it is development - but of course 'African development'.²⁶

Words do indeed change their meanings miraculously as soon as they pass from the Western to the African context, and not only in the vocabulary of European or American writers but also, through faithful imitation, in that of Africans themselves. That is what happens to the word 'philosophy': applied to Africa, it is supposed to designate no longer the specific discipline it evokes in its Western context but merely a collective world-view, an implicit, spontaneous, perhaps even unconscious system of beliefs to which all Africans are supposed to adhere. This is a vulgar usage of the word, justified presumably by the supposed vulgarity of the geographical context to which it is applied.

Behind this usage, when, 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 everybody else. It follows that in such societies there can never be individual beliefs or philosophies but only collective systems of belief. The word 'philosophy' is then used to designate each belief-system of this kind, and it is tacitly agreed among well-bred people that in this context it could not mean anything else.

One can easily detect in this one of the founding acts of the 'science' (or rather the pseudo-science) called ethnology, namely, the generally tacit thesis that non-Western societies are absolutely specific, the silent postulate of a difference in nature (and not merely in the evolutionary stage attained, with regard to particular types of achievement), of a difference in quality (not merely in quantity or scale) between so-called 'primitive' societies and developed ones. Cultural anthropology (another name for ethnology) owes its supposed autonomy (notable in relation to sociology) to this arbitrary division of the human community into two types of society which are taken, arbitrarily and without proof, to be fundamentally different.²⁷

But let us return to the myth of unanimity. It would seem at first sight that this theoretical consensus postulated by ethnophilosophy among all members of each 'primitive' community should produce a parallel consensus, at the level of results if not of methods, among all ethnophilosophers studying the same community. But, curiously enough, instead of an ideal consensus, a fine unanimity whose transparency would have revealed the spontaneous unanimity of all those 'primitive philosophers', ethnophilosophical literature offers us a rich harvest of not only diverse but also sometimes frankly contradictory works.

We have noted above such divergences between Tempels and Kagamé. It would probably be easy to find similar differences between the many other works relating to the 'traditional' thought of Bantus or Africans in general, if one could overcome one's understandable boredom, read all of them one by one, examine them patiently and

juxtapose all the views they contain.

But I can see the objection being raised that such differences are normal, that the diversity of works is a source of wealth and not of weakness, that the internal contradictions of ethnophilosophy can be found in any science worthy of the name - physics, chemistry, mathematics, linguistics, psychoanalysis, sociology, etc. - that they are a sign of vitality, not inconsistency, a condition of progress rather than an obstacle in the path of discovery. It may be added that, as in all sciences, a reality may exist without being immediately understood, and that consequently it is not surprising if an implicit system of thought can be reconstructed only as a result of long, collective and contradictory research.

The only thing this object overlooks is the 'slight difference' between the sciences cited and ethnophilosophy that they do not postulate anything remotely comparable with the supposed unanimity of a human community; that in these sciences, moreover, a contradiction is never stagnant but always progressive, never final or absolute but indicative of an **error**, of the **falsity** of a hypothesis or thesis, which is bound to emerge from a rational investigation of the object itself, whereas a contradiction between two ethnophilosophical theses is necessarily circular, since it can never be resolved by experimentation or any other method of verification. The point is that an ethnophilosophical contradiction is necessarily **antinomal** in the Kantian sense; thesis and antithesis are equally demonstrable - in other words, equally

gratuitous. In such a case contradiction does not generate synthesis but simply demonstrates the need to re-examine the very foundations of the discipline and to provide a critique of ethnophilosophical reason and perhaps of ethnological reason too.

Ethnophilosophy can now be seen in its true light. Because it has to account for an imaginary unanimity, to interpret a text which nowhere exists and has to be constantly reinvented, it is a science without an object, a 'crazed language'²⁸ accountable to nothing, a discourse that has no referent, so that its falsity can never be demonstrated. Tempels can then maintain that for the Bantu being is power, and Kagamé can beg to differ: we have no means of settling the quarrel. It is clear, therefore, that the 'Bantu philosophy' of the one is not the philosophy of the Bantu but that of Tempels, that the 'Bantu-Rwandais philosophy' of the other is not that of the Rwandais but that of Kagamé. Both of them simply make use of African traditions and oral literature and project on to them their own philosophical beliefs, hoping to enhance their credibility thereby.

That is how the functioning of this thesis of a collective African philosophy works: it is a smokescreen behind which each author is able to manipulate his own philosophical views. It has nothing beyond this ideological function: it is an indeterminate discourse with no object.

Towards a new concept of 'African philosophy'

Behind and beyond the ethnological pretext, philosophical views remain. The dogma of unanimism has not been completely sterile

since it has at least generated a quite distinctive philosophical literature.

Here we must note a surprising fact: while they were looking for philosophy in a place where it could never be found - in the collective unconscious of African peoples, in the silent fold of their explicit discourse - the ethnophilosophers never questioned the nature and theoretical status of their own analyses. Were these relevant to philosophy? There lay the true but undetected problem. For if we want to be scientific, we cannot apply the same word to two things as different as a spontaneous, implicit and collective world-view on the one hand and, on the other, the deliberate, explicit and individual analytic activity which takes that world-view as its object. Such an analysis should be called 'philosophology' rather than 'philosophy' or, to use a less barbarious term, 'metaphilosophy' - but a metaphilosophy of the worst kind, an inegalitarian metaphilosophy, not a dialogue and confrontation with an existing philosophy but a reduction to silence, a denial, masquerading as the revival of an earlier philosophy.

For we know that in its highly elaborated forms philosophy is always, in a sense, a metaphilosophy, that it can develop only by reflecting on its own history, that all new thinkers must feed on the doctrines of their predecessors, even of their contemporaries, extending or refuting them, so as to enrich the philosophical heritage available in their own time. But in this case metaphilosophy does not rely on an exploitation of extra-

philosophical data or on the arbitrary over-interpretation of social facts which in themselves bear no relation to philosophy. Metaphilosophy signifies, rather, a philosophical reflection on discourses which are themselves overtly and consciously philosophical. Ethnophilosophy, on the other hand, claims to be the description of an implicit, unexpressed world-view, which never existed anywhere but in the anthropologist's imagination. Ethnophilosophy is a pre-philosophy mistaking itself for a metaphilosophy, a philosophy which, instead of presenting its own rational justification, shelters lazily behind the authority of a tradition and projects its own theses and beliefs on to that tradition.

If we now return to our question, namely, where philosophy resides in the world-view described or in the description itself, we can now assert that if it resides in either, it must be the second, the description of that vision, even if this is, in fact, a self-deluding invention that hides behind its own products. African philosophy does exist therefore, but in a new sense, as a literature produced by Africans and dealing with philosophical problems. A contradiction? Oh no! Some may be surprised that, having patiently dismantled the ethnophilosophical machine, we should now be trying to restore it. They have simply failed to understand that we are merely recognizing the existence of that literature as philosophical literature, whatever may be its value and credibility. What we are acknowledging is what it is, not what it says. Having laid bare the mythological assumptions on which it is founded (these having suppressed all question of its

status), we can now pay greater attention to the fact of its existence as a determinate form of philosophical literature which however mystified and mystifying it may be (mystifying because mystified), nevertheless belongs to the history of African literature in general.

Let us be accurate: the issue here is only African ethnophilosophy. A work like **Bantu Philosophy** does not belong to African philosophy, since its author is not African; but Kagame's work is an integral part of African philosophical literature. In other words speaking of African philosophy in a new sense, we must draw a line, within ethnophilosophical literature in general, between African and non-African writers, not because one category is better than the other, or because both might not, in the last analysis, say the same thing, but because, the subjects being African philosophy, we cannot exclude a geographical variable, taken here as empirical, contingent, extrinsic to the content or significance of the discourse and as quite apart from any questions of theoretical connections. Thus Tempel's work, although it deals with an African subject and has played a decisive role in the development of African ethnophilosophy belongs to **European** scientific literature, in the same way as anthropology in general, although it deals with non-Western societies, is an embodiment of Western science, no more and no less.

A happy consequence of this demarcation is that it emphasizes certain subtle nuances and occasional serious divergences which might otherwise have passed unnoticed and which differentiate African authors whom we initially grouped together as

ethnophilosophers. It is thus possible to see the immense distance which separates, for instance, Bahoken's *Clairières métaphysiques africaines*,²⁹ justifiably assessed as a perfect example of ideological twaddle designed by an apparently nationalistic African to flatter the exotic tastes of the Western public from Kwame Nkrumah's *Consciencism*, written chiefly for the African public and aimed at making it aware of its new cultural identity, even though Nkrumah's book, unfortunately partakes of the ethnological conception that there can be such a thing as a collective philosophy.³⁰

Another even more important consequence is that this African philosophical literature can now be seen to include philosophical works of those African authors who do not believe in the myth of a collective philosophy or who reject it explicitly. Let me cite a few of these, Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga's fine article 'Le Bantou problématique'³¹ has already been mentioned. Another Camerounian, Marcien Towa, has given us a brilliant critique of ethnophilosophy in general, the *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle*, followed by an incisive criticism of the Senghorian doctrine of negritude, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: négritude ou servitude?*³² Henry Orika Odera of Kenya has published a fine article entitled 'Mythologies as African philosophy'.³³ The Béninois (former Dahomeyan) Stanislas Spero Adotevi earned fame in 1972 with his brilliant book *Négritude et négrologues*.³⁴

But more than that: African philosophical literature includes works which make no attempt whatever to broach the problem of

'African philosophy', either to assert or to deny its existence. In fact, we must extend the concept to include all the research into Western philosophy carried out by Africans. This broadening of the horizon implies no contradiction: just as the writings of Western anthropologists on African societies belong to Western scientific literature, so the philosophical writings of Africans on the history of Western thought are an integral part of African philosophical literature. So, obviously, African philosophical works concerning problems that are not specially related to African experience should also be included. In this sense, the articles by the Ghanaian J.E. Wiredu on Kant, on material implication and the concept of truth,³⁵ are an integral part of African philosophy, as are analyses of the concept of freedom or the notion of free will³⁶ by the Kenyan Henry Odera or the Nigerian D.E. Idoniboye. The same can be said of the research on French seventeenth-century philosophy by the Zairois Elungu Pere Elungu, *Etendue et connaissance dans la philosophie de Malebranche*,³⁷ of the epistemological introduction to *Theologie positive et theologie spéculative*³⁸ by his fellow countryman Tharcisse Tshibangu. The work of the Camerounian N'joh Mouelle, particularly *Jalons and De la médiocrité a l'excellence. Essai sur la signification humaine du développement*,³⁹ may also be placed in this category, although their subjects are not only universal but also lined with the present historical situation of Africa.

By the same token we may readily claim works like those of the Ashanti scholar Anton-Wilhelm Amo, who studied and taught in German universities during the first half of the eighteenth century, as

belonging to African philosophical literature,⁴⁰ although this may be regarded as a borderline case, since Amo was trained almost entirely in the West. But is not this the case with almost every African intellectual even today?⁴¹

The essential point here is that we have produced a radically new definition of African philosophy, the criterion now being the geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of content. The effect of this is to broaden the narrow horizon which has hitherto been imposed on African philosophy and to treat it, as now conceived, as a methodical inquiry with the same universal aims as those of any other philosophy in the world. In short, it destroys the dominant mythological conception of Africanness and restores the simple, obvious truth that Africa is above all a continent and the concept of Africa an empirical, geographical concept and not a metaphysical one. The purpose of this 'demythologizing' of the idea of Africa and African philosophy is simply to free our faculty for theorizing from all the intellectual impediments and prejudices which have so far prevented it from 'getting off the ground.'⁴²

Final remarks

There can no longer be any doubt about the existence of African philosophy, although its meaning is different from that to which the anthropologists have accustomed us. It exists as a particular form of scientific literature. But, of course, once this point is established, many questions remain. For instance, how shall we distinguish philosophical literature from other forms of scientific

literature, such as mathematics, physics, biology, linguistics, sociology, etc., inasmuch as these disciplines also develop as specific forms of literature? In other words, what is the particular object and area of study of philosophy? In more general terms, what relation is there between scientific literature and non-scientific literature (for instance, artistic literature), and why must we include philosophical literature in the first rather than the second?

This is not the place to answer these questions. All that we have tried to do so far has been to clear the ground for questions of this kind, since they presuppose that philosophy is recognized simply as a theoretical discipline and nothing else, a discipline which, like any other, can develop only in the form of literature.

Moreover, such questions can never receive definite and immutable answers, for the definition of a science must be revised constantly in the light of its own progress, and the articulation of theoretical discourse in general - by which we mean the demarcation of the various sciences - is itself subject to historical change. At this point, it is true, a much harder question, or series of questions, arises: how is the object of a science determined? What conditions, economic, historical, ideological or other, contribute to fixing the frontiers of a discipline? How is a new science born? How does an old science die or cease to be considered a science?⁴³

This is not the place to answer these questions either. But at least there is one thing we are in a position to affirm: no

science, no brand of learning can appear except as an event in language or, more precisely, as the product of discussion. The first thing to do, then, is to organize such discussions in the midst of the society where the birth of these sciences is desired. In other words, whatever the specific object of philosophy may be, the first task of African philosophers today, if they wish to develop an authentic African philosophy, is to promote and sustain constant free discussion about all the problems concerning their discipline instead of being satisfied with a private and somewhat abstract dialogue between themselves and the Western world.⁴⁴ By reorienting their discourse in this way, they will easily overcome the permanent temptation of 'folklorism' that limits their research to so-called African subjects - a temptation which has owed most of its strength to the fact that their writings have been intended for a foreign public.

It is indeed a strange paradox that in present conditions the dialogue with the West can only encourage 'folklorism', a sort of collective cultural exhibitionism which compels the 'Third World intellectual' to 'defend and illustrate' the peculiarities of his tradition for the benefit of a Western public. This seemingly universal dialogue simply encourages the worst kind of cultural particularism, both because its supposed peculiarities are in the main purely imaginary and because the intellectual who defends them claims to speak in the name of his whole people although they have never asked him to do so and are usually unaware that such a dialogue is taking place.

On the contrary, it is to be hoped that when Africans start discussing theoretical problems among themselves, they will feel spontaneously the need to gather the broadest possible information on the scientific achievements of other continents and societies. They will take an interest in these achievements not because they will be held to be the best that can be attained but in order to assess more objectively, and if necessary improve, their own achievements in the same areas.

The paradox is therefore easily removed: interlocutors of the same origin rarely feel the need to exalt their own cultural particularities. Such a need arises only when one faces people from other countries and is forced to assert one's uniqueness by conforming to the current stereotypes of one's own society and civilization. Universality becomes accessible only when interlocutors are set free from the need to assert themselves in the face of others; and the best way to achieve this in Africa today is to organize internal discussion and exchange among all the scientists in the continent, within each discipline and - why not? - between one discipline and another, so as to create in our societies a scientific tradition worthy of the name. The difficult questions we have been asking concerning the origins, the definition, the boundaries, the evolution and the destiny of the various sciences, and more particularly the nature of philosophy and its relation to other disciplines, will then find their answers in the concrete history of our theoretical literature.

We must therefore plunge in and not be afraid of thinking new thoughts, of simply thinking. For every thought is new if we take

the word in its active sense, even thought about past thoughts, provided we are not content simply to repeat hallowed themes, catechetically and parrot-fashion, with a pout or a purr, but on the contrary boldly rearticulate these themes, justify them, give them a new and sounder foundation. Conversely, every blustering declaration of loyalty to a so-called 'modern' doctrine will be at best mere folklore - when it does not turn out to be an objective mystification - unless it is accompanied by some intellectual effort to **know, understand and think out** the doctrine by going beyond the more sensational formulations to the problematic on which it is founded. We cannot go on acting a part indefinitely. The time has come for theoretical responsibility, for taking ourselves theoretically.

In Africa now the individual must liberate himself from the weight of the past as well as from the allure of ideological fashions. Amid the diverse but, deep down, so strangely similar catechisms of conventional nationalism and of equally conventional pseudo-Marxism, amid so many state ideologies functioning in the Fascist mode, deceptive alibis behind which the powers that be can quietly do the opposite of what they say and say the opposite of what they do, amid this immense confusion in which the most vulgar police state pompously declares itself to be a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and neo-Fascists mouthing pseudo-revolutionary platitudes are called 'Marxist-Leninists', reducing the enormous theoretical and political subversive power of Marxism to the dimensions of a truncheon, in which, in the name of revolution, they kill, massacre, torture the workers, the trade unionists, the

executives, the students: in the midst of all this intellectual and political bedlam we must all open our eyes wide and clear our own path. Nothing less will make discussions between free and intellectually responsible individuals possible. Nothing less will make a philosophy possible.

As can be seen, then, the development of African Philosophical literature presupposes the removal of a number of political obstacles." In particular, it requires that democratic liberties and especially the right of free criticism, the suppression of which seems to constitute the sole aim and *raison d'être* of the official ideologies, should be acknowledged and jealously guarded. It is impossible to philosophize in Africa today without being aware of this need and of the pricelessness of freedom of expression as a necessary condition for all science, for all theoretical development and, in the last resort, for all real political and economic progress, too.

Briefly, and in conclusion, African philosophy exists, but it is not what it is believed to be. It is developing objectively in the form of a literature rather than as implicit and collective thought, but as a literature of which the output remains captive to the unanimist fallacy. Yet, happily, it is possible to detect signs of a new spirit. The liberation of this new spirit is now the necessary precondition of any progress in this field. To achieve that we must begin at the beginning; we must restore the right to criticism and free expression which are so seriously threatened by our regimes of terror and ideological confusion.

In short, it is not enough to recognize the existence of an African philosophical literature. The most important task is to transform it from the simple collection of writings aimed at non-African readers and consequently upholding the peculiarities of a so-called African 'world-view' that it is today into the vehicle of a free and rigorous discussion among African philosophers themselves. Only then will this literature acquire universal value and enrich the common international heritage of human thought.

NOTES

- 1 P Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue* (Paris : Presence Africaine 1949) (AS 601). The letters AS, followed by a number, refer to the 'bibliography of African thought' published by the Rev. Father Alphonse Smet, in *Cahiers philosophiques africains* no. 2 (July-December 1972), Lubumbashi. This 'bibliography', despite the fact that it lumps together philosophical and non-philosophical (i.e. sociological, ethnological, even literary) texts, is nevertheless a useful instrument for any research on African literature or Western literature concerning Africa. The number following the letters AS indicates the number of the text in Smet's 'Bibliography'.
- 2 F Eboussi-Boulaga, 'Le Bantou problématique', *Présence Africaine*, no. 66 (1968).
- 3 Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Editions Réclame 1950) (AS 95), p.45.
- 4 Comparisons between the 'world-view' of Third World peoples and European philosophy involve stripping the latter also of its history, its internal diversity and its richness and reducing the multiplicity of its works and doctrines to a 'lowest common denominator'. This common stock-in-trade of European philosophy is represented in Tempels by a vague system of thought made up of Aristotle, Christian theology and horse sense.
- 5 AS 214.
- 6 M Griaule and G Dieterlen, *Le Renard pâle* (Paris: Publications of the Institute of Ethnology 1965) (AS 220).
- 7 Dominique Zahan, *Sociétés d'initiation bambara: le n'domo, le koré*, (Paris/The Hague: Mouton 1963 (AS 718); *La Dialectique du verbe chez les Bambara* (Paris-The Hague: Mouton 1963) (AS 713); *La Viande et la Graine, mythologie dogon* (Paris: Presence Africaine 1968) (AS 719); *Religion, spiritualité et pensée africaines* (Paris: Payot 1970) (AS 716). See my review of this last book in *Les Etudes philosophiques*, no. 3 (1971).
- 8 Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Les Diola. Essai d'analyse fonctionnelle sur une population de Basse-Casamance*, vols. I and II (Dakar: Mémoires de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire 1959) (not mentioned in AS); 'Brève esquisse sur la pensée cosmologique du Diola', *African Systems of Thought*, prefaced by M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen (OUP 1965) (AS 620); 'Un Système philosophiques sénégalais: la cosmologie des Diola', *Présence Africaine*, nos. 32-3 (1960) (AS 638); *Cinq Essais sur la mort africaine*, Publications de la Faculté des

Lettres et Sciences humaines (Philosophie et Sciences sociales) Dakar no. 3 (1969) (AS 621): 'La Mort et la sagesse africaine. Esquisse d'une anthropologie philosophique', *Psychopathologie Africaine*, no. 3 (1967). See also other texts by the same author, cited in AS 617-39.

- 9 AS 294. See also, by the same author, 'L'Ethnologie des Bantu', *Contemporary Philosophy. A survey*, ed. Raymond Klibansky, vol. IV (Florence 1971) (AS 754).
- 10 AS 347.
- 11 Mongameli Antoine Mabona, 'Philosophie africaine', *Présence Africaine*, no. 30 (1960) (AS 342); 'The Depths of African Philosophy', *Personnalité africaine et Catholicisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine 1963) (AS 343); 'La Spiritualité africaine', *Présence Africaine* no. 52 (1964) (AS 344).
- 12 A Rahajarizafy, 'Sagesse Malgache et théologie chrétienne', *Personnalité africaine et Catholicisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine 1963); AS 504.
- 13 Respectively, AS 341; 'La Conception bantoue face au christianisme', *Personnalité africaine et Catholicisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine 1963); AS 339.
- 14 AS 414. The chapter in question is the eighth, entitled 'Philosophical outline'; 'Dialectique existentielle des Bantous et sacramentalisme', *Aspects de la culture noire* (Paris 1958) (AS 410).
- 15 Jean-Calvin Bahoken, *Clairières métaphysiques africaines* (Paris: Présence Africaine 1967) (AS 46).
- 16 John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann 1969) (AS 372); *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger 1970) (AS 375); *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background. A Study of the encounter between New Testament theology and African traditional concepts* (OUP 1971).
- 17 See in particular the texts (written between 1937 and 1963) collected in *Liberté I. Négritude et humanisme*. As a theory of 'negritude', the Senghorian ethnology was always, above all, an ethnopsychology concerned essentially with defining the 'Negro soul', where sociology (usually idyllic descriptions of 'Negro society') and aesthetic analyses (commentaries, many of them excellent, on various works of art) are used mainly to reinforce this fantasy psychology. However, ethnopsychology always betrays the ambition to become an *ethnophilosophy* by accounting for the black 'conception of the world' as well as for the psychological characteristics. The project is clearly formulated in the celebrated 1939 article 'Ce que l'homme noir apporte' ('The black man's contribution') in which the black 'conception of the world', however, still appears as a psychological

quality: an animism, or rather, according to Senghor, an anthropopsychism. This is no longer so in the 1956 text 'The Black African aesthetic' and the 1959 text on the 'Constitutive elements of a civilization of Black African inspiration' *Liberté I*, pp. 202-17 and 252-86; apart from a few alterations, these are reprints of Senghor's reports to the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, Paris 1956, and to the Second Congress, Rome 1959. Explicitly referring to Tempels, but still wishing to explain the black's 'metaphysics' in terms of black 'psychophysiology', Senghor defines it rather as a system of ideas, an 'existential ontology' (ibid., pp. 203-4, 264-8). The reader will therefore readily understand that I should feel reluctant to situate ethnophilosophy 'in the wake of negritude' or to treat it as a '(late) aspect of the negritude movement', as Marcien Towa does in *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle* (Yaounde: Editions Clé 1971), pp. 23, 25. If African ethnophilosophers are undoubtedly part of the negritude movement, they owe the philosophical pretensions of their nationalist discourse rather to the ethnophilosophy of European Africanists.

- 18 A. Adesanya, 'Yoruba metaphysical thinking', *Odu*, no. 5 (1958) (AS 15).
- 19 W Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1962) (AS 5).
- 20 AS 436 and 438. This book will be discussed below, chapters 6 and 7.
- 21 Alassane N'Daw, 'Peut-on-parler d'une pensée africaine?', *Présence Africaine* no. 58 (1966) (AS.420); 'Pensée africaine et développement', *Problèmes sociaux congolais* (Kinshasa: CEP SI Publications 1966-7) (AS 419).
- 22 This unpublished thesis is mentioned here mainly because it is discussed at length by Marcien Towa in his critique of ethnophilosophy (Towa, *Essai sur la problématique philosophique* pp. 23-33 (AS 646).
- 23 Subtitled 'A phenomenological approach' and prefaced by Philippe Laburthe-Tolra (Berne: Herbert Lang 1970) (AS 325).
- 24 The article was published in *Présence Africaine*, no. 73, (1970) (AS 39).
- 25 For instance, G. de Souza, *La Conception de 'Vie' chez les Fon* (Contonou: Editions du Benin 1975); a doctoral thesis defended in 1972.
- 26 Henry Oruka Odera, 'Mythologies as African philosophy', *East Africa Journal*, vol. IX, no. 10 (October 1972) (not mentioned in AS).

- 27 See, on this point, Ola Balogun, 'Ethnology and its ideologies', *Consequence*, no. 1 (1974). See also my article on 'Le mythe de la philosophie spontanée', *Cahiers Philosophiques Africains*, no. 1 (1972), and Chapter 8 below.
- 28 That is, 'Language gone mad'. I have borrowed this phrase from the Zairois V.Y. Mudimbe, whose books *L'Autre Face du royaume, Une introduction à la critique des langages en folie* (Lausanne: L'Age d'homme 1973) ranks among the finest works written to this day on (not of) ethnology.
- 29 How revealing that this work was published in France 'with the help of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique'.
- 30 For an interpretation of the qualifications added to the 1970 edition of *Consciencism* and for an appreciation of the ideological limitations of the work, see Chapters 6 and 7 below.
- 31 I have mentioned this article as the most vigorous and complete critique of Tempels to date for its rigorous analysis of the contradictions in his work. Eboussi-Balaga shows that these can ultimately be reduced to

an interplay of value and counter-value .. which characterizes the colonizer's judgements on the colonized. Bantuism is partly admirable and partly abominable. It is valuable when the colonized wish to forsake it for equality: then they are reminded that they are losing their 'souls'. But Bantuism becomes a vile hotchpotch of degenerate magical practices when the colonizer wishes to affirm his pre-eminence and legitimize his power. ('Le Bantou problématique', p.32).

However, Eboussi does not totally reject the ideal of an 'ethnological philosophy', a philosophy which would abandon the search for an 'ontological substratum for social reality', would deal with the 'mythical discourse of "native theorists"', instead of bypassing it with scorn (*ibid.*, p.9). On this point I believe a more radical view should be taken. Later (particularly in chapter 4) we shall see why.

- 32 Towa, *Essai sur la problématique philosophique*; Leopold Sédar Senghor: *négritude ou servitude?* (Yaoundé: Editions Clé 1971) (AS 647).
- 33 Odera, 'Mythologies as African philosophy'.
- 34 S A Adotevi, *Négritude et négrologues* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, Coll. 10/18 1972) (not mentioned in AS).

- 35 J E Wiredu, 'Kant's synthetic a priori in geometry and the rise of non-Euclidean geometries', *Kantstudien*, Heft 1, Bonn (1970) (not in AS); 'Material implication and "if ... then"', *International Logic Review*, no. 6, Bologna (1972) (not in AS); 'Truth as opinion', *Universitas*, vol. 2, no. 3 (new series), University of Ghana (1973) (not in AS); 'On an African orientation in philosophy', *Second Order*, vol. 1, no. 2, University of Ife (1972) (not in AS).
- 36 H Odera, 'The meaning of liberty', *Cahiers Philosophiques Africains*, no. 1, Lubumbashi (1972) (not in AS); D.E. Idoniboye, 'Freewill, the linguistic philosopher's dilemma', *Cahiers Philosophiques Africains*, no. 2, Lubumbashi (1972) (not in AS).
- 37 E P Elungu, *Etendue et connaissance dans la philosophie de Malebranche* (Paris: Vrin 1973) (not in AS). One may also mention the unpublished thesis defended in Paris in 1971 by the Senegalese A.R. N'Diaye, 'L'Ordre dans la philosophie de Malebranche'.
- 38 T. Tshibangu, *Théologie positive et théologie spéculative* (Louvain/Paris: Béatrice-Nauwelaerts 1965) (not in AS).
- 39 E.N'joh Mouellé, *Jalons: recherche d'une mentalité neuve* (Yaoundé: Editions Clé 1970) (AS 775); *De la médiocrité à l'excellence. Essai sur la signification humaine du développement* (Yaoundé: Editions Clé 1970) (AS 432).
- 40 On Amo, see below, Chapter 5.
- 41 More generally, this new definition of African philosophy opens up the possibility of a history of African philosophy, whereas the very notion of such a history was unthinkable in the ideological context of ethnophilosophy. If African philosophy is seen not as an implicit world-view but as the set of philosophical writings produced by Africans, we can at last undertake to reconstruct their chequered history, including those of Afro-Arab authors like Ibn Khaldun, Al Ghazali, etc., whatever may be the historical and theoretical distance between these texts.
- 42 On the gross simplification of 'primitive' societies by Western anthropologists and the need to recognize the internal diversity of African culture by 'demythologizing' the concept of Africa itself, see below, chapter 8.
- 43 For a consideration of these questions and some representative answers, see: L. Althusser, *for Marx* (1965), trans. B. Brewster (Allen Lane 1969); L. Althusser, et al., *Reading Capital* (New Left Books 1970); G. Bachelard, *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique* (1947) (Paris: Vrin 1969); *Le Nouvel Esprit scientifique* (1934), 9th ed. (Paris: PUF 1966); G. Canguilhem,

Etudes d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences (Paris: Vrin 1968); M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (1972), trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (Tavistock 1973); *The Order of Things* (1966), (Tavistock 1970); *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (Tavistock 1972).

- 44 It is worth mentioning here the part that can be played in promoting this new type of dialogue by the departments of philosophy in African universities and the philosophical associations (e.g. the Inter-African Council for Philosophy) and their respective journals.