

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Special Issue

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QUEST Philosophical Discussions is an African Journal of Philosophy. It intends to act as a channel of expression for thinkers in Africa, and to stimulate philosophical discussion on problems that arise out of the radical transformations Africa and Africans are undergoing.

QUEST includes materials on both current subjects related to Africa, and subjects of general philosophical interest, serving an international public of professional philosophers and intellectuals in other disciplines with philosophical interest. Original articles written in either English or French will be published, each with a summary in the other language.

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Contributions: Articles should normally not exceed 6,000 words in length and should be accompanied by an abstract of no more than 200 words. Manuscripts should follow the citation format of the journal. Contributors should provide a short biographical note.

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EDITORIAL

This 1999 double issue of QUEST has a special focus on the language question in Africa, and on the idea of an African, 'Negro-African', or Black-African culture. The language question continues to mark sharp differences between African philosophers. We have here, in a sense, a continuation of the discussion between Godfrey Tangwa from Cameroon and Chris Uroh from Nigeria in the December 1994 and June 1995 issues of QUEST. The idea of culture, so much in use today in the most diverse discourses, receives profound and critical treatment under the provocative title 'Cultures do not exist' by Wim van Binsbergen. Pierre Nzinzi from Gabon and Lazare Poame from Ivory Coast further discuss the idea of a specific Negro-African culture and the challenges posed to African cultures by technology and democracy.

This issue appears with considerable delay but marks at the same time very hopeful developments related to QUEST. It appears in the year 2002 parallel to the 2000 and 2001 double issues and will be followed by a reorganisation of QUEST. The journal will find a new and more solid institutional underpinning in the context of the well-established co-operation between the Department of Philosophy of the Erasmus University in Rotterdam and the Africa Studies Centre in Leiden. It is obvious that the continuity of the journal is best guaranteed at this point in time by a solid institutional backing. Efforts to transfer the journal to a department of Philosophy at an African university have failed over the past years. However, the aim of making this transfer in due course is certainly not sacrificed.

The new co-ordinator, Wim van Binsbergen, is professor of the Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy at the Erasmus University as well as one of the leading researchers at the African Studies Centre, Leiden. He will take over as from the 2002 volume of QUEST. He will begin his term of office holding extensive consultations with the entire editorial team, in an attempt to facilitate the continuous and direct interaction between QUEST and the primarily participants in the venture, namely the philosophers at various faculties at African universities. The scholarly and thought-provoking contribution of Wim van Binsbergen to this issue may serve as further introduction to the QUEST community, after his 1996 QUEST article on a variety of Afrocentricity.

The plans for the future of QUEST involve transformation into an Internet journal in PDF format (i.e. freely accessible for reading and printing, but not downloadable) with a limited printed version of each issue for libraries, contributors, and for those colleagues who are not connected to the net. Of course originality, quality, and relevance to philosophical debates in Africa will continue to constitute the hallmarks of the QUEST editorial policy. We are confident that, with a changed team and a new production format, QUEST will make a major leap forward towards realising its goal of serving as an effective forum for philosophers in Africa and beyond.

COLONIALISM AND LINGUISTIC DILEMMAS IN AFRICA: CAMEROON AS A PARADIGM

Godfrey Tangwa¹

Africa is the richest and most variegated continent on earth: geographically, climatically, historically, culturally, linguistically and resource-wise. That much is a palpable fact, requiring neither proof nor, for our purpose here, any further elaboration or analysis. Africa is also, paradoxically, the poorest continent on earth. Precisely because of its variegated riches, Africa is the most exploitable as well as exploited continent on earth. So it is on account of its exploitation and exploitability that Africa can be called a paradoxical continent: the richest as well as the poorest continent on earth.

The colonial intervention which, of course, lies on the same continuum with the slave trade, is, without doubt, the most important experience in the human history of Africa. And the most important single event in the colonial history of Africa is, arguably, the Berlin Conference of 1884 during which European imperial nations, like good hunters, stood over the map of Africa, like a game, and, with their imperial pens (penknives?) quartered her up amongst themselves, for its exploitable resources, with regard for neither the linguistic, cultural nor political state of affairs on the continent.

The imposition of European languages and systems of education on Africans followed the "partitioning of Africa" as necessary and inevitable corollaries, corrugates and support structures of colonial activities whose impetus, motive force and overriding aim remained economic domination and exploitation. It is possible but quite idle to speculate on what the history and situation of Africa might have been without the colonial experience. The experience itself is now simply an unalterable part and parcel of African history. It is a historical datum comparable to an individual's having been born or brought up at a particular place or time. *Post factum*, there is absolutely nothing that can be done about it. This, of course, does not mean that some of the effects of that experience cannot or should not be altered. But recognising the irreversibility of the colonial experience itself is important in determining which of its enduring effects can be changed and arguing for those which should be changed. No matter how bitter and unpalatable (or sweet for that matter), the colonial history *is* the history of Africa and any attempt to run away from this concrete historical fact cannot but create a certain egocentric predicament. I am, of course, quite aware that calling historical events "facts" might raise problems of meaning at a certain philosophical level. I am equally aware that we cannot separate history qua history from present selectivity and interpretation. Nevertheless, I hope that the meaning of my claims here is not only quite clear but relatively uncontroversial.

Now, as already mentioned, one of the inevitable corollaries of colonialism was the imposition of European languages and systems of education in Africa. Today, eleven decades after the Berlin Conference, and almost four decades after the beginning of the end of the overt colonialism, African countries, with scarcely any exceptions, created through historical circumstances, find themselves facing many dilemmas among which some of the most controversial are linguistic dilemmas. There is no African country which is not a linguistically plural country, with the colonially inherited languages vying with several indigenous languages. In Cameroon, for instance, with a population of about 12.5 million, the colonially inherited official languages are English and French, superimposed on about 240 indigenous languages. The linguistic dilemma facing African countries can be very simply stated: Should African countries (themselves colonial creations) continue using the languages and systems of education inherited from colonialism or jettison these as undesirable colonial legacies in preference for indigenous languages and systems of education?

In the face of this dilemma, my suggestion is basically that African countries should seize the dilemma by both horns; that is to say, that, while reversing the colonial policy whereby the indigenous languages were purposely marginalised, they should continue to use the colonial legacies, which, if properly domesticated, can serve very well as vehicles for national unity, integration development, as well as for international and global interaction. Such a suggestion might be called "utilitarian" or "instrumentalist" or "pragmatist" in quite an ordinary and obvious sense. But I wouldn't want to be drawn here into the philosophical controversies surrounding these terms.² As philosophical theories, I consider both utilitarianism, pragmatism and instrumentalism, in fact, to be untenable. But in a non-philosophical sense, I have no problem with any of them and consider all of them, in fact, indispensable in our day to day living.

In fact I should go as far as claiming that, properly used, the African educational and linguistic legacies of colonialism are rather positive and beneficial unintended effects of the colonial enterprise. That being the case, I consider it undesirable for Africans to continue bemoaning either colonialism in general or the particular fact that European languages and systems of education were colonially imposed on them. Such an attitude is likely to obscure or even completely negate the possible benefits that can be reaped (drawn) from the experience of colonialism and its surviving legacies.

Cameroon as a Paradigm

When we consider the problems and dilemmas created in Africa by colonialism, the case of "Bilingual" Cameroon stands out as an unparalleled paradigm, to the extent that, if a satisfactory solution is discovered or invented there, it would be easily applicable to all other African countries. I have placed scare-quotes

around "bilingual" for reasons that would be apparent soon. I have said "Cameroon" simply, in order to avoid also putting scare-quotes around the expression "Republic of Cameroon" for reasons that should equally be evident shortly. Some Cameroonians would go as far as insisting that the name "Cameroon" should always be written within quotes because of the fact that the name was coined and given by some Portuguese navigator-adventurers on account of the remarkable quantities of prawns (shrimps, crayfish, njang) called "cameroes" or something of the sort in their own language that they discovered at the mouth of the Wouri River towards the end of the 15th century. But my view of history in general and of names in particular is such that I don't believe we need to go that far.

Cameroon is often very appropriately called *Africa in Miniature*. Cameroon is indeed like a summary or pocket edition of Africa. In Cameroon, all the macroscopic problems of Africa as well as its potentialities are microscopically present. If we turn the map of Africa to look like a pistol, Cameroon would be the trigger. Cameroon is the meeting if not the melting point of the colonial legacies of the leading imperial nations on earth: Germany, Britain and France. Cameroon's geographical, biological, historical and cultural diversity leaves out little of real significance that exists elsewhere on the African continent. The major ecosystems and climatic zones, the flora and fauna of the continent are all to be found in Cameroon; so are the different races - from the pigmies of the south-east through the coastal Bantu Negroes, through the Sudanese Negroes of the savannah middle belt to the Arabs of the far north. Cameroon's population is also composed of almost equal proportions of traditional religionists (39%), Christians (40%) and Islamists (21%) - a perfect case of that triple heritage to which Kwame Nkrumah and Ali Mazrui have drawn so much attention, where traditional African, Euro-Christian and Islamic values meet, mix and mingle.

In terms of economic resources, Cameroon is self-sufficient in domestic food production, and produces in exportable quantities almost everything that can be produced in other parts of Africa: Cocoa, Coffee, Tea, Groundnuts, Bananas, Cotton, Palm Produce, Timber, Petroleum and countless fruits. With about 240 (236 exactly according to linguistic experts) indigenous languages and corresponding tribes, Africa's rich linguistic and cultural diversity finds eloquent instantiation in Cameroon. Shaped like a triangle, Cameroon is the perfect compromise between circles and squares. But Cameroon is also that singular country in Africa where you find the squarest pegs in the roundest holes. In spite of its enormous human and natural resources, Cameroon is today, like many other African countries, a beggar-nation, the hardship level of whose ordinary citizens has assumed really alarming proportions.

Some Historical Signposts

According to historians, one of the Kings of the Douala area of Cameroon (King Bell) signed a commercial treaty with the English in 1856. Subsequently, all the kings of the area wrote a joint letter to Queen Victoria inviting England to establish a "protectorate" over the area. But as her Britannic Majesty bid her royal time in answering, the Douala kings, in disappointment, turned to the Germans who quickly set up a "protectorate" in 1884. The English later arrived (a few weeks too late) with a mandate from Queen Victoria to do what the Germans had just done but, to their disappointment, they saw the German flag already flapping triumphantly in the Douala breeze.

At the Berlin Conference of 1884, Germany's colonial lordship over Cameroon was confirmed. The Germans then set up their capital at Buea on the slopes of Mount Cameroon (Fako) with a relatively cold climate free of mosquitos, and from there consolidated their grip over Cameroon. The peace-loving peoples of the coastal areas were easily bribed with exotic European products such as spirits and mirrors etc. The politically very well organised kingdoms of the hinterland had to be subdued by military force. By the eve of the First World War (1914) the Germans were in total colonial control of the country. But when the Germans were defeated in the war, they lost Cameroon along with all their other African colonies. The League of Nations took control and placed the western part of Cameroon under British mandate and the eastern part under French mandate, an arrangement which the United Nations confirmed in 1945 when it replaced the League of Nations.

The British administered their own part of Cameroon which came to be known as "British Cameroons", composed of "Northern Cameroons" and "Southern Cameroons", from Lagos as a part of Nigeria, their largest African colony. In the part under French mandate (French Cameroons) agitation for independence started as early as 1948 when the UPC (Union des Populations du Cameroun) was founded by Felix Moumie, Ruben Um Nyobe, Ernest Ouandie and A. Kingue. The programme of the UPC was centred around the slogan "Immediate Independence and Unification". The French were not amused. They savagely suppressed the UPC and it went underground. Some of its militants escaped to Southern Cameroons. The UPC rebellion continued in French Cameroons especially in the Bassa and Bamileke regions through "independence" which the French "granted" on January 1st 1960. The country became known as La Republique du Cameroun. The rebellion was not definitively crushed until 1971.

Meanwhile, in Cameroon under British mandate, parliamentary democracy was flourishing with several parties in lively and healthy competition. The first ever elections were won by the KNC (Kamerun National Convention) which formed a government under the leadership of Dr. E.M.L. Endeley. In

1959 the ruling party lost heavily to the opposition party, KNDP (Kamerun National Democratic Party) and John Ngu Foncha headed a new government.

Nigeria gained her own independence on 1st October 1960 as a Federal Republic. Then the United Nations proposed a plebiscite in Cameroon under British mandate with two options:

(a) Do you wish to achieve independence by joining the independent Federal Republic of Nigeria?

or

(b) Do you wish to achieve independence by joining the independent Republic of Cameroon?

As one of the kings of the hinterland, Fon Achirimbi II of Bafut, remarked about this proposal, it was a choice between "Fire and the Deep Sea". But for some obscure reasons, the third option of simply achieving independence as an autonomous country was not proposed. My own conjecture here is that, given the lack of firm grip that the British had had in this area, and given the phoney "independences" that the colonialists were now arranging all over Africa, they did not want to take the risk of having a truly independent country at the "trigger" of Africa, especially in an area where traditional rule had clearly demonstrated its capabilities and potentialities.

Be that as it may, the UN conducted plebiscite took place on February 11th 1961, and Southern Cameroonians voted overwhelmingly (70,49%) to achieve independence by joining La Republique du Cameroun while Northern Cameroons opted for remaining as a part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

After the plebiscite, a constitutional conference was held in the border town of Foumban between Southern Cameroons and La Republique du Cameroun during which a Federal system was adopted with a provision (Article 49) that any attempt to abolish it would be null and void. And so the Federal Republic of Cameroon came into being, composed of two federated states: West Cameroon (capital, Buea) and East Cameroon (capital, Yaounde).

Things went on fairly smoothly in the Federal Republic of Cameroon, a bilingual and bi-cultural (English & French) country with three parliaments, two legal systems (Common Law and Napoleonic Law), two educational systems, two administrative systems and two peoples with different collective experiences, orientations and outlooks, trying to understand and learn from each other in a bold experiment at nation-building.³ Until 1966. In September 1966, Alhaji Ahmadou Ahidjo, the leader of East Cameroon who was now the President of the Federal Republic while John Ngu Foncha, the leader of West Cameroon was his vice, tricked the leaders of all the other political parties to sink their differences and merge into a single party. The result was the CNU (Cameroon National Union). Now under a one party state, he moved fast to assume dictatorial powers and set up a highly efficient network of state espionage and repression. Then in 1972, he organised what he called a "referendum" proposing a unitary state. Not surprisingly, his proposal "won" by 99.99% of the votes

supposed to have been cast. Then, by decree, Ahidjo changed the name of the country from Federal Republic of Cameroon to United Republic of Cameroon.

In 1982, Ahidjo suddenly resigned, for reasons that remain extremely mysterious up to the present, and handed over power to one of his most loyal acolytes, Paul Biya. In 1984, Paul Biya, without any more need to pretend a referendum, issued a decree reverting the name of the country to La Republique du Cameroun, the name of French East Cameroon before Reunification! At that point, most Southern Cameroonians became convinced of what a few among them had started whispering as far back as 1966, namely, that there was a covert policy to destroy the historical, legal, administrative and educational foundations of Southern Cameroons so as to assimilate it into the Francophonie. The period, spanning a decade, from 1984 to the present, is current affairs. So I will not go into that here.⁴

It should now be clear why the name La Republique du Cameroun (Republic of Cameroon) is highly problematic for all historically conscious patriotic Cameroonians. The name signifies either an act of unilateral opting out from the 1961 Union on the part of East Cameroon, as some West Cameroonians have argued, or an act of assimilation of West Cameroon into East Cameroon. The present name of the country ought to be changed. For while there may be nothing in a name, that does not mean that you should join your neighbour and start answering his/her own name. My suggestion is that the country should revert simply to KAMERUN in its German form. This would remind everybody of why an anglophone state and a francophone state ever thought of merging to form one potential nation. It is also the best face-saving solution for the regime of His Excellency Paul Biya and its external (mis)advisers. This is a suggestion whose reasonableness, appropriateness and advantageousness seem to me self-evident. I therefore will not only not waste any time trying to prove the obvious but will also immediately start practising what I am preaching by using the name KAMERUN throughout the rest of this essay.

The official national languages of Kamerun are English and French. And for this reason, Kamerun is usually inappropriately referred to as a bilingual country. As already mentioned, there are 236 indigenous languages in Kamerun which had been there long before English and French came into the scene. And besides these, there is also Pidgin English which predates both English and French in Kamerun and is, perhaps, more widely spoken though less widely written than both English and French. Kamerun is more appropriately described as a multilingual country and many Kamerunians are, in fact, multilinguists. What is true of Kamerun here is equally true of most other African countries.

My Contention

My contention is that, although colonialism was an evil thing in itself, there is no need for African countries, its victims, to continue bemoaning this historical fact and that some of its corollaries such as modern education and the European languages which were the vectors of its introduction can be considered as rather beneficial unintended effects, the silver linings, as it were, on the dark clouds of the colonial nightmare, and put to very good use as vehicles of national unity and integration, modernisation and global dialogue.

The fact that the past is completely determined and out of our reach whereas the future is, at least partly and in very important ways, still open and therefore influenceable by us, makes the first part of my thesis so evidently true as to be almost trivial. But that something is evidently the case does not, unfortunately, necessarily imply that people see it as such. The history of a people, any people, and the African continent in this particular case, is simply the sum-total of what has happened to them/it in the past. It goes without saying, therefore, that there is nothing that can be done about it. Historical reality is immutable although this fact is quite compatible with attempted falsifications of history. History lies outside the realm of prescriptivity and should accordingly, be approached quite dispassionately. This does not, of course, imply that we cannot or should not draw lessons from history but only that is completely useless, almost irrational, to bemoan history just as it is completely useless, almost irrational, to regret one's biodata such as race, place and time of birth, gender etc. These are things that can and should simply be accepted and then put to whatever prescriptive uses.

The second part of my thesis is, admittedly, more controversial and more difficult to demonstrate. The "western system of education" through the medium of European languages was introduced in Africa for colonial purposes. Nevertheless, I am contending, this was inextricably linked with certain very important advantages. One of these was introduction to a system of education that is more modern than most indigenous African systems of education. The new system of education was based on writing whereas traditional African education was based mostly on orality. The advantages of writing over oral tradition are too obvious to need any cataloguing here.⁵

Without writing, science, in its broadest signification, is impossible. There is no implication here that Africans were incapable of developing writing. In fact, some Africans, such as Njoya, king of the Bamouns in Kamerun, did invent an indigenous *Mvem* script. But the fact is that, for historical reasons, such indigenous forms of writing did not develop to gain wide usage. There are some people who urge that Kamerun, for instance, should retrieve, develop and use the *Mvem* script in place of modern writing to prove that, without the colonial interference, Africa would have developed and modernised quite satisfactorily. But that would be a costly and pointless exercise. With few putative exceptions, all

other scripts have today been superseded by modern writing (Latin Alphabet). Most other scripts ever invented will remain, for the foreseeable future, only of historical-anthropological-archaeological interest. Notable exceptions here would be such scripts as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew and Korean which are more of symbols of national identity than international scripts.

Cultures as Circles Within a Circle

Modern writing belongs to no particular people, country, nation, race or continent. Modern writing belongs to human culture in general. Similarly, modern education which uses modern writing as its chief implement is not the property of any one culture, people, race, nation or continent. As an aspect of human culture in general, it belongs equally to all human cultures and any culture that neglects it or completely refuses to avail itself of it does so at its own risk, the risk of disappearing rather quickly.

It is by modifying at will the content (to a lesser extent) and the uses (most importantly and to the greater extent) of modern education and not by trying to fashion a distinctively unique system of education that any people, nation, culture etc. can put their unmistakable stamp on their education.

It is a matter for grave concern that some Africans think of such things as science, technology, engineering etc. as being aspects of western (white) culture which Africans, for reasons of racial dignity, independence and patriotism should abandon and create their own "authentic" equivalents of them. This is a fatally wrong way of thinking and looking at things. These things, no matter to whom credit may be due for their invention and development, are aspects of human culture in general. Africans (like any other people) can put their own distinctive stamp on these only by contributing new developments to them and, most importantly, by the uses to which they put them. Are there not black people and Africans in particular who have contributed significantly to the development of science, technology and engineering as well as those who instruct white students in these things in Europe and America etc? Would this be possible if these things were distinctively exclusive aspects of western (white) culture as some people would have us believe?

As I have argued elsewhere⁶, cultures can be considered as forming intersecting and overlapping concentric circles within a circle (delimiting human from non-human cultures) and no particular human culture is as distinctive and exclusive as appearances and some people might lead us to think. Something that is of relevance to all human cultures is certainly more important than something that is relevant to only a particular culture or people. And to discover or invent or develop something that is relevant or important for human culture in general is necessarily to lose the copyright or patent over it. Which particular person, people or culture can claim exclusive right over the invention or devel-

opment of, say, fire, agriculture, cooking, building, clothing, etc? None. Because these are achievements and aspects of human culture in general. The same is true of writing, science, technology, electricity etc. All peoples and nations and cultures have contributed in varying degrees to make these what they are.

The fact that a particular person, people or culture invented something is no guarantee that others who are only benefiting from the invention as an aspect of human culture may not supersede him/them/it in its use and further development. These are things over which national or cultural pride, on the one hand, and shame, on the other, are quite out of place. The Chinese invented gunpowder but it was Europeans who eventually made the most effective use of it to spread their imperialism. Just as Europeans invented or, at any rate, fabricate sophisticated torture equipments and dictators of the so-called third world have excelled in their use. Mathematics was invented by Africans (Arabs and ancient Egyptians) but today it is made use of by all people on earth to the extent that some people including even some Africans think that mathematics is foreign to African culture. Even with such very cultural things as art and music, African music and art have been appropriated by Europe and America and turned into multi-billion "hard" currency industries.

Language and Pragmatism

Now, what about language? For, if the colonially introduced systems of education along with writing should be considered as advantageous by-products of colonialism on account of being aspect of human culture in general, surely the same cannot be said of the colonial languages? The same modern education using writing can surely avail itself of the indigenous African languages as vectors of that education. Why not? This is where my pragmatism without philosophical antecedents or underpinnings comes in. My position here is that, where a viable international indigenous *lingua franca* exists, as in East Africa, for example, it should certainly be used without any further ado as the main vector of the educational system. But where no such *lingua franca* as yet exists, as in Kamerun, for instance, the best option would be to carry the education in both indigenous languages and an international language, as far as desirable and practicable in each case. African countries are pure creations of historical circumstances, legacies of colonialism. And the most realistic approach is to make the best of a bad situation within the colonially inherited boundaries until such a time that regional co-operation and pan-Africanism might be in a position to salvage from some of the damage done by the Berlin Conference and help towards more deliberate and rational modification of national boundaries. So, when I advocate the colonially inherited languages for African countries, it is, first and foremost, for purposes of internal communication and only secondarily for external use.

Nations or countries or continents which possess a single language are usually thought of and described as being lucky. But this is because the full potential advantages of linguistic pluralism have not yet been contemplated or drawn. Linguistic pluralism should bring to any people the richness of variety, variation, differing world-views and perspectives and the wide range of possible choices implied in such a situation. The idea considered by some an ideal of *one nation - one people - one language* in no way signifies an indispensable and indivisible hallowed trinity. The idea of *one nation - one people - several languages* signifies a potentially superior alternative. The potential advantages of linguistic pluralism should be very similar to the advantages of, say, democracy over monolithic dictatorship. A dictatorship is a system which depends on a single person's wisdom while a democracy tries to depend on collective wisdom. And to ride on the wings of a single individual's wisdom, no matter how powerful, knowledgeable and good s/he might be, is to choose the ditch as a destination, sooner or later. The potential advantages of linguistically plural societies over mono-lingual societies are also similar to those of a multi-lingual person over a mono-lingual person. We could, in this regard, in fact draw very important lessons from the importance of biodiversity in nature. I am reliably informed that biologically diverse communities of plants and animals survive disasters much better than communities which have little diversity. Might there not be something here as to how Africans have survived enslavement and racism?

Language and Internationalism

Now, a language does not become or remain an international language by deliberate choice. The reasons why any language becomes international are complex and include, among others, economic, historical and politico-military reasons. Only evolution, which is more encompassing than mere history, can determine which language becomes an international language. In fact, any language which consciously and deliberately tries to become or remain an international language is more likely to subvert its own chances of being so. I believe that something of the sort is presently happening to the French language.

My advocacy that African countries should continue using their colonially imposed and inherited languages is further conditioned to the extent that these languages are international languages. It is very significant to note in this regard that Bernard Fonlon, the chief philosopher and theoretician of Kamerun's official bilingualism, changed his mind about Kamerun's bilingual policy before his death and instead advocated that English should be Kamerun's first official language in spite of the fact that Southern Kamerunians who inherited English from the British constitute only 25% of Kamerunians.

English is indisputably the first international language of our times. People for whom English is an indigenous language may be proud of this fact but this is irrational, for there is no good reason to be at all. People for whom English is not a mother-language may be ashamed or jealous before this fact, but that is equally irrational, for the same reason, that is, lack of a good reason so to be. Even if English had not been imposed on Africans by colonialism, it would have been in their own interest in today's contemporary world to master and use it. As an international language, there is a wealth of informations, knowledges and wisdoms encoded in English which any of its users can decode to great benefit. It is for these reasons that I claim that the colonially imposed languages or systems of education were blessings in disguise for Africans.

The use of English as the inescapable international language of contemporary science, technology and communication need not in any way disturb the development and use of the indigenous African languages. How does learning and using a foreign language stop anybody from using his/her own mother-language? The widespread mastery and use of Latin through the Middle Ages up until very recent times did not stop the English people from being English, the Germans from remaining Germanic nor the French from continuing with their exaggerated love of the French language. Today, Latin, once an unrivalled international language, is a dead language. But nonlatin Europeans are none-the-worse for having adopted and used Latin when it was the inevitable international language. On the contrary, their various indigenous languages, which have all outlived Latin, have been greatly enriched by Latin. Latin played an important role in the unification of the European races which originally were as diverse linguistically and culturally as the African tribes are today. In fact, what is today called *western culture* has Latin and Judaeo-Christianity as some of its defining characteristics.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and His Disciples

No treatment of the problems arising from linguistic legacies of colonialism in Africa can be complete without mention of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (formerly James Ngugi) and his very powerful arguments against the use of the colonial languages in Africa. Ngugi's *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (James Currey & Heinemann 1986) can be considered the antithesis of the thrust of my argument in this paper. Ngugi has been, for a long time, an ardent crusader of his point of view. He has gathered a large crowd of followers and supporters from all over the world.

Ngugi's views on this problematic are clear, consistent and very well articulated. Given the autobiographical snippets and glimpses of historical contexting in Ngugi's book, one cannot but sympathise with his point of view. Colonialism and especially Neo-colonialism is a monster with ten faces and a

hundred feet walking by a thousand paths. It is perhaps thanks to the anopheles mosquito that colonialism showed a different face in parts of West Africa from the one it showed in parts of East Africa. The personal experience of individuals as well as the collective experience of communities is also quite varied both under colonialism and under the neo-colonial dictatorships that have replaced it in most parts of Africa. Differing reactions and attitudes to what we may call our colonial patrimony are therefore understandable. Ngugi has, all through his turbulent life and career in Kenya, convincingly matched his professed convictions with appropriate action. He has demonstrated the depth and sincerity of his convictions by patiently and courageously suffering for them. Nevertheless, neither conviction nor sincerity nor both together is a criterion of truth or prescriptivity. As a generalised prescription, I consider Ngugi's views on this particular problematic quite erroneous.

But I am less concerned with proving Ngugi wrong than with convincingly arguing for what I consider right, as I have attempted doing above. On one little but crucial point, however, I should say that I consider the linguistic philosophy underlying Ngugi's arguments quite erroneous in its exaggeratedness. Language is certainly very important to humans and even to non-humans. But language is important as a *tool* for communicating. Language is not as determinant of human thought and behaviour as Ngugi's arguments presuppose. All forms of linguistic philosophy (as distinguished from Philosophy of Language) which attempt to reduce all our problems to problems of language or which confuse reality or facts with the language with which we attempt to describe them, are patently false. There is an influential view in certain philosophical circles, received from Ludwig Wittgenstein, to the effect that the limits of one's language signify the limits of one's world. But, although I do believe that language and reality have some sort of dialectical or cybernetic relationship, I find this view unconvincing. Language is not an ontological datum. No one is born with the outlines of his/her mother-language already traced or imprinted, as it were, in the mind. All language is acquired through learning. So, although language is a very important instrument of culture and identity, all theories which essentialise or ontologise language are clearly false. It is culture which creates language and not language which creates culture.

Some of the disciples of Ngugi leave the very substantive issues with which he has been concerned to chase shadows and appearances, mistaking *form* for *content*. When my first child was born on February 25th 1991, my mother, as Nso custom and tradition demands, was asked to "name" the child. She called her "Kinyuy" (It is God who knows), not to be confused with "Nyuyki" (God knows). I myself then called the child "Prima" and, accordingly, registered her as *Prima Kinyuy Tangwa*. Whereupon some disciples of Ngugi harangued me for giving the child a foreign name. They demanded to know if any of my ancestors was called Prima. I answered that none of my ancestors was called Prima but that I did not give the child the name because it is a foreign name but

rather because the name has meaning for me in spite of being a foreign name. They then demanded to know what I meant by it and I answered that, by it, I meant "the first in a line that may neither be long nor straight". Of course they did not understand that and that was my point. All names in Lamnso are meaningful but only the name-giver knows the real nuance of the name because it is usually connected with some aspect of his/her personal experience. The experience of Nso people has gone far beyond Nso and Lamnso. Why should this not be reflected in names? In fact, one of the kings of Nso, Seem Mbum m (alias Mbinglo) named one of his sons born during the Second World War "Hitler". Another Nso prince is named "Chaff)" after a foreign doctor who worked in Nso.

But on these matters it is very easy to leave the corn and go after the chaff. There are people who think that wearing a western type of dress like a suit is a mark of being educated, prosperous or important while there are others who consider it a shameful sign of a colonised mind. But the dress you wear, just like the name you bear, while sometimes an index of self-expression, makes absolutely no difference as to what you are or what you think about any issue. Nothing of substance can be deduced from the mere fact that someone is dressed in a danshiki. In this connection, I always remind people that Nyerere answers "Julius" and Mandela answers "Nelson" and both wear western suits; whereas Sese Seko Mobutu, in an ostentatious "African authenticity" ceremony dropped "Joseph Desire" from his stock of names and capped his French suits, which for some reason he couldn't abandon, with a leopard skin cap.

May be dropping the name "James" made some personal difference to Ngugi. At the personal level, the widest freedom should be allowed in this area. But with regard to his work, both artistic and academic, and his struggles, both socio-political and academic, would it make any difference if he were still James Ngugi? Did bearing "Julius" in any way prevent Nyerere from being, so far, the only African Head of State to have made a convincing effort on behalf of his people instead of amassing personal wealth and to have quit power willingly and voluntarily? Did bearing "Nelson" prevent Mandela from fighting racism and dictatorship in South Africa to a halt? Names are neither here nor there. The food you eat and the clothes you wear have got nothing to do with it. I know a Catholic priest who could not do without "Beacon and Sausage" (Bickin and Shoshage) for breakfast but who contributed immensely towards Africanising the Church.

Conclusion

Africa's linguistic colonial legacy will not go away; it is in Africa to stay and it should stay. Africa's indigenous linguistic heritage, as it comes out from the

wings into centre stage, must come to terms with this fact and also with the related fact that the artificial national boundaries drawn by historical circumstances cannot be simply wished away but remain amenable to modifications under suitable circumstances.

From outside Africa, it is at both encouraging to see the interest shown by so many western Universities in African languages and worrying to contemplate the possibility that the study of African languages might end up as no more than an exotic field for western academic adventurers and their African assistants. On the continent itself, not much is being done and much cannot be done in most parts of Africa under the present circumstances. The University system in most African countries is today in a state of collapse for various reasons including, among others, laughably inadequate funding, explosion in student numbers, decay of University structures and infrastructures, flight of University Lecturers and intellectuals from economic hardship or political persecution to calmer greener pastures abroad, generalised social and economic chaos etc etc.

In most African countries today there exists a generalised sense of frustration among the entire citizenry arising from what we may, borrowing and extending an expression of Biodun Jeyifos⁷, call the arrested process of democratisation. The hopes raised in Africa in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the dictatorships of Eastern Europe and the false promises of the western power blocks to condition support and aid to African regimes on democratisation, have all ended in frustration if not despair. With a few exceptions, dictatorship is riding triumphant in most African countries with the connivance of the western democracies. First things will have to come first. Until the politico-economic situation changes for the better in most African countries, it is unrealistic to think that matters relating to language policies would be addressed in any serious or meaningful way.

Notes

¹ This paper was first read at an international conference: "1995 AFRICA "Breaking Boundaries: Beyond the land of Cush. New Critical Encounters with Languages and Literatures of Sub-Saharan Africa", Tel Aviv University, 18-23 June 1995. I am grateful to the German Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for an ongoing fellowship award which enabled me to write this paper. I thank Barry Wilkins, Sue Willdig and Wilhelm Vossenkuhl for critical comments on an earlier draft.

² In 1992, I published an article in *Quest: Philosophical Discussions* (Vol. VI, No.2, December 1992) on "Colonial legacy and the Language Situation in Cameroon". And some of my critics started talking about my "utilitarian conception of language" thereby giving the impression that I am a philosophical utilitarian. I am nothing of the sort. See, for instance, James Uroh, "Colonialism and the Language Question: A Reply to Godfrey Tangwa" (*Quest*, Vol. VIII, No. 2 December 1994).

³ For some telling differences between West Cameroonians and East Cameroonians from the point of view of a West Cameroonian, see "Our Mungo Bridges (Or what separates West

Cameroonians from East Cameroonians most tellingly"), *CAMEROONIAN LIFE*, July/August 1993 & October 1993.

- ⁴ Those particularly interested in this period, especially the last five years, can read the collection of essays, written by Rotcod Gobata: *The Past Tense of Shit* (Book One) [Nooremac Press 1993] and *I Spit on Their Graves* (Book Two of the Past Tense...) [forthcoming].
- ⁵ I have discussed some of these in the first part of my article "African Philosophy: appraisal of a recurrent problematic. Part 1: The Sources of Traditional African Philosophy.", *COGITO*, Summer 1992, pp. 82-84.
- ⁶ See "African Philosophy: appraisal of a recurrent problematic. Part 2: What is African Philosophy and Who is an African Philosopher?", *COGITO*, Winter 1992, pp. 142-143.
- ⁷ See *Research in African Literatures*, Spring 1990, Vol.21, No.1

COLONIALISM AND LINGUISTIC DILEMMAS IN AFRICA : CAMEROON AS A PARADIGM (REVISITED)

George Echu

Prolegomena

Godfrey Tangwa's article titled "Colonialism and Linguistic Dilemmas in Africa: Cameroon as a Paradigm" posits that the Berlin conference of 1884 constitutes a landmark in the history of Africa in that the continent was divided between European imperialists in an attempt to reap the benefits of its natural resources, without any regard for "the linguistic, cultural or political state of affairs on the continent". In fact, Tangwa's problematic is clearly stated in the following terms:

The linguistic dilemma facing African countries can be very simply stated: should African countries (themselves colonial creations) continue using the languages and systems of education inherited from colonialism or jettison these as undesirable colonial legacies in preference for indigenous languages and systems of education ?

The whole paper evolves around this pertinent and controversial question which has attracted a lot of intellectual debate in recent times. In other words, should African countries try to unmake history by refuting the past which remains part and parcel of them ? Is the choice really easy, if at all there is a choice to be made ? That is the question ; and there lies the main thrust of Tangwa's argumentation. The author's position is absolutely clear: Africans should continue using the received languages "as vehicles for national unity, integration, development, as well as for international and global interaction", while at the same time "reversing the colonial policy whereby indigenous language were purposely marginalised". This notwithstanding, he fails to propose a language planning policy whereby both the received languages on the one hand and indigenous language on the other could be used side by side for the benefit of Cameroonians in particular and Africans at large.

In handling this issue, which we consider to be primarily of linguistic concern, the author reveals that his mind is a highly critical one. The paper probes into a lot of socio-cultural and political questions, presented in an in-depth analytical manner. Yet, for the student of linguistics that Tangwa professes to be, he lacks the linguistic arguments to make his point. In our opinion, it would have been more rewarding if he carried out some detailed investigation into the Cameroonian linguistic history before seriously embarking on such a high level scientific and intellectual venture.

As stated earlier, Tangwa's paper addresses a very pertinent issue ; and this explains why it has attracted our attention. But given that the linguistic

aspect of the issue at stake is not given proper consideration, we think it is our duty to situate the 'linguistic dilemmas' as observed in the Cameroonian context in view of complementing important information that is inexplicably absent in the work.

Language Policy in Cameroon during the Colonial Era

The assertion that during the colonial period African languages were relegated to the background may not entirely be a truism. When we consider the policy of Indirect Rule as practised in territories administered by the British, we observe that here the use of indigenous languages was almost an imperative since the British made maximum use of traditional and native authorities in order to reach out to the people. Hence local languages remained an indispensable medium of communication at the service of the colonial administrator.

On the contrary, the French policy of Assimilation gave very little importance to indigenous languages given that frantic efforts were made to transform the indigenous population into Frenchmen. And how best could this objective be attained if priority was not given to the French language and culture? In his article, Tangwa fails to bring out this difference in approach which characterises the two main colonialists on the African continent.

As far as Cameroon is concerned, it is perhaps a regrettable oversight that Tangwa's paper makes no reference to Stumpf (1979) whose work presents a detailed account of language policy in Cameroon during the colonial period. In fact, all began with the Berlin Conference during which Germany 'officially' received the mandate to colonise Cameroon. However, prior to the arrival of the Germans, the Baptist Missionary Society of London, headed by Joseph Merrick, had touched the coastal town of Douala as early as November 1843. Before arriving Douala, they had first been to Fernando Po in 1841. Thus, the first missionary station was founded in Douala in 1843 and the second in Bimbia in 1844. In the area of education, the first missionary school was opened in Bimbia in 1844 and the second in Douala the following year. Victoria later followed suit; and in these schools, English and Duala were the languages of instruction. By 1887 when the Baptist Missionary Society left Cameroon for the Congo, their schools could boast of about 280 pupils who were taught in both English and Duala.

The German missionaries who arrived Cameroon at the beginning of the German colonial period did not relent efforts in using indigenous languages for education and evangelisation. But in 1897, the colonial administration, through Governor Von Puttkammer, put a ban on the use of indigenous languages in schools. Only the German language was henceforth to be used for education. Furthermore, in 1900, a colonial law known as the 'Schutzgebietgesetz' gave the

missionaries the right to carry out only their evangelisation mission in local languages.

Seen from this perspective, indigenous languages were not completely jettisoned ; they continued to play an important role in the socio-cultural life of Cameroonians, given that languages such as Bulu, Basa'a, Ewondo, Duala, Mungaka and Fulfulde were taught and widely used for evangelisation (Mbuagbaw, 2000: 135). Secondly, in view of the fact that up till 1907 all the existing schools in the territory were mission schools, it was rather difficult for the colonial administration to have full control of the language policy as practised by the missionaries. In other words, the colonial language policy as prescribed by the German administration in Cameroon was hardly rigorously applied by the missionaries. This can be testified by the fact that when the first public school was opened in 1907, the German administration issued an order to the effect that German was henceforth to be the only language to be used for education - as if this had not been done before. But how could such a language policy be efficient where only six primary and three agricultural public schools existed in the territory prior to the First World War, as against more than a hundred schools opened and ran by the missionaries in the Western and Southern parts of the country? In fact, throughout the German colonial period, indigenous languages continued to enjoy a somewhat comfortable position - more comfortable than did the German language.

In 1916, following the defeat of Germany in Cameroon during World War I, Cameroon was shared between Great Britain and France. The territory under British mandate continued to use some indigenous languages like Duala, Bafut, Kenyang and Mungaka, alongside with English in schools (Bitja'a Kody, 1999: 82). In French-speaking Cameroon, there existed perpetual conflict between missionaries who persisted in the use of indigenous languages and the French colonial administration. The latter took a series of measures aimed at promoting French, while at the same time relegating indigenous languages to the background. In 1917, the French colonial administration instituted a special subvention for schools which used French as the language of instruction. Eventually, schools that taught in indigenous languages were suppressed. This is expressed in decisions rendered public on 1 October 1920 and 28 December 1920 whereby the 47 schools opened by King Njoya in the Bamun region wherein Bamun was the language of education were all closed down. As from 1922, 1800 schools run by the American Presbyterian missionaries, and in which Bulu was taught, suffered the same fate. This systematic linguistic persecution (cf. Stumpf, 1979) was carried out with vigour, until French became the sole language in use for education. This notwithstanding, indigenous languages continued to serve not only for evangelisation but also for popular communication. In other words, while the official language remained the monopoly of official communication, the indigenous languages dominated unofficial communication in churches, the market place, cultural celebrations, ritual ceremonies, the home, etc.

How else could these languages reveal their vitality ? Cameroon's unique situation of 248 indigenous languages (cf. Breton and Bikia Fohtung, 1991) is not the least easy to deal with. Such linguistic diversity has been at the background of the complicated language equation for Cameroon. For those who find solace today in contenting themselves with the fact that the colonialists did everything to relegate Cameroonian indigenous languages to the background, the question to be asked them is simply what they have done so far to remedy the situation, be it at the individual, community or institutional level.

Language Policy in Post-colonial Cameroon

If the colonial powers in Cameroon and elsewhere in the continent were bent on promoting their respective languages, it is undoubtedly due to the fact that these languages were the main tool of European colonisation. Language being the vehicle if not the expression of culture, would it have been possible for the Europeans to effectively colonise Africans without imparting the European languages ? This explains why during the colonial period indigenous languages were somewhat marginalised, although such marginalisation was carried out in an uneven manner by the different colonial powers.

As power changed hands at independence one should have expected a sudden reversal of language policy, given that colonial power had now given way to black power. Unfortunately, this was not the case ; some African countries like Cameroon barely continued with the colonial language policy. The two colonial languages (English and French) continued to remain official languages for several reasons. First, owing to the multitude of indigenous languages, it seemed more reasonable to resort to the European languages, being 'no man's languages' in the African context, rather than choose any of the indigenous languages for official purposes. Needless to mention that political officials at the time feared an impending language conflict if they acted otherwise. Secondly, given that the indigenous languages were not standardised, adopting them for official purposes could have entailed a lot of investment and sacrifice in terms of manpower and financial resources. In addition, prior to independence, very few of these languages were relatively well developed, let alone standardised. Although the Bible had been translated into languages such as Duala, Bulu and Mungaka, the bulk of the rest could neither boast of didactic material appropriate for teaching, nor any form of codification. Hence the difficulty in using them as languages of instruction. Adopting European languages as official languages thus presented relative economic advantages at the time, more so in view of the fact that communication with the international community whether through diplomacy or trade would be greatly facilitated.

Of course, these arguments do in no way spare Cameroon of the blame of having failed to adopt a national language policy for the country. In fact,

whereas some African countries such as Nigeria, Senegal and Central African Republic have come up with well defined language policies that give due consideration to indigenous languages, Cameroon, with its characteristic indecision, is still lagging behind. In Nigeria, Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa have long been elevated to the status of national languages. There, they do not only serve as vehicles for education, but are also studied up to University level. The case of Cameroon is rather pathetic in this regard. According to Chumbow (1996: 7-8):

A proposal to select six zonal languages for Cameroon and teach them at the University of Yaounde was implemented for a while in the middle sixties, but was suppressed for fear that those whose language was not selected (i.e. the majority) will revolt.

Such fears have made the choice of one or more national languages an impossibility for Cameroonian authorities, who have resorted since the National Council for Cultural Affairs held in Yaounde in December 1974 to considering all the 248 indigenous languages as 'national' languages.

Although successive governments since reunification in 1961 have been more concerned with promoting the policy of official language bilingualism, it would be unfair to lose sight of the developments in the area of mother tongue education and the development of indigenous languages. Many critics of language policy such as Tangwa unfortunately consider the issue strictly from government's role. For them, the absence of a clearly defined language policy in successive Constitutions of the country (1961, 1972, 1984) suffices to make sweeping statements that are sometimes devoid of steam.

Issues of language policy are certainly the responsibility of States and governments ; however, the role of local councils, village communities and the local elite cannot be under-estimated. In fact, community initiative has been instrumental in influencing language policy in post-independent Cameroon. Although for a long time, no clear policy statement existed on the national language question in matters of teaching, use for education and dissemination, the 1996 revised Constitution made provision for the development and promotion of national languages in education as indispensable aspects of Cameroon's national identity. Such a decision was facilitated thanks to the National Education Forum held in Yaounde in 1995 during which many participants were favourable to the teaching of national languages in schools. Then in 1998, "the parliament passed a bill on the general orientation of education in Cameroon with special emphasis on the teaching of national languages. This bill was subsequently promulgated into law N° 004 of April 1998 by the Head of State" (Mba and Chiatoh, 2000: 5). Although the Ministry of National Education is yet to outline the practical modalities for the application of this law, there is no doubt that the stage is set for eventual action.

Furthermore, as far as mother tongue education in Cameroon is concerned, PROPELCA (Programme de Recherche Opérationnelle pour l'Enseignement des Langues au Cameroun) has been working relentlessly since

1977 under the auspices of Maurice Tadadjeu, professor in Linguistics at the University of Yaounde I. These efforts in the promotion of Cameroonian languages have equally been sustained by SIL-Cameroon, CABTAL (Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy) and NACALCO (National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees). Mention should also be made of the fact that as early as 1979, the National Committee for the Unification and Harmonisation of Alphabets in Cameroon languages adopted the harmonisation of the writing system of Cameroonian languages (cf. Tadadjeu and Sadembouo, 1979). It goes without saying that mother tongue education at the early stages of primary education as conceived by researchers working in this domain will soon be a reality.

The Way Forward

As earlier observed, the policy of official language bilingualism is so challenging that it constitutes in itself the main core of Cameroon's language policy. Although political speeches since the time of President Ahidjo have always talked of the promotion of indigenous languages without clearly spelling out any orientations in this regard, the message is, however, simple. Article 1, paragraph 3 of the Constitution of 18 January 1996 states:

The official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status. The State shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages.

That the present Constitution mentions the issue of national languages whereas previous Constitutions were simply silent on the question is rather significant. And although the State seems to assume the guiding role as clearly stated in the aforementioned Constitution, it equally encourages private initiative in this domain. This explains why experimental projects in the area of teaching and research have long been carried out through private initiative with the silent approval of the government. Such initiatives as observed through the action of SIL-Cameroon, CABTAL, NACALCO, etc. constitute the way forward in the right direction. Consequently, we do agree that our 'national' languages be encouraged and developed through mother tongue education, standardisation, teaching and research, as well as their effective use at the socio-cultural level. As Chumbow (1996:5) rightly points out, there is no doubt that "the early use of the mother tongue in education has significant long term benefits with respect to maximising the development of the intellectual potential of the child".

It goes without saying that a trilingual language policy model whereby English, French and indigenous languages are encouraged not only in education but also in other domains will reap considerable benefits for Cameroonians.

Such a model could equally be applicable to other African countries, for as Chumbow (1996: 3) remarks:

The colonial linguistic heritage (vehicle of modern science and technology) must be reconciled with the African linguistic heritage (vehicle of indigenous knowledge and culture), indispensable in the development of nations that are not only modern and viable, but also African in the same way that technologically viable Japan is Japanese. The task of nation-building in Africa therefore involves reconciling the colonial legacy with the African heritage as a pre-condition for take off in the direction of the ideal for national development.

This endeavour is not solely the responsibility of the State ; it is the challenge of each and every member of the community to ensure that both the indigenous languages and foreign languages are promoted. Cameroonians of good will should understand that it is their responsibility to learn not only the official languages but also one or more indigenous languages. Neither policy statements nor their practical implementation suffice ; individual effort remains the gateway to success.

Cameroonians in particular and Africans in general should thus take the bull by the horns now. It is unreasonable waiting for a *Godot* who will never come. Consequently, we therefore beg to differ with Tangwa that “until the politico-economic situation changes for the better in most African countries, it is unrealistic to think that matters relating to language policies would be addressed in any serious or meaningful way”. To say this will entail that matters pertaining to language policy are linked solely to political and economic considerations. Such a vision is grossly erroneous, for socio-cultural factors are equally of great relevance. To begin with, Africans must themselves show interest in their indigenous languages and cease to consider them inferior to received languages. Language attitudes of this nature do in no way give our indigenous languages their due place in African civilisation.

Thus a balanced language policy will become effective when mother tongue education is introduced in the early years of primary education (say the first two years), the official language being introduced later on. Such a policy will only be realistically implemented gradually where possible, especially in the rural areas. The indigenous language of a particular rural area will thus be used in teaching and promoted at different levels. And, where applicable, one or more indigenous languages could be promoted at the sub-divisional, divisional or provincial levels. Once more, through government endeavour, local councils, language committees and individual initiative, the teaching of English and French on the one hand and indigenous languages on the other should be encouraged nation-wide.

The issues Tangwa raises in his paper are certainly crucial not only as far as the Cameroonian context is concerned, but more globally as far as the African

situation is concerned. If we judged it necessary to revisit his article, it was because of the need to fill the vacuum created more by error than by design. This done, it is hoped that the reader will have a more comprehensive vision of the issues at stake.

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AFRICA AND ITS LINGUISTIC PROBLEMATIC

Lansana Keita

The study and the classifications of the languages of Africa have traditionally been monopolized by European linguists who invariably approached the topic from an Eurocentric standpoint. This research standpoint was determined to a large extent by considerations of "race" as configured by orthodox European anthropology. I seek to critically examine and revise the current modes of classifying the language of Africa. I also discuss the issue of the current usages and possible futures of the European colonial languages in Africa.

One of the direct products of the European colonization of Africa is that while the African continent is home to approximately 750 languages, the languages of official communication and modernism are those of the erstwhile colonial powers. For example, there are few African countries where university and technical education are conducted in indigenous languages. The reason for this is the same one that led to the colonization of the African continent in the first instance. The colonization of Africa by Europe (specifically the six nations of France, Britain, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, and Germany) was due to the qualitative differences in technological development at the midpoint of the last century (i.e., the nineteenth century).

The technological advantage of the maxim gun made it possible that vast areas of Africa would be colonized by single European powers. These powers were then free to forcefully bring these vast areas under the official control of single European languages. Another technological advantage enjoyed by the European colonizers was that their languages were written, hence imbued with the power of permanence. This was indeed a situation fraught with irony since the earliest written languages in the world were of African origin: ancient Egyptian and ancient Nubian. The classical Ethiopic language of Ge'ez, Hausa, and Swahili are also languages with a long written tradition, and longer than most indigenous European languages. When I say, "indigenous European languages," I refer to extinct and never written European languages such as Pict, Vandal, Gallic, Saxon, and so on. In fact the vast majority of indigenous European languages are now extinct and have left no identifiable trace.

The European languages that were imposed on Africa during the colonial era are in reality hybrid languages, heavily influenced by the equally hybrid languages of Latin and Greek. It is now more than thirty years since the end of formal colonialism in Africa, but the colonial languages still hold sway and the old post-independence questions still have not been settled. Examples of such questions are: what is the future role of the colonial languages in African society? Should one adopt a pragmatic attitude and preserve the colonial languages for the access they provide to modern science, technology, and knowledge? Are there

cultural and psychic costs for an unchallenged and continuing reliance on the colonial languages of Europe? These are the questions I propose to discuss in this essay on what I refer to as Africa's linguistic problematic. These questions have been already variously discussed by theorists of African literature, and some answers are well known. But I add to the discussion by exploring in metatheoretical fashion the very idea of "African languages" and their relationship to European discourse about language classification in general.

What is immediately evident concerning any study of the languages of Africa is that the classification of these languages have been for the most part conducted by European language scholars. What is also evident is that the historical analysis and dialogue concerning the languages of Africa have been structured according to assumptions heavily influenced by principles of Eurocentrism.

Thus, in this essay I shall proceed as follows: I shall first examine the value-laden historical and sociological bases on which the study of African languages were undertaken. I shall then examine the phenomenological content of such languages to determine how they influence the psychology of European and African speakers. Finally, I shall offer possible solutions to the question of colonial languages in Africa.

Africa and the Phenomenological Content of European Languages

The question concerning the role of European languages in African society is a controversial one given both the circumstances under which these languages were introduced to Africa and the linguistic terms and discourses that developed out of these specific circumstances. On the one hand, in a general way, there is what might be called the pragmatist approach and on the other, the phenomenological approach. The pragmatists would argue that there is nothing untoward to having European languages as the official languages in contemporary African society because such languages are already in place and they offer a gateway to forms of knowledge and expression that are international in scope.¹

The well-known novelist Chinua Achebe is an example of the pragmatist position. Achebe believes that English could be used quite effectively by Africans in ways reflective of the specificity of African interpretive and cultural experiences.² On the other side there are well-known African writers who believe that a post-colonial Africa should seek to restore its agency by reverting to its indigenous languages for both written and speech purposes. The well-known arguments of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o offer good examples of the phenomenological approach. According to this author it is the languages of Europe introduced to Africa by way of the colonial and neocolonial educational systems that ultimately represented the power of Europe that "fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (286).

West African philosopher Marcien Towa also expresses the urgency of the situation with his observation that "the linguistic problem is one of the fundamental problems of the African. The linguistic problem conditions the construction of an African ensemble at the continental level" (178). This comes after the recognition that certain interpretive and phenomenological blockages arise when the African author seeks to express in the colonial language certain thoughts and ideas that are properly germane to a local African language. This problem is so evident that even European authors express similar sentiments. There is the general belief that Tolstoy or Kant are best understood in their original languages of Russian or German, even when professional translations into other cognate European languages are made.

Yet Towa recognizes that the problem may even reduce to that of language mastery for whatever purposes; he emphasizes the importance of an inter-regional language such as Swahili for communication in Africa while retaining the colonial languages for communication with the non-African world (178). Matters are complicated by the fact that the idea of post-colonial literature in the colonial languages is now being positively embraced in some quarters on account of the infusions of new usages and phenomenologies on the part of the contemporary African. This approach partially resembles that of Achebe's but with an important difference. Whereas Achebe seems to recognize an equality of importance between the colonial languages and the local ones, some authors, supportive of the new creative ways in which the colonial languages have been used, ascribe an increasing importance to the colonial languages on account of an assumed quality of modernism.

This model derives possibly from a recognition of the development of modern languages in Europe. The myriad languages that Europeans spoke for thousands of years before the imposition of Latin on most of Europe have disappeared for the most part. French, English, German, and Spanish are relatively modern hybrid languages that have developed out of local European vernaculars embellished mostly by the colonial languages of Latin and Greek. It should be noted that the local languages of Europe were constrained to borrow heavily from Latin and Greek in order to express abstract and theoretical ideas. In this regard it is ironic how Eurocentric linguists of colonial times sought to contrast Europe's languages with those of Africa on the basis of capacity for abstract thought of the former, a quality which the latter supposedly lacked. But the colonization of Europe's linguistic patrimony by Latin and Greek need not be repeated in Africa with the European colonial languages playing a role similar to Latin and Greek. The reason is that there are major languages of Africa that were well established in written form before the advent of the European colonists. These are the languages of Swahili, Hausa, Ge'ez, Arabic, and others.

Authors such as Gérard have recognized this fact but with some qualification. Gérard and others would argue that Swahili, though possessing a written past, is a hybrid language (48). This is an error. Swahili is no more hybrid than French,

Yoruba, or any number of languages spoken in Europe or Africa. In the case of Swahili there are some Arabic loan words due to the fact that the language was developed in a geographical area where individuals of different ethnic backgrounds engaged extensively in trade. In this regard the origins of Swahili are no different from those of several other extant languages. I suspect that if the loan words in Swahili were from some language regarded as Bantu there would be little discussion from Eurocentric linguistic sources. But we should note that even if Arabic is regarded as belonging to some distinct Afro-Asiatic language family, this language group has its origins in East Africa.

The linguistic classification "Afro-Asiatic" was coined mainly on the basis that Arabic was developed in Arabia, a region of West Asia. Yet there are more logically compelling reasons to regard Arabia as Africa minor (Eurocentric discourse speaks of Asia minor with regard to places like Turkey) than as part of Asia. What this discussion demonstrates is the important implications (linguistic, sociological, etc.) that flow from the arbitrary assumptions of Eurocentric discourse.

Yet we cannot escape the debate concerning the role of Europe's languages in post-colonial Africa. As suggested above the fundamental issue is the phenomenological content of Africa's languages of Europe and their compatibility with the languages of Europe. I would want to qualify this question though with the observation that on account of the universality of the principles of empirical science and its emphasis on objectivist analysis, the phenomenological question concerning Europe's languages in Africa would be of lesser importance in this area. Proof of this claim could be had from the fact that Asian scientists of Chinese and Japanese extraction often publish articles in English, which does not appear to hinder their analytical skills. But in the more creative and subjectivist areas of discourse such as poetry, literature, and music the phenomenological question assumes importance. One interesting point though - which again tends to support my contention - African writers, poets, and musicians are able to express their ideas, from a phenomenological viewpoint better in the Mediterranean languages of French, Portuguese, and Spanish than in the other colonial languages of English and German. The point is that even for the untrained ear Mediterranean modes of expression seem less incongruous in an African context than those from other areas of Europe. Perhaps there is a linguistic basis for this given the proximity of the Mediterranean culture area to Africa and the seemingly sharp divide that one discerns between the languages and cultures of northern Europe and Mediterranean Europe.

But is the phenomenological question really about the incompatibility of different discourses or is it one of conditions of agency? Western theoreticians of the epistemologies of language such as Whorf (1952) and Quine (1960) have argued that different languages are like different epistemological nets cast on the world to capture different aspects of it. What this means is that what we know about the world are not facts existing independently of us but different meanings

ascribed to our separate sensate experiences. And Quine spoke of the incompatibility of different discourses apparent through translations. This idea constitutes the heart of his interesting text *Word and Object*. The thesis concerning the contingency of linguistic meaning has also gained much currency in recent times within the research area known as the "strong programme in the sociology of knowledge" (Barnes, 1977).

Thus it seems evident that some meanings are necessarily lost whenever translations are made between any languages. One might consider the hypothetical solution of Englishmen having to discuss their daily affairs in Hausa, say. The very thought of this strikes us as incongruous. One obvious reason for linguistic incompatibilities is that every natural language is not just a set of words joined together by syntactical rules but a body of particularistic meanings developed over time. This is indeed one of the problems with interlinguistic adoptions.

But is the question only one of interlinguistic incompatibilities or does it also entail the human psychological cost of alienation? In fact, the "alienation" argument is one of those frequently heard concerning African usage of European languages especially in those areas regarding the phenomenological aspects of human experience. But is this always the case? In the case of the European context consider the case of individuals of Jewish ethnic extraction who have lived in many European countries and have participated in the intellectual life of these countries, all using different languages. Was Jewish intellectual life in Europe thereby alienated for several centuries? This does not appear to have been the case. Maimonides, Spinoza, Marx, Trotsky, and Einstein were individuals of Jewish extraction who did not write in Hebrew but made significant contributions to the intellectual life of Europe over many centuries. These intellectuals of Jewish extraction were certainly Europeans though they were not fully recognized as such for most of the history of Europe.

Consider too the case of the peopling of the United States of America by individuals of linguistic heritage other than English. Yet I doubt whether American scholars of Polish, German or Hungarian extraction experience any phenomenological misgivings about expressing their thoughts in English - a language alien to their cultural heritages. Yet it would be viewed somewhat differently for a Native American Navajo to write an authentic novel in English depicting Navajo cultural life. Perhaps the question here is one of agency. American writers of European but non-English ancestry are not really affected by having to write in English. Since the migration of Europeans to the Americas was mainly voluntary, human agency was expressed. Furthermore, the languages of Europe do not contain terms and meanings which view European cultural others as dehumanized beings lacking in agency.

But this is not the case with European Languages vis á vis Africa. European language usage brackets the African in ways that create specific ontologies alien to those of African languages. Terms such as negro, black, primitive, uncivilized tribe, tribal, sub-Saharan Africa, black Africa, true negro, negroid, Hamite,

Hamitic, Bantu, savage, first world, third world, évolu  , and so on, do not exist in any African language. These are merely value-laden terms with dehumanizing and pejorative intent, added to the languages of Europe reflective of the unequal encounter between European and African in the last five hundred years. The truth is that the African occupies a special place in the ontologies of the languages of Europe. This special place is one reflective of a racial caste system in which terms have been created to define the African as a being of less human worth than that of the European. In the Americas, the location of the brutal captivity of West African by Spaniard, Portuguese, English, Dutch, French, and Dane, the languages of its inhabitants reflect the racial and caste obsessions of the European settler. The punctilious taxonomy of so-called racial types created for the lexicons of the Portuguese, French, Spanish, and English (to a lesser extent) demonstrates that the African is always viewed as a biological being occupying particular rungs on a racial hierarchy. According to these linguistic usages, civilization, culture, aesthetic values, and so on are defined by the European for the purpose of European agency and hegemony.

The task then for persons of African heritage who use the languages of Europe is to purge them of their anti-African concepts in order to create neutral ontological spaces for African discourse. But given that the languages of Europe are still spoken by Europeans who express a vested interest in maintaining cultural and economic hegemony over the African world the task of reconfiguring these languages for African usage may prove somewhat daunting. Yet the task of reconfiguration is still worthwhile so long as Africans see themselves constrained to use the languages of Europe in whatever dimension. In fact, the linguistic task at hand is a dual one: the promotion of two or three African languages for intercontinental currency and the sanitizing of the languages of Europe so that African agency be restored. In the case of the Americas there are four international languages of United Nations usage: French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. In Asia the languages of Chinese and Japanese are recognized for international usage while in Africa only Arabic enjoys United Nations recognition. Hausa and Swahili could quite easily be added to Africa's international language roster.

Reinventing the Languages of Europe

In terms of the reconfiguration of Europe's languages for African usage one might consider the following examples. The term "negro," for example is strictly of European provenance and has no real sociological significance in any analysis of Africa's peoples. Historically, Africans have always referred to themselves in terms of linguistic, regional, and ethnic affiliations, not according to the simple-minded notion of pigmentation. In the modern era only the addition of nationality to the above list is acceptable. But despite its questionable content the terms "negro" has been massively abused since its conception. It was the central concept

in the Eurocentric historiography of Africa and its peoples. The usual strategy of the part of the Eurocentric historian (who usually fancied himself also as an anthropologist) was to determine *a priori* whether such and such an African people were "negroes" or not, then to proceed to write a speculative history *cum* anthropology based on that simplistic assumption. In the Western Hemisphere the standard Eurocentric procedure was to analyze the period of captivity and forced labor of Africans there as "negro history"

But the usage of the Eurocentric term "negro" persists even if changed into "black" for English language usage. Hence instead of "negro Africa" we now have "black Africa" or its euphemistic equivalent "sub-Sahara Africa." Eurocentric discourse speaks of "sub-Saharan Africa" as a simple mechanism for divorcing most of its inhabitants from any cultural or historical connection with the rest of Africa and its environs. The invented or real pathologies that afflict so-called sub-Saharan Africa are mysteriously supposed not to affect "supra-Saharan African." It is in the spirit of this discussion that the Eurocentric term "negro" and its euphemistic permutations (black, negroid, sub-Saharan, and so on) should be evaluated for African usage.

Another example is that of the term "tribe." The term derives from the Latin word *tribus* that signified the three original peoples of Rome but is now used exclusively in the languages of Europe to refer to the sub-national groups in Africa, provided that those groups are not of European provenance. European discourse reserves the term "ethnic group" or "people" for equivalent groups of European origin (the Afrikaners of South Africa are never referred to officially as a tribe). On the contrary, usage of the term "tribe" or "tribal" in Eurocentric discourse refers in strictly emotive fashion to societies that are primordial or primitive (another favorite Eurocentric term vis á vis Africa) in all dimensions. Political action on the part of European communities is usually described as "ethnic conflict" while similar actions in Africa are viewed emotively as "tribal strife." The behaviors in both instances are similar, but the images are different.

Another interesting example of how Eurocentric discourse constructs specific ontologies for Africans in that concerning the post-colonial African world. The terms "francophone," "anglophone," and "lusitaphone" are reserved only for so-called "sub-Saharan Africa." The ex-French colonial territories of North African and South-east Asia (Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, etc.) are almost never referred to as francophone areas. And unfortunately the colonized mentality of post-colonial Africa would seem to endorse these divisive constructions.

Concluding Remarks

The problem concerning linguistic discourse and communication in contemporary Africa are but an aspect of the continent's general problems. In the above discussion I pointed out how the questions of Africa's languages have been

answered from the standpoint of Eurocentric discourse. This Eurocentric hegemony constitutes one aspect of Africa's linguistic problematic. Thus a critical examination of the prevailing Eurocentric linguistics of Africa is to be encouraged. I also pointed out the usage of Europe's colonial languages by African writers should be an enterprise of much circumspection - given the peculiar European-engendered phenomenology of Africa's peoples and cultures since the fifteenth century. Briefly, the languages of Europe should be purged of all usage that denies agency and confers a lesser humanity on Africans. Despite the myriad problems of the contemporary era Africans now have greater freedoms to develop creative solutions to the linguistic problem. One such suggestion was to establish one or two *lingua francas* for the African World, which includes not only the African continent but areas where relatively large numbers of persons of African origin reside. After all, the world has no problem with the fact that most speakers of Spanish or Portuguese do not live in Spain or Portugal respectively.

Notes

- ¹ Key elements of the pragmatist thesis are expressed in Edwin Okafor, "Hégémonie de L'anglais au Nigeria," *Presence Africaine* 133-134 (1985): 3-18.
- ² See Chinua Achebe, "The African Writes and the English Language," in *Morning yet on Creation Day*, (New York: Anchor Press, 1975) 91-103. But note the following: "...but I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (103).

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‘CULTURES DO NOT EXIST’
EXPLODING SELF-EVIDENCES
IN THE
INVESTIGATION OF INTERCULTURALITY

Wim van Binsbergen

to Richard Fardon

1. *Introduction*

When upon Heinz Kimmerle’s retirement in 1995 the chair of intercultural philosophy at the philosophical faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, fell vacant and the post was advertised, candidates were examined in the light of two major requirements: a sound knowledge of at least one non-European ‘culture’, and acquaintance with the Western philosophical tradition. As an anthropologist with extensive fieldwork experience in five African situations¹ I for one can claim the first point, but precisely that relative expertise has inspired the provocative title of this argument, originally delivered as my inaugural lecture when I succeeded Kimmerle. ‘Cultures do not exist’, I will argue. Not so much in order to render the designation of the chair on intercultural philosophy inherently problematic (for surely if cultures do not exist, the adjective ‘intercultural’ as characterisation of a branch of philosophy cannot have any meaning), but in order to indicate the hand luggage² that I shall take with me to Philosophers’ Land. This hand luggage comprises

- first, insights that have been gathered in empirical research and that intercultural philosophy ought to take to heart; but also, secondly,
- philosophical problems that have been largely ignored in the context of cultural anthropology’s empiricism as for over a century has constituted the main mode of producing allegedly valid intercultural knowledge in academia.

This indicates the tension currently characterising my work. I have recently given up my chair in the social sciences for one in philosophy, but clearly I am not (yet) a philosopher — I continue to have difficulty reproducing and articulating ideas that seem to be self-evident to every philosopher, and I I think I detect insurmountable problems in philosophical texts that to philosophers appear to be particularly well argued.

The structure of my argument is as follows. To begin with, I shall indicate how the concept of 'culture' has taken root as a key concept in our contemporary social experience and in philosophy. Precisely because it has done so, it is of the greatest importance to subject to empirical and philosophical scrutiny such self-evidences as attach to 'culture'. Now more than ever, the process of globalisation has brought together within a common political space a plurality of self-reflexive and militant identities; as this text is being finalised for the press, the truth of this statement is driven home by the violence against military and civilian targets in the USA on 11th September, 2001, probably caused by Middle Eastern Muslims holding just such a diabolical enemy image of the USA as the Americans do of them. *An adequate analysis of this kind of situations will be of decisive importance for the fate of humanity in the first centuries of the third millennium CE.*³ As a next step, I shall explore the conditions under which my claim that 'cultures do not exist' may acquire meaningfulness. Since in this connection I put forth the social sciences as an example for philosophy, I am compelled to discuss the place of empirical knowledge within philosophy. I shall stress that intercultural philosophy ought to take into account such knowledge as the empirical sciences have gathered through explicit and well-tried methods; and here I am thinking particularly of the empirical discourse on African ethnicity, and of the neo-diffusionist arguments in favour of extensive cultural connections in space and time informing Africa's cultural history and its place in the world as a whole. But as a next step I shall argue — by reference to my own complex itinerary through Africanist cultural anthropology — how this particular empirical science, despite its unmistakable relevance for intercultural philosophy, is yet so philosophically naïve, and so disposed towards a North Atlantic epistemological perspective from an epistemological point of view, that cultural anthropology can at best constitute a mere point of departure for our theoretical explorations of interculturality. Finally I posit that intercultural mediation ideally situates itself beyond any specific cultural orientation, which allows me to characterise intercultural philosophy as the search for a transgressive and innovative, metacultural medium for the production of knowledge. It is the quest itself which makes this a commendable undertaking, even though its metacultural goal is unlikely to be ever reached.

2. 'Cultures' in contemporary society

Ever since the end of the eighteenth century CE, in Western scholarship and subsequently in North-Atlantic society as a whole the concept of 'culture' has developed to acquire such great self-evidence that it has almost assumed a transcendental nature; in the latter respect therefore the concept of culture has come to be somewhat comparable to time, space, causality and substance — which in Kant's philosophy are the basic categories utilised by human thought

but not derived from sensory perception.⁴ Appropriated by the wider society, the concept of ‘culture’ combines claims of totality, unicity, integration, boundedness, and non-performativity. According to this conception, a human being does at any one moment of time have, not a plurality of intersecting ‘cultural orientations’ co-existing simultaneously, but only one ‘culture’, and in that ‘culture’ she lives her entire life as if she has no option, as if displaying the distinctive features that mark her as an adherent of that culture are free from ostentatiousness and from strategically calculated effect upon her social environment — free from performativity. The claim that such an allegedly unitary culture forms an integrated whole, springs forth from two kind of considerations:

- people’s assumption that, as far as human individuals are concerned, whatever is cultural, is the attribute of *one (allegedly integrated) individual personality*;
- ‘culture’ produces a meaningful world, that is to say produces the illusion of a self-evidence that can only exist by virtue of the fact that no manifest limitations and boundary conditions are imposed upon that self-evidence in the consciousness of the bearer of that culture; for the sake of maintaining that illusion of self-evidence, of a self-evident universe contained in, and implied by, ‘a culture’, such a ‘culture’ has to be holistic (i.e. geared to a totality, a whole), and by consequence is implicitly intolerant of diversity.

In the last analysis we are dealing here with an implicit claim to universality made by the individual for her ‘culture’. This mechanism was already recognised by Kant when he claimed that whoever considers something beautiful, takes it for granted that it would be beautiful to anyone.⁵

Moreover the above, unitary concept of ‘culture’ implies the assumption (and here lies the link with ethnicity) that this one ‘culture’ can be adequately designated by means of an ethnonym: ‘*Dutch culture*’, ‘*Chinese culture*’, ‘the culture of the *Zambian Nkoya*, of the *Nigerian Yoruba*, of the *South African Zulu*’, and so on. This produces the classic image that anthropologists have by now largely discarded but that still has wide circulation outside anthropology: the image of Africa as a gaudy patchwork quilt of fundamentally different ‘cultures’, each of which constitutes an integrated, bounded totality. Nor is this conception of ‘culture’ limited to that of a merely descriptive category for the human situation: in contemporary public culture, the use of the concept of ‘culture’ has come to be closely associated with ethical and political judgements based on whether or not the person so judged shows respect for someone else’s ‘culture’

What does it mean if someone insists that others should show respect for her own ‘culture’? It means more or less what follows. In a concrete interaction situation, where a person seeks to reinforce her claims to scarce resources (such

as prestige, the right to vote, a residence permit, access to the markets of housing, education, employment, the liberties listed in catalogues of human rights), that person may explicitly appeal to a certain idea that has already been privileged by public opinion, and by bureaucratic and political practices and regulations. This is the idea that a person, not by her own free choice but by a determination in his innermost essence and totality, represents not only a universal but also a specific (notably *cultural*, or 'ethnic') mode of being human, a mode that she has in common with only a (usually quite small) small *sub*-section of humanity, on the grounds of a history shared with the other members of that sub-section, and expressed through practices specific to that sub-section as acquired through a learning process (e.g. speaking a common language).

In this insistence on respect a number of heterogeneous elements come together in the most surprising way: totality, essentialism, pluralism, the definition and structuring of the public space as multicultural, political strategy, and performativity. The respect claim expresses a conception according to which 'culture' represents a person's total commitment, constituting the essence of that person. 'Culture' becomes the central identity; and like other identities, it legitimates itself by means of the construction of a subject that claims, with Luther: 'Here I stand, I have no option.' Interestingly, the person in question can only exhort others to respect his own 'culture', by himself taking a distance for his cultural existence, objectivating the latter and making it a topic of conversation. And such a distancing makes one aware of the cultural and ethnic otherness of others, of the accidental, contingent, nature of one's own cultural and ethnic identity, as if one had, in fact, an option to end up with a different identity.⁶

This lends a double layer of performativity to the respect claim: that claim is explicitly performed within the public space,⁷ on the basis of a conscious distancing from the self, while the self has wanted, effected, perceived, and evaluated, the effect that that claim has on other people. In the contemporary world the convincing, *public stance* of authenticity and integrity (which in itself is performative and therefore inherently self-defeating) is indispensable in order to render *strategic* identity claims successful — in order to gain recognition.

The respect claim displays a typical contradiction of post-modern North Atlantic society: whatever is introduced, in a strategic and performative manner, into the public arena, is no longer allowed to be explicitly discussed in terms of strategy and performativity; on the contrary, public opinion, pressures towards politically correctness (i.e. social etiquette), and even formal socio-legal rules (anti-discrimination legislation) are conducive to a situation where in public-arena expressions these elements are explicitly referred to in terms of 'authenticity'. The concept of 'culture' (as a thinking in terms of 'cultures', plural) embodies this contraction. It is not a sign of bad faith. On the contrary, this contradiction is inevitable given contemporary conditions. Constituting itself by reference to 'culture', self-identity is always and inevitably situated in a

field of tension between self-evidence and performativity. Thus the concept of 'culture' offers a contemporary solution for the perennial problem of society: how to negotiate the tension between individual and community. This makes 'culture' one of the principal empowering concepts at the disposal of political actors in the local, national and global arenas of our time.

The great attraction of this concept of 'culture' turns out to lie precisely in its capability of encompassing and concealing *contradictions*.

A social-science readership, in the present post-Marxist era, would be likely to realise that here I am referring to a formal, highly abstract conception of society, and of any social institution, relationship, situation, and event, not as a structure or flow of concrete objects and persons but as a bundling of contradictions. A philosophical readership however might have to be specifically alerted to such a sociological view. Of course, the contradiction as a model of thought is a precondition for dialectics and has a splendid pedigree in mainstream philosophy. Yet philosophers (with the exception of post-structuralists and Marxists) may be inclined to consider the articulation of contradictions not an end in itself (as it would be for the anthropologist describing the formal abstract structure of a ritual in terms of contradictions between generations, genders, modes of production, conceptions of power and legitimacy, etc.), but as a stepping-stone towards the rational threshing out of these contradictions: if not in some Hegelian synthesis then at least in the elegance of academic prose.

How then does the concept of 'culture' deal with social contradictions? It offers the possibility of defining a central identity within which a person's many identities as the player of many social roles can be re-arranged within a hierarchical framework — which relegates the majority of these identities to a state of being secondary, unessential, invisible, while at the same time reaffirming (in a sense that I consider utterly artificial and performative) the *cultural* identity as that person's deepest essence. This identity is supposed to define not just a partial aspect of an individual's life, not one specific role, but a total life world, whose parts hang together meaningfully and organically have their place within the ensemble — resulting in a situation where the subject can confront the world as if that subject were a monolithic whole, and can find meaning and order in that world. The awareness of such a central and holistic cultural identity is not innate but is explicitly constructed in social communication (in other words, is learned), which often goes hand in hand with the cherishing of a collective historical experience and of selective culturally distinctive features; often also ethnic and cultural mobilisation by an elite is part of the process through which such a cultural identity is being constructed. Nevertheless the actors involved tend to succeed in representing this construction, not as the deliberate human creation of something that was not there in the first place, but as a mere taking consciousness of what allegedly had always been a person's deepest and innermost essence. Such a construction is in

line with modernity's dominant collective representations: the unified, undivided, individual *subject*, and its *identity*. 'Culture' as a universally accepted term in North Atlantic society is a thought machine designed to subjectively turn the fragmentation, disintegration and performativity of the modern experience, into unity, coherence, and authenticity. Thus the illusion of self-evidence and integrity are somehow saved in postmodern times when everyone knows that nothing is self-evident any more nor possesses integrity.

In its insistence on an essential, authentic otherness, and in its dissimulation of performativity, this conception of 'culture' lands us with a huge social problem: it takes for granted, and even rejoices, in the presumed absolute difference alleged to exist between a plurality of positions, and hence freezes the public space to a snake-pit of absolute contradictions, where opposition may persist to the point of mortal combat. The decreased liveability of contemporary society may be attributed, to certain extent, to the ever greater impregnability of an ever greater number of cultural fortresses. Only a few decades ago cultural relativism was simply an expression of the anti-hegemonic, anti-Eurocentric critique of imperialism and colonialism.⁸ But now it risks to become a nightmare: a license to reduce contemporary society to an immovable stale-mate of positions between which, on theoretical grounds, no open communication, identification, community and reconciliation is possible any longer; and violence remains as the only way out. However, as the Chinese philosopher Vincent Shen has rightly argued,⁹ such insistence on irresolvable differences (however much a respectable philosophical position ever since Nietzsche) is insufficient as a survival strategy for the modern world: in order for us to be able to face the future, we need dialogue, exchange, compromise, between the positions that have been occupied in the name of 'culture'. Intercultural philosophy is nothing but an exploration of the possibilities that exist on this point. Intercultural philosophy, therefore, has a prophetic function, not in the derived sense of foretelling the future, but in the original (biblical) sense of uninvitedly speaking to contemporary society about its ills, predicaments and alternatives, while invoking a transcendent value or being.

3. *The background of the concept of 'culture' in cultural anthropology and philosophy*

3.1. *Culture in cultural anthropology*

What is the origin of this concept of 'culture'? It has a variegated history but its most common meaning it is the popularisation of a cultural anthropological concept that, in that form, was only coined as recently as 1871, by Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture*.¹⁰ Tylor defines 'culture' as:

'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.'

A century earlier, with Herder¹¹ ‘culture’ merely encompassed the so-called higher and public forms of human achievement (religion, art, science, constitutional arrangements); Herder’s merit was, however, that he included the peoples outside Europe among those having a measure of ‘culture’, showing himself surprisingly anti-ethnocentric in this respect.¹² Tylor’s breakthrough was to go beyond ‘high culture’ to include, in his definition of culture, everything that was not given to man by nature, but that he partakes as a member of a human group.

Tylor’s was not the last word. From 1900 onwards, in the United States and Great-Britain, prolonged participant observation, carried by mastery of the local language, emerged as the principal empirical tool in cultural anthropology. This means that for the first time one had at one’s disposal abundant and convincing, contemporary data on which to base an analysis geared to the distinctions and the meanings that the people under study applied in their own world-view — an analysis that was *emic* in the sense of Pike’s paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* as propounded in the 1950s.

The paired concepts of *emic* and *etic* express the distinction between an internal structuring of a cultural orientation such as is found in the consciousness of its bearers, on the one hand, and on the other a structuring that is imposed from the outside. *Etic* has nothing to do with ethics in the sense of the philosophy of the judgement of human action in terms of good and evil. Pike’s terminology is based on a linguistic analogy. In linguistics one approaches the description of speech sounds from two complementary perspectives: that of phonetics (hence *-etic*), which furnishes a purely external description, informed by anatomical and physical parameters, revolving on the air vibrations of which the speech sounds consist; and the perspective of phonology, whose basic unit of study is the phoneme (adj. phonemic, hence *-emics*): the smallest unit of speech sound that is effectively distinguished by language users competent in a particular language, basing themselves on the distinctive features of that speech sound. The phonetic features of actually produced speech sounds is subject to endless variation, that can be registered by any observer and by whatever acoustic apparatus, regardless of competence in the particular language in question. By contrast, every spoken language has only a very limited range of phonemes (usually only a couple of dozens). Language users classify the infinite variety of actually produced speech sounds according to the elements of this series of recognised phonemes, and thus determine which words or sentences, consisting of several phonemes, are at hand in a particular situation.¹³

Pike thus codified the two-stage analytical stance (both *etic* and *emic*) of the classic anthropology that had emerged in the second quarter of the twentieth century with such proponents as Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Fortes, Griaule and Leiris. Before this development, anthropology had been dominated by analysis in terms of externally imposed analytical schemes (the *etic* approach) such as evolutionism, diffusionism, materialism, theories concerning the fixed

and universal phases of aesthetic development, etc. The rise of fieldwork and of an *emic* perspective meant that the empirical horizon of individual studies contracted greatly. *Emic* analysis required that one learned a new language and stayed on the spot for years. Such an investment, and the analysis based upon it, could only take place within a very narrow spatial and temporal horizon: that horizon which the fieldworker could cover by her own individual action — an area of at most a few thousand square kilometres and usually very much smaller, situated in a limited period of time that for the duration of the fieldwork and writing-up was even frozen into a stereotypified 'ethnographic present'. *Gone were the days, in cultural anthropology, of searching for extensive connections in space and time.* The ethnographic monograph became the standard format of anthropological knowledge production, the ethnographer and her book came to identify with the name of the group under study, with the ethnonym. The idea arose that each such a monograph amounted to the description of 'a culture'. Presumably there would be about as many 'cultures' as there are ethnographic monographs, and each 'culture' would be effectively conceived after the model of the book: bounded, internally integrated, consistent, unique — a whole that is well described with the term 'holistic'. It became the anthropologist's task to seek entrance to an 'other culture',¹⁴ conceived as a total, bounded, integrated, and non-performative form of human existence — as a nearly impregnable fortress. Until quite recently, this view has determined the pathos and the rhetoric of fieldwork and ethnography. Henceforth not only our vision of continents outside Europe, but also the anthropologist's individual career was to be organised around the ethnographic standard monograph. Cultural relativism became the operative term for the respect that anthropologists, and the outside world, owed to this fieldwork-related celebration of distinctive otherness. Its emergence no doubt had to do with the way in which individual anthropologists positioned themselves on the North Atlantic academic market of intercultural knowledge: as monopolists peddling their own unique knowledge of the reified culture where they had done individual fieldwork.

Also in another way was cultural relativism instigated by the practice of fieldwork. On the one hand fieldwork, as an *emic* activity, claims the most far-reaching intersubjectivity between fieldworker and host population; but on the other hand it is a lonely and unique experience that essentially escapes external critical assessment and hence among fellow-professionals is scarcely conducive to an intersubjectivity based on shared external analytical (i.e. *etic*) abstraction from the local culture under study. For this methodological dilemma the dogma of cultural relativism has offered a safety net: under the aegis of cultural relativism it became ideologically impossible, in professional anthropological circles, to express doubt about the specific pronouncements of ethnographers; for since fellow professionals lacked the prolonged personal experience with the local ethnographic context under study, such doubt could only be based on the *etic* extrapolation of connections that had merely been established for another

‘culture’, by applying an *emic* analysis specific to that other ‘culture’... Henceforth the professional stance of anthropologists would be a combination of intradisciplinary avoidance¹⁵ *in academia*, among anthropological colleagues, combined with the myth of such limitless communication in the field as could yield a comprehensive and allegedly valid view of the local ‘culture’ under investigation in the field. Anthropological restudies of the same community by different fieldworkers have demonstrated¹⁶ that this methodological dilemma is virtually without solution, a state of affairs that casts severe doubt on anthropology’s claims of constituting a scientific discipline.

Whoever took up the academic study of cultural anthropology in The Netherlands in the early 1960s, still had to learn the anthropological definition or definitions of culture as an unmistakably technical term, as a far from obvious addition to the common vocabulary¹⁷ with which one had left secondary school. But in the course of the four decades that have since elapsed, the concept of culture has spread world-wide (among the western Indo-European languages, but also outside) to become one of the most frequently used and taken-for-granted terms by which to express the contemporary world, its variety, and especially its conflicts. The concept of culture was transformed from an academic technical term to a self-evident, common societal concept that nowadays is on the lips of practically any social actors regardless of their class or education. This transformation is closely related to the rise, in the last quarter of the twentieth century within the North Atlantic society, of a migrant population that stood out both in terms of geographical origin and of somatic characteristics. Another major factor of this transformation has been the cultural globalisation of our daily life, as the result of new techniques of communication and information that led among other effects to frequent displacements across great distances. More than ever before it is evident that no cultural situation is homogeneous, that no culture exists in isolation, and that cultural specificity can only occur by virtue of a local, parochial boundary maintenance in the face of an expanding, world-wide field of locally available and perceived cultural alternatives.

3.2. *Culture in philosophy*

Also philosophers today frequently utilise the concept of ‘culture’; it is even one of the two constituent lexical elements in the expression ‘intercultural philosophy’, whose foundations my Rotterdam chair seeks to investigate. It is remarkable to what great extent philosophers (who usually are very critical in their use of concepts) have taken concepts as ‘culture’, ‘cultures’, ‘cultural specificity’ and ‘interculturality’ for granted, for self-evident — as if the human condition could not be thought otherwise but in terms of a plurality, of a ‘multiversum’, of ‘cultures’.¹⁸

The following is a possible, perhaps even obvious, definition of ‘intercultural philosophy’ that remains so close to everyday language use that it

takes aboard the entire loading of 'culture' as a pre-scientific societal concept used by general actors in the modern world:

taking as its point of departure the existence, side by side, of a plurality of mutually distinct 'cultures', intercultural philosophy investigates the conditions under which an exchange can take between two or more different 'cultures', especially an exchange under such aspects as knowledge production of one culture about another; tolerance or intolerance; conflict or co-operation in the economic, social and political domain.¹⁹

In a more specific form of the above we would conceive of intercultural philosophy as the search for a *philosophical intermediate position* where specialist philosophical thought seeks to escape from its presumed determination by any specific distinct 'culture'. The following has been a common path along which philosophers have sought to effect such an escape: we render explicit the traditions of thought peculiar to a number of cultures, and we subsequently explore the possibilities of cross-fertilisation between these traditions of thought. By doing so, the emphasis is not on the philosophical enunciation of such intercultural practices in which non-philosophers are involved, but on the philosophical practice itself; and the central issue to be problematised is not the fact (or the illusion; see the final section of this argument) of communication across cultural boundaries, but a comparison of conceptual contents on either sides of such boundaries — as if intercultural communication in itself is a given that may already be taken for granted. Under the heading of 'non-western' or 'comparative' philosophy such a form of intercultural philosophy is frequently engaged in but — to my mind — prematurely so, as long as the central concept of 'interculturality' (i.e. the fact, the conditions, and effects of communication across cultural boundaries) has been insufficiently analysed in its own right. It is as if we concentrate all our efforts on seeking to determine the fur coat pattern resulting from a cross between a zebra and a giraffe, without asking the question of whether such a cross could ever produce viable offspring in the first place.

Also in the more specifically 'comparative-philosophy' approach to interculturality, philosophers tend to take their cue from a concept of 'culture' that is holist in nature, assuming an existential cultural identity that is the opposite of performative; such a concept coincides with the socially accepted concept of 'culture', which because of its built-in contradictions is directly linked to social power relations and ideological mystification. Thus the philosopher risks to become the slave or the mouth piece of his own society, at the very moment when he seeks to think away from the latter's cultural structuring, and to apply a comparative perspective. Genuinely philosophical analysis would on the contrary consist in the attempt to expose terms that have become self-evident and are taken for granted, and to replace them — with good

and explicit reasons — by other terms, that are likely to offer new insights since they are detached from the societal tissue of power and ideology, for instance as neologisms which never had that kind of social embedding in the first place.

Meanwhile it is easily understood why, of all people, intercultural philosophers have borrowed the concept of ‘culture’ from cultural anthropology. Let us consider these reasons now.

3.3. *Philosophers against philosophical ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism*

In the first place the concept of ‘culture’, with its implied cultural relativism, offered philosophers the possibility to take a critical distance from Eurocentrism²⁰ and ethnocentrism as characteristics of the main stream of Western philosophy from Hegel to Rorty and the French post-structuralist philosophers. Hegel’s ethnocentrism and his contempt of Africa have been well documented.²¹ Rorty’s ethnocentrism is evident, conscious, and he shows it off.²² The reproach of ethnocentrism is laid at the doorstep of the French post-structuralists — Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault — by Rattansi.²³ Nonetheless the latter allows himself to be largely inspired by their work for his post-colonial theory of racism, feminism and North Atlantic hegemony. Foucault travelled widely, held (or was considered for) intercontinental appointments, yet (with the exception of his notes on the Iranian revolution of 1978) in his philosophical and historical analyses almost completely limited himself to the North Atlantic; this however did not prevent him from profoundly inspiring thinkers with a background and identity outside the North Atlantic, as is clear from Mudimbe’s seminal *The Invention of Africa* (1988) — an emphatically Foucaultian book, although it is firmly based on the early Foucault and overlooks the developments in the latter’s work after the 1960s.²⁴ To the French philosophers mentioned by Rattansi we might add Deleuze and Guattari. In their work the exotic Other is repeatedly appropriated, in the most stereotypical fashion, merely in order to add further contrast to these authors’ statements concerning their own, North Atlantic, post-modern cultural orientations. At the same time world-wide cultural diversity and the intellectual problems which it poses, mainly feature in their work in a local and domesticated form: to the extent to which, over the last few decades, France itself has become a multicultural society. But also to Deleuze and Guattari we must grant what Rattansi had to grant to the French post-structuralists he discusses: in principle their work contains the starting point for a non-ethnocentric theorising of processes of globalisation, identity and signification.²⁵

But these are only signs of a changing tide. Until recently the Western philosopher implicitly took for granted that there is one, self-evident, social and cultural context (the North Atlantic one), and one self-evident language (his own). Especially the twentieth century has seen a very great investment in the philosophical articulation of language and of social and cultural identity. Yet the philosophical investigation of interaction between *two or more* cultural and

social contexts, *two or more* languages, is still in its infancy. Not only interculturality, but also interlinguality is a relatively underdeveloped aspect of mainstream Western philosophy. The twentieth century has seen a very rich harvest of approaches to the philosophy of language.²⁶ However, also in this domain one has tended to limit oneself to one's own language, as an expression of the philosophical ethnocentrism that takes the North Atlantic society, 'culture', and historical experience, as self-evident and as the universal norm. Philosophical approaches to interlinguality (concerning such topics as translation from one language into the other, and as the ethnographic representation of concepts and representations embedded in a different cultural orientation) have been relatively rare²⁷ and, what is more important, have not been accorded the central place in today's mainstream Western philosophy that they deserve.²⁸ In the contemporary world at large, under conditions of globalisation, problems of communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries are of vital political, economic, social and artistic importance. The ecological survival of mankind and the avoidance of a Third and probably final World War over issues of race; ethnicity; the definition of such fundamental concepts as freedom, truth, legitimacy, personhood, and the supernatural; economic hegemony; and North-South inequality to a not inconsiderable extent depend on mankind's increased capability of intercultural and interlinguistic communication, a future goal towards which philosophy is to deliver models of thought. Once again I may remind the reader of the prophetic mission of intercultural philosophy.

Meanwhile it is good to realise that currently not only the anthropological, but also the philosophical practice is based on the tacit assumption of the possibility of adequate translation — despite the existence of philosophical theories, such as Quine's, claiming the indeterminacy of translation. Contemporary philosophers, including those in the most entrenched Western position, rely on a large number of predecessors, who wrote in the following languages among others: Greek, Latin, Italian, Arabic, Hebrew, French, English, German, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Danish, Dutch and Afrikaans. The great majority of philosophers only command one, two or three of these languages at the specialist level necessary for philosophical discourse and for independent research in the history of philosophy. Manifestly it is accepted practice that even professional philosophers consult the great majority of relevant philosophical texts in translation. Now in Western philosophy we are only dealing with two large linguistic families, Indo-European and Afroasiatic (with the sub-family of Semitic, including Arabic and Hebrew); in intercultural philosophy the problem is substantially more complex, since this field in principle encompasses all²⁹ current and extinct languages of the world.³⁰ It is important to stress that philosophers in their everyday practice give every indication of a solid, self-evident trust in their own and other people's capability of interlinguality — *pace*

Quine. This does not make them our best *prima facie* guides in the exploration of problems of interlinguality as an aspect of interculturality.

Modern philosophy's ethnocentrism is probably, more than anything else, and far from being the manifestation of a sinister anti-South complot, merely a pardonable simplification: within one language, one cultural orientation, most philosophical problems are already highly aporetic — impossible to ford (as least not by pedestrian means...), like a deep and wide river. Yet intermeshing plurality, in combination with people's identitary retreat inside apparently unassailable boundaries, is the central experience of the contemporary world, and in this light Western philosophy's standard simplification of its problem field to just one language and one culture is increasingly unacceptable.

3.4. Culture and difference

Also the second reason why philosophers have taken over the Tylorian concept of 'culture' is largely internal philosophical:³¹ the convergence of the concept of culture with the creation, by post-structuralists such as Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, of a sophisticated conceptual apparatus for the thinking and handling of *difference*. Here the logocentric fascination with binary contradictions, which has captivated Western thought from the Presocratics right up to Hegel, Marx and the twentieth-century structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss, suddenly appeared in a different and critical light. Post-structuralism, which as a strategy of difference contained the possibility both of deconstructing and of affirming identity at the same time, came after two major intellectual movements (marxism, structuralism) which relegated the diversity of 'cultures' to the status of an epiphenomenon; for both movements denied the specificity of distinct cultures in the light of some postulated more fundamental condition ('the historical inevitability of the struggle over material production and appropriation' in marxism; or alternatively, 'the innate binary structure of the human mind' in structuralism) effectively reducing *emic* otherness to *etic* sameness. With the realisation that the binary opposition is a figure of thought whose two poles in fact may to some extent (like the *ourobouros* snake biting its tail in ancient Hermetic and alchemistic symbolism) contain each other and dissolve into each other, doubt was cast on two major strategies of thought, hitherto taken for granted:

- (a) the reduction of otherness to sameness (as in Marxism and structuralism), and
- (b) the entrenched conception of otherness as amounting to an absolute and irresolvable difference (as in Shen's dilemma).

Both strategies are of prime political importance in the contemporary globalising world: under the hegemonic onslaught of North Atlantic social, cultural, scientific and political forms, ultimately backed by the superior military power

of the NATO and particularly the USA, there are strong pressures upon any person, community and polity outside the centre of power, to either submit to being co-opted into sameness (a), or to be subjected to exclusion as irretrievably different (b). For the post-structural 'philosophy of difference', difference becomes a basis for a recognition of the other as both equivalent and other — as a basis for respect instead of either appropriative imposition (a) or exclusion (b). At the same time the philosopher is reminded of the possibility that whatever sameness to self he believed to recognise in the other, might well be vain self-projection, appropriation, and subjugation — and for this reason grand schemes as to some ultimate, underlying convergence of mankind, of all cultures and languages of the world, of all Old-World cultures, of all philosophical traditions world-wide, of all African cultures, etc., are treated with healthy suspicion. The difference-orientated intercultural philosopher wholeheartedly affirms what anthropologists had discovered decades earlier: culture is a machine for the production of difference, especially where initially there was undifferentiated and unarticulated sameness. For intercultural philosophy the anthropological concept of 'culture' turns out to be a tool for the articulation of collective positions of difference that may count as accepted points of departure for social and political action, in such a way that any attempt to merge these positions of difference into a higher unity will be dismissed as a (modernist or hegemonic) assault on their integrity.³²

But while this is a laudable position, that converges with the cultural relativism dominating anthropology from the mid-twentieth century onward, there is a price to be paid for the philosophical adoption of the anthropological concept of culture: Shen's dilemma then can no longer be solved. Cultural relativism, which was ushered into intercultural philosophy with the best of intentions, ultimately means an impediment towards the fulfilment of intercultural philosophy's most urgent social responsibility.

Philosophers have taken over the Tylorian concept of 'culture' as a strange body, a black box, without attempt to attune it systematically to other contemporary philosophical concepts such as category, subject, mind, the state, etc. In philosophy the concept of 'culture' has an interesting history that however does not lead straight to Tylor. The origin of the concept lies in Roman antiquity: Cicero's *cultura animi* in the Stoic sense of spiritual exercise through reticence and respectful sociability. An absolute concept of 'culture' as referring to human action within a society was first used by the seventeenth-century theoretician of natural law Pufendorf. When one century later Herder added to this the notion of historicity, and began to speak of the 'culture' of specific peoples, the basis had been laid for a philosophy of culture. And such a philosophy of culture did materialise, with considerable delay, in the beginning of the twentieth century, with philosophers like Dilthey, Rickert, Cassirer and Simmel; but it was to address almost exclusively European culture.³³ Even Spengler's world-wide perspective, which at first view would have little that is

condescending vis-à-vis other civilisations,³⁴ had yet been inspired by the question as to the future of European civilisation.³⁵ The German school of cultural philosophy around 1900 counted however among its ranks one writer who inexhaustibly and with visionary powers wrote about non-Western civilisations: Max Weber; but he can scarcely be considered a philosopher any more. The main achievement of this phase of the philosophy of culture was the development of a macro perspective on civilisations and cultures as totalities, occasionally (Rothacker, Gehlen)³⁶ in confrontation with nature in the context of the historical genesis of man at the beginning of the Palaeolithic. Such philosophy of culture did have a profound effect on the social sciences in many respects (particularly it stressed the hermeneutic stance of *Verstehen*, that soon was to be popularised through Weber's writings),³⁷ but its concept of 'culture' proved a dead-end. If contemporary philosophers use the concept of 'culture' this is not in continuity with the philosophy of culture in Germany around the turn of the twentieth century, but in the sense of contemporary cultural anthropologists as heirs to Tylor. As the authoritative *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* states, almost with relief:

'Die empirische K[ultur]anthropologie hängt mit der Kulturanthropologie der deutschen philosophisch-geisteswissenschaftlichen Tradition nicht zusammen.'³⁸

Before 1960 (when Winch initiated the important debate on rationality and the analysis of exotic cultures)³⁹ philosophy could scarcely offer an elaborate discourse on the encounter between 'cultures' at the micro level of individual participants and their concrete interaction situations, or on the production of knowledge at the boundary claimed to exist between 'cultures'. It is only for a slightly longer period that the sub-discipline of 'comparative philosophy' has existed; here the European, Chinese and Indian traditions — often characterised as 'cultures' in the sense critiqued above — are scrutinised for the extent to which they possess parallel themes. Islamic and African philosophy offer specific problems of classification for this sub-discipline. Islamic philosophy does so in that, in the few centuries that it can be said to have flourished (notably in the 3rd-5th century AH, i.e. in the 8th-11th centuries CE), it remained so close to classic Greek philosophy as to be virtually a branch of that tradition; African philosophy poses a classificatory problem because it is either very old but largely unrecorded (a point of view held by many passionate defenders of African philosophy), or (as Hountondji would have it) new and largely tributary to the North Atlantic academic philosophical tradition.

Understandably, contemporary philosophers have given in to the temptation of adopting the anthropological concept of 'culture', and to apply it within their own philosophical arguments without further revision. Thus by the middle of the twentieth century philosophy ended up with a concept of 'culture' that displayed heavily holistic and essentialist traits just like in that concept's

original cultural anthropological setting, and that was too naïve to problematise the performative aspects of cultural identity. However, especially in the last thirty years cultural anthropology, of all disciplines, has had no choice but to take a more relative and dynamic view of the concept of 'culture'. The two related main factors of this development have been the emerging theory of ethnicity (see below, section 7), and the need to account analytically for globalisation and the resulting multicultural society of the late twentieth century of the Common Era. This process in anthropology has certainly parallels in philosophy (especially in the post-structuralist philosophy of difference⁴⁰ that has been a major inspiration in the development of intercultural philosophy,⁴¹ despite the implicit Eurocentrism for which the most prominent post-structuralists have been chided.

4. *From 'holistic culture' to partial 'cultural orientations'*

Meanwhile the provocative title of this argument, 'Cultures do not exist', must not be read as if I wish to banish forever the concept of 'culture' from intellectual discourse. Besides, such an attempt would be futile considering the way in which that concept has taken root in the societal discourse of our time, globally and in all walks of life. I am *not* rejecting the idea of specific forms of programming of human representations and behaviour, — a programming that is specific in space and time, that has an internal systematics, that is not idiosyncratic and limited to just one human being but on the contrary is shared — by virtue of learning processes — by a number of people, yet remains limited to a relatively small sub-set of humanity. This idea is based on undeniable empirical factors that every human being sees confirmed innumerable times in his pre-scientific everyday social experience. Such forms of programming I prefer to call, not 'cultures' but *cultural orientations*, in order to avoid the suggestion that on the one hand they order total human life on a grand scale and yet, on the other hand and at the same time, can be considered bounded, integrated and unique.

As long as we admit the situationality, multiplicity, and performativity of 'culture' (a number of crucial insights of which a term like 'cultural orientation' reminds us), there is no longer a stringent reason to banish the words 'culture' and 'cultural' from our philosophical conceptual toolbox. The reader may rest assured: if the inaugural address on which this piece is based, was to mark my accession to the Rotterdam chair of 'intercultural philosophy', it did not intend to do so by destroying the very notion of 'culture' on which 'intercultural' is inevitably based, nor by destroying the emerging branch of philosophy designated by that notion.

If the cultural is a form of programming, then it would be characterised by a systematic aspect rather than by the absence of systematics. The contradiction between structuralists and post-structuralist resides, among other points, in the

post-structuralists casting doubt on the systemic nature of the cultural experience. This contradiction arises, in part, from the erroneous choice of too high a level of abstraction. If one conceives of 'cultures' as bounded, integrated totalities that may adequately designated by means of an ethnonym,⁴² and within which a human being can lead a complete life from morning to evening and from birth to death, without necessarily crossing into other 'cultures', then it would inevitably come to light that the claim of a cultural systematics is an illusion, behind which lies in reality the kaleidoscopic effects of multiple cultural orientations that criss-cross each other simultaneously, and each of which is built on systemic principles that are not informing the others.

In earlier centuries the state and a world religion such as Christianity and Islam were often capable of imposing upon this multiplicity of cultural orientations their own hierarchical ordering, resulting in a constellation that might loosely be described as 'Islamic culture' or 'Christian culture'; but today in the North Atlantic the state and world religions are no longer capable of doing so. In the first place there is the specificity of cultural orientations associated with distinct classes, professional groups, levels of education, linguistic communities, religious communities. Even when we limit ourselves to a consideration of those roles that have been acquired by a learning process and that are being played in the public space, we have to admit that practically every human being finds himself at the intersection of *a number* of different cultural orientations, between which there is often no systematic connection.

Take notions of purity. The androgynous tenderness and the psychological immunity to polluting dirt informing my role of a father changing my young children's diapers has nothing to do with the very different stress on very different conceptions of purity which I invoke in totally different social settings activating totally different social roles and identities on my part: e.g. the histrionic display of anger that I summon when finding a hair in the soup served in an expensive restaurant when I am entertaining a visiting professor from Africa; or the undodging sense of impeccable formal purity with which I yield to the tyrannical syntactic requirements of a computer language when writing computer programmes; or the relish with which I use my fingers as ready-made brushes in my amateur painting; or the stoic resignation with which I have daily braved cockroaches, rotten meat, and mouldy staple food in certain parts of Africa under famine conditions.

Cultural systematics do exist within each distinct cultural orientation, but not necessarily between various cultural orientations. Moreover in the context of the contemporary, globalising world there is, in the sphere of private life, nutrition and other forms of consumption, recreation, gender and sexuality, a constantly increasing plurality of life styles at various stages of articulate definition, and all these life styles (each with greater or lesser degrees of distinctness, boundedness, and conspicuousness through a specific name and other boundary markers) yield their own microscopic cultural orientation. The

subject who finds himself at the intersection of all these orientations is a fragmented, kaleidoscopic subject to which we would be wrong to attribute a high degree of integration — perhaps it has even disappeared as a subject.⁴³ It is as if today's secularised, globalising society has more than any other historical societies furthered the fragmentation of the subject. But in a formal sense the situation in other societies is not fundamentally different in that also these societies consist of the bundling (that is only effected at the level of the complex role behaviour and Ego consciousness of individual participants) of a plurality of cultural orientations between which there is no systemic internal correspondence or coherence.

For instance, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the socio-cultural life of the Nkoya people of western Zambia was built up out of the contradiction between two enmeshing cultural orientations: village life, based on autarkic agricultural production and hunting, kinship, and non-violence as the principle governing interpersonal relations; and court life, based on the parasitic, non-productive exploitation of village communities for food, other produce, and human personnel, and governed by the denial of principles of kinship and non-violence.⁴⁴

The anthropological approach in terms of the articulation of modes of production⁴⁵ could have such a great success in the 1970s-80s precisely because it was the theoretical expression of the empirical fact that also archaic, non-Western societies display not a totally integrated structure but instead a diversity of orderings, each of which having its own systematics, its own distinct internal logic, such as that theoretical approach analysed — no doubt one-sidedly — from the perspective of production.

If we could at all speak of a system at the level of society as a whole, then it would certainly not be an all-embracing, holistic *cultural* system, but a system of economic and political control — and the economic and the political constitute dimensions of social life that scarcely enter the discourse of structuralists, who otherwise have been the prime champions of the systemic nature of culture.

The most obvious way of identifying the various cultural orientations that may be discerned within one society, is by searching, within the cultural practices of that society, for consistent (in other words systematic) semantic fields that have a *limited* extension and whose limitation consists in their being denied, challenged, combated or destroyed by other, adjacent, differently structured semantic fields. It is in this way — by assessing the range of application of specific semantic fields in empirically documented mythical and ritual contexts, and ascertaining where this application became excessively contradictory or came into open conflict with other, differently constructed semantic fields — that I was capable of identifying various religious complexes in the society of western central Zambia, each religious complex as the ideological component of a specific mode of production: ancestor veneration,

the veneration of royal ancestors, of the High God, of spirits that are not supposed to be bound to specific localised communities, etc.⁴⁶

In this sense, at a much lower level of aggregation than the society as a whole, the distinct cultural orientations do have a systemic character, by definition. Acquiring a cultural orientation through a learning process amounts to programming that systematics onto the behaviour of the individual participants. Of the many cultural orientations that are present in a society, everyone learns a few score in the course of his life, and besides the ethnographer (as well as the trader, the sailor, the diplomat, the itinerant traditional healer, etc.) learns a few that belong to a different society and that are not or hardly present in his own society of origin.

'Cultures' in the holist sense do not exist unless as the illusions of the participants. However, social actors in the world today explicitly utilise the concept of 'culture', and they do so in the same polysemic and contradictory way in which most indigenous concepts are used by social actors. This is a major reason why the concept of 'culture' is hardly useful any more as a technical term for philosophy or empirical social science. Meanwhile, in the hands of social actors, notably for the world that social actors create between themselves, the very concept of 'culture' may bring about effects that are horrifyingly real: the Nazist Holocaust; ethnic cleansing in late-twentieth century Europe and Africa; ethnic politics that have led to the absolute erosion of the constitutional structures of many African states today, in a dual process encompassing first their experiences after territorial decolonisation, then their experiences after the democratisation movement of around 1990; multicultural, migrancy and refugee policies in West European states today that rely on the reference to 'cultures', in the plural, to greatly emphasise the differences between social actors, but that is incapable of curbing the rising feelings of frustration, insecurity, hatred and alienation in those countries; the rise of a mutual enemy image composed of stereotypical cultural traits separating Middle Eastern Muslim Arabs and North Atlantic Americans.

'Unreal in existence, real in effect', is one of the current definitions of the concept of *virtuality*. The contemporary social experience is full of such virtuality. For instance, the concept of 'culture' emerged from the world of science (as an *etic* term), but via the media and the educational institutions it has transformed itself and begins to reverberate in countless feedback like an ill-adjusted public address system. Members of contemporary, globalising society have appropriated the concept of culture as an empowering *emic* term, no longer controllable from its original base in science. This is only one example among very many processes of dislocation, where cultural products from a specific localisable provenience are appropriated into subsequent contexts that are rather alien to the original one and largely independent from it; in the process, the original product is transformed, whereas the appropriating contexts can be said to constitute itself through the very process of virtualising appropriation.⁴⁷ As an

emic term ‘cultures’ (plural) is a virtual concept, that is no longer at place in philosophy or in empirical social science unless in order to be deconstructed there in a bid to lay bare its underlying semantic structure and political implications — always in the hope that also such critical deconstruction (like in the present argument) will find its way to the wider society.

5. *The relativity of an empirical perspective*

For the philosopher the statement ‘cultures do not exist’ is problematic not in the first instance because of the concept of ‘culture’, but because of the word ‘exist’.

The question concerning existence, and the question concerning the possibilities and conditions of knowledge (knowledge about that which exists), are among the most important ones in philosophy. Empirical science is in no position whatsoever to answer these questions for us, for it thrives itself on the basis of specific — albeit usually implicit — choices from among the many possible answers to the questions concerning being and concerning knowledge. If, for instance, one adopts, like in Buddhist philosophy, the position that the reality to which the senses appear to testify, is merely an illusion, whereas the true Being only becomes knowable after many phases (for most people very difficult, or impossible, to traverse) of meditative distancing from the apparently concrete world of the senses; then from such a perspective the idea of empirical science is absolutely absurd; but whereas the Buddhist school of thought dominated China, among other parts of Asia, for centuries (after which it lost its grip on China), in that same country Taoism, as the older and more persistent school, displayed an orientation towards sensory reality characterised by far greater kinship with Western science.⁴⁸

Empirical science presupposes a kind of realism: the assumption that there is a reality out there that is not limited to consciousness (although it may be in consciousness that the categories are given with which to gather knowledge of that reality), but that has also concrete, factual manifestation in a manner which is in principle independent from consciousness. The dynamics of empirical science take place between consciousness and sensory perception, between concrete fact and category of thought, and between the individual researcher and the collectivity of researchers. On the one hand the collectivity of scientists that only under far-reaching conditions of method, consistency and conformity admits modes of individual knowledge to the realm of intersubjectivity and thus declares these individual modes to amount to science; and on the other hand there is the social collectivity: the latter’s reception of scientific production is the end goal of such production. As I have stressed in the Preface to this book, that reception is problematic: scientific insights may be built into a society’s collective representations, but then they cease per definition to be scientific, and many collective representations reflect the science, not of today, but of yesterday. On the other hand, collective representations constitute a major

distortive influence on individual and collective processes of scientific observation and conceptualisation in the first place.

Empirical scientists are seldom conscious of the fact that their professionalised form of knowledge production implies a number of essentially arbitrary choices. They can afford this naïveté since, in the course of the last few centuries in the North Atlantic region, empirical sciences have developed into an institution that, within the society where it is found, has come to self-evident, taken for granted, reflecting, underpinning, and increasingly legitimating, power relations — in ways Foucault more than any other modern thinker has helped us to recognise. And here I do not refer in the first place to such power relations as exist within the world of science itself and as are responsible for the fact that the scientific ‘state of the art’ as accepted by the community of scientists is always a shifting compromise of intra-disciplinary power relations; that is understood. But the power aspect of modern empirical science reaches much further. Such science is not only a nursery for universality claims concerning the reality of the senses — claims such as

- ‘ $V = i * R$ ’ (Ohm’s law)
- ‘photosynthesis is the source of all energy for life forms on earth’
- ‘all human societies possess some kind of incest prohibition’.

Because, in the contemporary North Atlantic, empirical science sets the example of truths that are surrounded with great authority and connotations of universality, and has become a major legitimating force, its example breeds in the minds of contemporary citizens the preparedness to accept other universalist claims, those of a socio-political nature, that are determining the contemporary world to a high degree but that, because of their normative or performative nature, cannot possibly be based on empirical science. I mean such ideas as

- the self-evident authority of the modern state and of her principal instrument, the formal organisation
- the self-evidently universal nature (if not in application then at least in allegedly universal applicability) of human rights and of the democratic constitutional form of the state
- the self-evidence and inviolability of the subject, of identity, and of ‘culture’
- the self-evident claim that universalism has primarily sought North Atlantic social, cultural, political and scientific forms to express itself (as in Hegel’s Eurocentrism), which accords to these forms self-evident superiority as underpinning the globally hegemonic project that has characterised the North Atlantic region ever since the sixteenth century.

Such self-evidences, far from being scientific, belong to the collective representations which form the preconditions of the North Atlantic social order.

Manifestly, empirical sciences is just another cultural orientation among the many other such orientations of North Atlantic society; and it is one of extraordinary importance for the production of the self-evidences that not only determine the structure of our own lives but in which also superiority claims reverberate vis-à-vis the rest of the world. Empirical science posits a form of life that in the last analysis may turn out to be Eurocentric and hegemonic. But at the same time it tries to wrench itself free from this particularistic and regional societal grip by making its methods and techniques highly explicit, refined, and intersubjective. This is why radical anti-hegemonic discourses make such a point of advocating epistemological alternatives to current empirical science, for instance in the form of a specifically African epistemology,⁴⁹ or by reducing — as in Harding's approach — current empirical sciences to the status of merely one specific, culturally determined, local form of knowledge (an ethnoscience), in the midst of the infinite number of conceivable ethnosciences from all over the globe.⁵⁰

With regard to the type of phenomena that is usually studied by the natural sciences, Harding's suggestion that modern science is merely an ethnoscience of the North Atlantic region would at first sight appear to be little convincing. No matter how much we may claim that that natural scientific knowledge is arbitrary, local, and potentially subservient to Eurocentrism, yet planes based on that knowledge do not spontaneously crash into the ground as soon as they venture outside the North Atlantic region, watches keep on ticking, the electromagnetic waves generated under this scientific regime turn out to have an apparently unlimited action radius so that they may be transmitted back to earth via man-made spacecraft travelling to the Moon or even beyond Saturn, and biochemical medicine enjoys its considerable (though by no means unlimited) successes all over the world regardless of the cultural and somatic specificity of its practitioners and its patients.⁵¹ Third World revolutionary movements that radically steer away from North Atlantic cultural orientations, acquire and utilise for the furthering of their cause manufactured products (weaponry, aeroplanes, Information and Communication Technology) whose successful use in their hands is manifestly not impeded by these movements' being alien to, or even deliberately opposed to, North Atlantic cultural orientations. World-view is simply not the decisive factor for science and technology to work: these weapons work just the same in the hands of bandits who operate without explicit ideological positioning and who, thriving in the many pockets of ineffective state control throughout the Third, Second and increasingly even First World today, are responsible for the increasing privatisation of violence.

The unmistakable success of North Atlantic natural, medical and technical science as based on the dominant epistemologies informing mainstream North Atlantic academic research and academic practice, does not *ipso facto* exclude other epistemologies, from other cultural backgrounds, for the description and

explanation of natural phenomena — and many such epistemologies have managed to persist for centuries in their concrete practical niches of agriculture, hunting, metallurgy, house construction, magic, therapy. There they apparently offered an attractive mode of explanation that adequately took care of the necessity of survival precisely within the local natural environment which these alternative epistemologies sought to describe and master. Thinking through the plurality of possible epistemologies for the approach to sensory reality is one of the tasks confronting intercultural philosophy. Natural science today finds itself in a field of tension. To a certain extent it is entitled to the claim of being cosmopolitan, universalist, part of the common heritage of mankind. On the other hand it is to a great extent the specific and recent creation of North Atlantic modernity, charged with a heavy hegemonic burden. This applies a fortiori to the social sciences. The phenomena that the latter study are largely the product of human intentionality and signification. And by virtue of this fact any social scientific epistemology will, to a large extent, have an ethnocentric bias derived from the society (still principally the North Atlantic one) from whose midst social science research is being conceived and executed even if the object of research is to be found outside the North Atlantic (as is often the case for anthropology). The specific social-science epistemology employed constitutes simply one specific choice for the construction of self-evidences, which in the society under study would be constructed differently. Whatever poses as an impartial, objective scientific perspective is therefore in the best case the confrontation between two sets of self-evidences of matching strength but different contents; and in the worst case the denial of the value and the rights of the other society.

In this context it is risky to appeal to empirical social sciences in order to correct current philosophical approaches of interculturality. Yet this is what I am about to do. Worse still, I will go even further and claim that philosophy itself is much more of an empirical science than philosophers are prepared to admit.

6. *Philosophy as empirical science?*

It is quite usual that philosophy appropriates elements from the empirical sciences, and even though this kind of interdisciplinary borrowings tends to lag a few decades behind the state-of-the-art in the discipline from which is being borrowed, yet without such appropriation philosophy could not pursue fundamental research into the foundations of the empirical sciences.

Some philosophers take the position that the upward flight of philosophy should not be thwarted by empirical ‘so-called facts’. Philosophy may then be conceived as the investigation of concepts, methods of argument, and meanings, and hence as the development (with a precarious balance between innovative originality and intradisciplinary intersubjectivity⁵²), the testing out and the

administration, of language forms capable of articulating the aporias of the contemporary existence, notably in a way that is not yet furnished by other human practices (empirical sciences, belles lettres, other forms of art, politics and religious discourse). In this conception philosophy is a specific practice whose ontological referent, in the last analysis, is the contemporary social experience (in which however the experience of other points in space and time may reverberate, so that also these past and exotic human experiences should be incorporated in the philosophical exercise). From this point of view it would be hard to defend a totally non-empirical conception of philosophy — even though we had to admit the need for a non-empirical component: for technical research leading to ever better tools in the domain of conceptualisation and logic which do not strikingly reflect an experience that is specific in space and time.

Philosophy thus shares with belles lettres the development of language forms that promise a superior insight. However, contrary to the literary writer, the philosopher seldom entirely works for his own account: most philosophical writings thrive on the rendering and interpretation of the thought systems of other explicitly mentioned philosophers and philosophical movements. The sources for the latter constitute an empirical reference that, ontologically, has practically the same status as the data on which literature scholars, historians and cultural anthropologists base themselves. This raises the same questions as to method, disciplinary intersubjectivity, societal appropriation, cultural bias and the resonance of general societal power relations in the production of knowledge. It would be to philosophy's advantage if, for this life-size empirical dimension of its practice, it would lay a greater premium on method, as a lesser premium on originality.

Coming from an empirical scientist who insists on the methods and results of contemporary empirical science as an example for philosophy, my argument here may remind one of that of the physicists Sokal and Bricmont a few years ago.⁵³ In the most Droogstoppel-like fashion⁵⁴ they demonstrate how the appropriation of a contemporary physics idiom has yielded some of the most obscure pages of the most prominent French philosophers. They derive their sense of being right from an experiment that Sokal conducted within the pages of the cultural studies journal *Social Text*:. There he treated, tongue in cheek, current quantum physics as an esoteric text requiring a post-modern hermeneutics. He reproduced in what he himself considered a nonsensical article the post-structuralist idiom so faithfully that the article was accepted for publication as a serious contribution.⁵⁵ Sokal and Bricmont can think of nothing better but to assess the philosophical use of idiom in the light of the conventional meaning of the terms in question in their original physics and mathematics context. This approach smacks of parochialism and essentialism, and is out of touch with the contemporary world at large, where borrowing across boundaries (including disciplinary boundaries), followed by far-reaching transformative localisation of the borrowed goods at their new destination, is the

order of the day. My point of view is fundamentally different from theirs: they do not make the slightest attempt to understand and apply the philosophical use of language in its own intentionality, and they persist in a naïvely uncritical view of their own empirical science, which they simply take for granted as God's truth, without acknowledging its ephemeral and provisional nature.⁵⁶ Sokal's post-structuralist reading of modern quantum physics, even if intended as a pedantic hoax, may yet turn out to contain more wisdom than its author credits himself with, and certainly more wisdom than Sokal and Bricmont's debunking of French post-structuralist technical philosophical language. It is precisely the post-structuralist deconstruction of the autonomous subject, of all theoretical positions, which makes it thinkable that an idea, while being in the air and reflecting the contradictions of the age, may inadvertently flow out of the pen of a cynical author who is consciously rejecting that idea.⁵⁷

These reflections on the empirical constraints on philosophy have a direct bearing on intercultural philosophy. For intercultural philosophy it is of the greatest importance to realise that rendering the thought of another thinker or of a tradition of thought is an empirical activity with all attending demands of method. In connexion with the literate philosophical traditions of the Ancient Near East, Islam, South Asia and East Asia, the dangers of blundering are limited, for here there exist rich local forms of philological-critical scholarship of great antiquity, and intersubjectivity between local and North Atlantic specialists can only be achieved at the price of the North Atlantic scholars living up to the high, local standards of technical competence and language mastery. This tradition of non-North Atlantic scholarship also makes it possible to expose and overcome such Eurocentric flaws as the empirical perspective directed to those parts of the world may yet contain — as is clearly manifested by the Orientalism discussion.⁵⁸ However, when we are dealing with illiterate traditions of thought, then their recording and interpretation is nothing but a specific form of ethnography. It will have to be situated against the background of the accumulated experience, comparative research and technical criticism — as well as the critique of epistemological naïveté and North Atlantic hegemony — of many thousands of ethnographers who in the course of a hundred years have occupied themselves with the empirical handiwork of ethnography. On the first instance, ethnography was nothing else but covering with text those parts of the world that had not yet produced their own text. By a process of initial avoidance of adjacent disciplines which is characteristic of the professionalisation of a new discipline (below we shall point out the same pattern for early anthropology) the emergent fields of intercultural philosophy and African philosophy have tended to ignore this methodological heritage and even dissimulate the empirical status of their activities. If they nonetheless rush to the description of African philosophies the way these are manifest in myths, proverbs, and in the oral pronouncements of contemporary thinkers, — then these intercultural and

African philosophers are no more entitled to the benefit of doubt than those ethnographers are who persist in their naïve empiricism.

Experienced and well-trained anthropologists, some of the calibre of Marcel Griaule and Victor Turner, made it their life's work to record — by an analysis of myths, rituals, conflicts, depth interviews, and the practice of everyday life — African patterns of thought and their actual contents, either by an external, *etic*, process of rendering explicit the systematics that is implicit in their hosts' patterns of thought, or by a more *emic* method of faithfully recording the pronouncements of local thinkers such as Ogotomêlli (studied by Griaule) or Muchona (studied by Turner). Naturally the ethnographic methods of Griaule or Turner are not above all criticism.⁵⁹ The point is however that intercultural philosophers, even without engaging in a methodological discussion with the work of Griaule or Turner, think they know better: Ogotomêlli and Muchona would then be denied the status of 'real' 'sages', while the institution of 'the sage' would yet be claimed to occur throughout Africa, but unfortunately unnoticed by all those anthropologists, who inevitably are to be declared to lack all access to authentic African thought..⁶⁰

In such a denial of the potential of cultural anthropology for intercultural philosophy I see an expression — probably unintended — of essentialism and anti-empiricism:

- the claim that there are specifically African essential traits
- that are claimed to be inaccessible to the empirical methods of North Atlantic social sciences
- that only Africans are capable of understanding and articulating
- and whose only trustworthy guardians are the exponents of African and intercultural philosophy
- precisely because the latter take a distance from the canons of empirical (social) science.

I do not think that such an attitude renders, in the long run, a service to Africans. Africa, that has produced mankind and that via Ancient Egypt has made a very great contribution to North Atlantic civilisation, will easily survive the encounter with empirical science — with this proviso that this should not remain a form of science imported straight from the North with all its naïveté and Eurocentrism, but that Africans will have to continue to explore their own specific variants of empirical research and its methodological canons.

Instead of a rejection of empirical methods in their own practice and in that of other sciences, the anti-empiricist rhetoric among philosophers often takes a different form: that of the careless or ignorant dissimulation of the formidable methodological requirements of valid empirical knowledge production. Thus the appeal to empirical knowledge in philosophical discourse often amounts to statements that are passable at the level of collective

representations, but that are insufficiently precise and comprehensive to pass as scientifically grounded renditions of the empirical reality to which the appeal is being made. In regard to such self-evidences as philosophers may claim, essential elements remain out of sight or are swept under the carpet: method, intersubjectivity, the cultural and political over-determination of such self-evidences; thus the value of their arguments is greatly reduced. It characterises intercultural philosophy as a young branch of science that such self-evidences abound there; the habitual approach, in those circles, in terms of a plurality of holistically conceived 'cultures' is a case in point.

Even more of a short-cut available to philosophers in their avoidance of an explicitly empirical methodology, is that of what I might call *canonical botanising*. Here the argument proceeds, from the enunciation of a certain phenomenon, not to the painstaking exploration of that phenomenon with the aid of such empirical research as is usually abundantly available — but to the classification of the phenomenon in question in terms of a certain passage in the work of a canonised Great Philosopher; after which the discussion is dominated by the interpretation of that one passage, as if that would sufficiently underpin such self-evidences as have been claimed in the first place.

An example is Derrida's claim⁶¹ to the effect that writing precedes the oral expression, since anything which may be conducive to inscription, from the earliest prehistory of mankind, is already to be defined as writing: a deliberately snapped twig on a branch, an line drawn with the finger in the sand. The deceptive nature of such an argument, if taken literally, does not *per se* lie in the use of the term 'writing' — for one might put oneself on a nominalistic standpoint and accordingly choose one's definition freely. However, by adopting the contrast between writing and orality, unmistakably conceptual continuity is suggested with the usual definition of writing in the empirical sciences. And from that perspective Derrida's position is absurd. The origin and the oldest forms of writing are well documented; they have been the subject of hundreds of highly scholarly empirical publications.⁶² In this literature we have seen the growth of a consensus as to what constitutes writing, on the basis of a careful weighing of the empirical evidence against the background of progressive theoretical sophistication. This consensus defines a full script as a system, consisting of a finite number of arbitrary, fixed, mutually distinctive and for that very reason mutually related visual elements, which are being used productively (i.e. that an infinite number of combinations may be generated on the basis of a finite number of systematic rules and elements), in such a way that all speech sounds of the specific languages for whose rendering the script is being used, may be represented (more or less adequately) in that script. Such a script represents neither objects, nor ideas, but simply spoken words. In the history of mankind, full writing in this sense has been attested only from the late fourth millennium before the common era, notably from Sumer, Elam, and Egypt. Far more limited precursors of full writing, in the form of pictograms and

ideograms, are up to ten thousand years older and go back to the Upper Palaeolithic. Against the background of this empirical tradition it is ridiculously anachronistic to speak of script and writing for the preceding three million years of human history. If we throw overboard the specific characteristics of full writing we can no longer explain the enormous influence that full writing has had on religion, philosophy, science, literature, state formation, law. It is typical of the procedure of canonical botanising that — in favour for one passage from a Great Philosopher — it feels it can ignore the entire, empirically grounded, literature on writing and on the distinctions between types of writing and their implications.⁶³ Are we not being condescending towards Africans when we pretend that, according to some twisted and indefensible definition, they yet turn out to have writing after all, as if not having writing is the greatest, most dehumanising disaster that could possibly happen to a person or to a people? Is such an attitude not somewhat ethnocentric? Strangely, the usual definitions of writing surprisingly allow the African continent (and not just Ancient Egypt) a much more prominent place in the history and distribution of writing than is generally acknowledged.⁶⁴ My worry here is not, of course, that apparently undeservingly global recognition would be given to unwritten African traditions of thought. For it has been my life's work as a literary writer, anthropologist, Southern African diviner-priest-therapist (*sangoma*),⁶⁵ and intercultural philosopher, to further precisely such recognition. No, my worry is that intercultural philosophers (without explicit adequate empirical methods, and insufficiently aware of their own personal problematic of transference even though the latter could be argued to cause them to distort the African material in the light of their own nostalgic of vicariously identity-affirming projections) would claim to mediate African traditions whereas in fact what they were representing are only figments of these philosophers' imagination, fed more by the North Atlantic philosophical tradition than by an intimate knowledge of illiterate African life.

If intercultural philosophers entrench themselves in a concept of 'culture' that stipulates a countable plurality of holistic 'cultures', and if they approach the empirical dimension of the rendering of other traditions of thought as if no sound methods have been worked out for such a task, then we are well advised to remind them of contemporary empirical insights in 'culture' and identity, even despite all reservations we have vis-à-vis the empirical sciences for their implicitly naïve and hegemonic nature.

7. *Globalisation and ethnicity*

7.1. *Nkoya ethnic identity*

In myself the awareness that 'cultures do not exist' awoke during fieldwork in the Zambian capital of Lusaka in the early 1970s. Here the Nkoya ethnic group constituted a small minority of at most a thousand people, who by means of

collective rituals (girls' puberty ceremonies, possession cults, and funerary ceremonies) managed to maintain a considerable amount of mutual contact and of continuity with the cultural practices of their distant home in the Zambian countryside. One night I visited a puberty ceremony, as I did so often in those days. While I danced around with the crowd and joined in the singing, I was addressed by a Black middle-aged man, meticulously dressed in a smart chalk-stripe three-piece suit, who despite his corpulence and his game leg made fierce attempts to keep up with the dancing rhythm. He said, in inimitable Zambian English:

'Yesseh Bwana, diss iss áowaa twadísyonaa káwatya' — *'You see now, Boss, this is our traditional culture'*.

Taken-for granted cultural identity but also alienation, performativity (consciously playing a role with deliberately sought after effect), and commodification of 'culture' — all united in one person.

In the next quarter of a century I became more and more familiar with the religion and the kingship of the Nkoya, and I ended up as the adopted son of Mwene Kahare Kabambi, one of the kings of this people — at his death in 1993 I inherited the king's bow and 25 km² of land. This was the context in which, from 1988, I applied myself to the study of cultural globalisation among the Nkoya in the rural areas, especially the way in which a formal organisation (the *Kazanga Cultural Association*, an ethnic association articulating Nkoya ethnic identity, and largely administered by successful urban migrants) managed to select and transform the local music and dance into an annual ethnic festival, a consecutive and carefully orchestrated *performance* named Kazanga. Since 1988, time-honoured genres of local music⁶⁶ and dance have been emphatically *performed* in a format adopted after North Atlantic examples, and before an audience of national-level politicians and other outsiders. The performative nature of this new form of cultural production in the context of the *Kazanga* festival turned out to be closely related to commodification: in former times this symbolic production had for the participants always derived its self-evident value from the cosmology and the temporal rhythm (in annual seasonal cycles, personal life cycles, and the rise and decline of communities, headmanship and kingships) of the local rural community, but now this value has been dissociated from the local and has become into a commodity, part of the strategies by means of which regional elites seek to acquire power and wealth.

Ethnic articulation with performative and commodified means, such as in *Kazanga*, situates itself in an increasingly politicised space, in which the local cultural orientations have lost their self-evidence by the confrontation with local and global alternative forms of expression, organisation and identity. We would remain absolutely incapable of understanding these processes if we continue to

insist on a model of the plurality of distinct, complete 'cultures' existing side by side. Instead, the contemporary social science of Africa presents the following discourse on ethnicity.

7.2. The discourse on ethnicity in African studies today

One of the most inveterate popular misconceptions concerning Africa today is the idea that the population of that continent would in the first place have to be classified into a large number of 'tribes'; each tribe would be characterised by its own 'culture', art, language, somatic features, political organisation including 'tribal chief', and its own 'tribal homeland' or 'tribal territory'; the later would cause the African continent to be a large patchwork quilt of adjacent, non-overlapping, fixed 'tribal areas', between which 'tribal wars' are postulated to go back to remote antiquity.

The tribal model for Africa has sprung from a number of sources most of which have to be situated not in Africa itself but in the North Atlantic region:

- the preference of colonial governments for clear-cut administrative divisions each coinciding with mutually exclusive territories in the landscape;
- the preference of colonial governments for a model of inexpensive indirect administration, that assumed the existence, in the landscape, of local, indigenous administrative territories coinciding with colonial territorial divisions;
- European views concerning the coincidence of 'culture', language, territory and the state — the early modern, particularly Romantic origin of nation formation in Europe;
- the rationalising need, not only among colonial governments but also among industrial enterprises, among the Christian missions, and gradually also among Africans, to label unequivocally the multitude of cultural and linguistic identities at the local, regional and national level;
- while the above factors led to the crystallisation of clear-cut classifications of the African population — mainly on a territorial basis — also African leaders (traditional chiefs involved in indirect rule, early converts to world religions, incipient intellectuals and politicians) seized the opportunity to transform these new labels and classifications into self-conscious units ('tribes', 'ethnic groups') and to claim, for these units, an identity, a 'culture', of their own (although this usually only amounted to the selection of a few distinctive cultural features as boundary markers), and a history of their own; this process is known as ethnicisation;
- in the absence of other social and religious distinctions, these ethnic classifications, and the local and regional contradictions they suggested by virtue of their being bound to a territory, became the incentives for group formation and for competition in national politics;

- formal politics along ethnic and regional lines also led to networks of patronage along which the elites, in exchange for political support, could offer specific advantages to their ethnic and regional followers; the latter had all the more need for these advantages given the increasing failure of the formal institutions of the post-colonial state;
- even so, ethnicity in contemporary Africa retained a situational nature: some situations are far more ethnically marked than others; an increasing number of situations is, by the people involved in them, primarily constructed in terms of other identities than the ethnic identity, notably in terms of religion, gender, class, professional group, national state. Also it very frequently occurs that people in situations that are emphatically ethnically marked (such as migrants in the ethnically heterogeneous context of the modern city) operate alternately, and with success, in more than one ethnic identity; often also one sheds, at a given moment in life, the ethnic identity that one has had from birth — exchanging this identity either for another ethnic identity that has greater prestige or that represents a local majority, or opting for a different, more universalist kind of identity (e.g. Muslim; or socialist) in the light of which the particularist ethnic identity becomes irrelevant. Here a central thesis of contemporary ethnicity research meets the post-structuralist philosophy of Derrida: the idea of the self as forming a unity onto its own, is only a myth.⁶⁷

This raises the question as to the existence and nature of precolonial identities in Africa. In precolonial Africa a great diversity of languages, cultural customs, modes of production, systems of domination, and somatic traits could be discerned. Along each of these criss-crossing dimensions identities, in the sense of named categories, could be defined in local contexts. These categories often had a perspectival nature: one could speak of ‘the northerners’, ‘the forest dwellers’, ‘those who seek to dissociate from the state’, depending on the opposite position occupied by the speaker himself. But in other cases the designations derived from localised clans, which furthered the essentialist suggestion of a fixed, somatically anchored identity acquired by descent from a common ancestor. Precolonial states, such as occurred on a grand scale in Africa across several millennia, always displayed a plurality of languages, cultural orientations, modes of production, somatic features, and besides the statal forms of domination they tended to loosely incorporate such local forms of authority (authority within kin groups, territorial groups, cults, guilds, gender organisations) as constituted alternatives to statehood. Not so much control over demarcated territories, but control over people (by means of course of law, violence, and tribute in the form of produce and people), was the central theme of these states. Therefore precolonial boundaries must be conceived of in terms of areas of overlapping of spheres of influence, and not as lines on a map.

It has been amply demonstrated that many colonial and precolonial ethnic designations in Africa have no roots in the precolonial past, and therefore must be very recent. The nomenclature of colonial and post-colonial identities in Africa derived *to a limited extent* from the extensive and complex repertoire of precolonial identities. However, it would be totally erroneous to claim (as African ethnic ideologues, Western journalists, and a declining number of researchers would do) that twentieth-century ethnicity in the African continent has merely been a continuation of precolonial patterns of group formation and group conflict. The above listed characteristics of twentieth-century ethnicity hardly occurred before the colonial state had established itself with its bureaucratic, named territorial divisions.

In the contemporary ideological construction of Africa, and in Africa, ethnicity is to a large extent thought as holistic and as bundled: language, cultural customs, modes of production, somatic features, territory, political leadership are then assumed to form one integrated package in such a way that a person's ethnic identity (that person's 'culture') is claimed to determine the *total mode of being* of that person. *Such bundling is a direct reproduction of the bureaucratic rationality that forms the framework for the political in post-modern North Atlantic society.* The various cultural orientations involved in a local situation are hierarchically ordered, in such a way that one cultural orientation is privileged above the others, is essentialised, and is considered to be eminently constitutive for one person or for one group; this is the cultural orientation that is subsequently stressed as a result of public mediation. Thus 'culture' functions primarily as a performative boundary marker. By contrast, it was characteristic of precolonial identities that the various dimensions along which they could be defined remained detached from one another, were not mutually integrated, and as a result no single identity was capable of developing into a claim of totality that was publicly mediated. Instead the various identities within a region criss-crossed in a gaudy confusion.

All this allows us to understand why in their own personal vision of social life, many Africans have come to consider as an unshakeable reality the very tribal model that we as professional Africanists are rejecting today. Politicians can appeal to this reified and distorted image of social reality in order to lend an ethnic dimension to economic and political contradictions, thus essentialising these contradictions.

Given these historical and political backgrounds, it is difficult to offer a useful definition of ethnicity. However, the following is an attempt in that direction. Ethnicity is the way in which wider social processes have been economically, politically and culturally structured under reference to a plurality of ethnic groups that are distinguished and named within the collective space. A recognised ethnicity is not 'a culture', and a national or international political system is not an 'arena of cultures'. An ethnic group is nothing but an explicitly

named set of people within a societal system of the classification and raking of groups. Within the social field (e.g. a society, a nation state) one collectively distinguishes a limited number of such named sets of people, always more than just one. Membership of such a set is considered to be acquired by birth and hence is in principle immutable, but in fact the acquisition of a specific ethnic identity later in life is a common occurrence. Invariably more than one identity is invested in one person at the same time. Within each set, people identify with one another, and are identified by others, on the grounds of a number of historically determined and historically mutable, specific ethnic boundary markers: the ethnic name itself, and moreover e.g. language, forms of leadership, modes of production, other distinctive cultural features, occasionally also somatic features. The ethnic groups that exist within one country often differ from each other only with respect to *a very limited selection of cultural features functioning as boundary markers*.

Concretely this means the following. From a Nkoya village in the heartland of Zambia one may trek (partly on the trail of David Livingstone 130 years ago) five hundred kilometres towards the north, east, west and south without noticing remarkable changes in the cultural, man-made landscape (the villages, the royal courts, the fields, the pastures, the fishing grounds, the hunting groups, shrines, but also ideas about kinship, law, witchcraft, adulthood, kingship, birth, maturation and death, the world, life after death, God); on one's journey one traverses a large number of so-called 'tribal areas' and language areas such as used to be distinguished in the colonial period. And whereas most local inhabitants will turn out to be multilingual and while the languages of the Bantu linguistic family look alike like Dutch, German and Swedish, after a few hundred kilometres one can no longer effectively communicate using the Nkoya language — but this will only be the case hundreds of kilometres after one has effectively left behind the recognised 'Nkoya tribal area' as defined in colonial times.

The great regional continuity of cultural orientations, in western Zambia as elsewhere in Africa, is an empirical fact; in a process of essentialisation, ethnonyms and other aspects of ethnicisation have imposed deceptive boundaries upon this continuity — more or less in the way one sticks out nicely shaped cookies with a cookie mould, from a large rolled out slab of dough that has everywhere virtually the same constitution.

8. *Beyond ethnography*

In my opinion, the contemporary anthropological discourse on African ethnicity,⁶⁸ cultural diversity and cultural continuity contains the best possible arguments for my thesis that 'cultures do not exist'; these are largely based on

empirical ethnographic research. Therefore, let us stay a while with ethnography as a specific form of intercultural knowledge production.

The ethnographer situates her pronouncements in a social process, in the encounter and dialogue⁶⁹ between the ethnographer and the people she is writing about. This lends to ethnographic texts a character of their own, an anecdotal narrative accent that is often subversive vis-à-vis the quest for discursive appropriation, consistence, the imposition of sharp conceptual boundaries, and other similar types of ordering that tend to be characteristic of North Atlantic philosophical texts. Moreover, despite the great investment the cultural anthropologist has made towards mastering the local language, she does realise, as no other, that a large part of human manifestations is not framed in language and can hardly be expressed in language. Although ultimately anthropology is geared to the reduction of a large variety of human manifestations including non-language ones, to text, anthropology tends to the insight that language, although of unmistakable structuring potential, is not ultimately and totally determining, neither for the cultural domain, nor for the full range of human cognition.

Profoundly inherent to anthropology is a recognition of the performative side of human behaviour. In the anthropological discipline the concepts of 'role' and 'role play' have turned out to be eminently successful as devices to link the individual and the social. The anthropologists realise that man shapes his social mode of existence by playing a role, with a very great degree of personal interpretation on the part of the role player, by loosely interpreting a social script, and not by the mechanical acting out of a fully determined, tightly programmed cultural inscription. Moreover the entire idea of the acquisition of cultural competence by means of participant observation is based on the notion of play: to the best of her ability the fieldworker plays, not the role of foreign researcher (for that role scarcely exists as an *emic* concept in most social contexts world-wide), but a number of roles that are being recognised and defined within the local society (friend, guest, kinswoman, lover, patron, client), and she tries to bend these roles so that they are not merely locally recognisable, but also instrumental for the main goal of her local residence in the host society: for the collection of information.

Even although she will occasionally have great doubt on this point, both in the field and during writing up, the ethnographer in principle takes for granted her capability of getting to know, through prolonged participant interaction, one of more cultural orientations from the inside and in their specific systematics. She also takes for granted that in this way she will ultimately be able to produce, by herself, forms of local public behaviour that the original participants will recognise as more or less competent according to the local model. In this production of local overt behaviour, which is increasingly competent (as it is constantly subjected to the participants' sanctions through their gaze, rejection, ridicule, encouragement) the local model is articulated and made manifest much

more directly and unmistakably than in the most dextrous interviews. For the anthropologist, participation is not only a source of primary information through observations and interviews, and not just a means to lower thresholds of communication by generating trust and demonstrating humility. It is the constant practical test of whether the anthropologist can apply in practice the local knowledge which she has gained in interviews and observation.

In the context of anthropological fieldwork as a knowledge acquiring practice, the term 'participation' has a totally different meaning from that which philosophers derive from the work of the French ethnologist Lévy-Bruhl⁷⁰ — for many philosophers their principal source of a furtive conceptualisation of humanity outside the North Atlantic region. For Lévy-Bruhl, who worked in the first half of the twentieth century, participation was a specific form of incomplete, diffuse and porous subjectivity allegedly characterising so-called 'non-western' or — as one preferred to say then — 'primitive' man — a model of experience according to which the human subject does not juxtapose himself vis-à-vis the surrounding nature and society, but largely merges into them. By the same token, such juxtaposition was supposed to be characteristic of the logical rationality of the North Atlantic subject under the habitual conditions of modernity.

Anthropological participation in the context of fieldwork has a unique function of validation. Let us take as an example the learning of a foreign language through total immersion. Someone involved in such a process will produce speech acts, will submit these to native speakers for criticism and correction, and will thus gauge and improve his own skill in the local language. In the same (and overlapping) way participant observation furnishes a practical feedback to the implicit and explicit insights that a fieldworker may have gathered earlier in the same research through observation and conversations. Participating is in the first instance not an expression of exoticism, not a form of going native or of risky loss of self, but simply an inductive and hence evidently incomplete form of empirical proof in practical, interactive and reflective form. If the fieldworker has actually arrived at some real knowledge and understanding of local cultural forms, then she is rewarded by the participants by the latter's affirmative attitude and by an increased flow of subsequent information; and in the opposite case she is punished by the participants' rejection and a decrease in the subsequent flow of information. The more the fieldworker is defenceless, the more devoid of North Atlantic hegemonic protection, the more isolated from her home background, the stronger the social control that the participants can exert on her, and the more massive the flow of information and the greater, ultimately (provided the fieldworker can retain or re-gain her professional distance), the knowledge and insight gathered during fieldwork. The time-consuming and humble learning of a cultural orientation including at least one of the local languages (local settings nearly always involve more than one language simultaneously) characterises anthropology as a form of

intercultural knowledge on feedback basis. Moreover, knowledge production in participatory fieldwork takes place on both verbal and non-verbal levels, leading to the ethnographer's textual renderings of the participants' own texts, as well as to the ethnographer's textual renderings of observations of non-verbal behaviour. Because of this much wider, non-verbal basis, firmly rooted in participation, the knowledge acquired in fieldwork derives from experience (often profound and distressing experience) in ways that have scarcely parallels in the procedures of intercultural knowledge production so far pioneered by intercultural philosophers; unless the latter do fieldwork among sages, but then their techniques of elicitation and recording are often hopelessly defective.

Therefore, whatever may be theoretically wrong with fieldwork as a method for the production of intercultural knowledge, it appears to be *in principle* far superior to the forms of intercultural knowledge of philosophers, who tend to rely on texts, and usually on translated texts from foreign languages at that; I say 'in principle', because below I shall argue that this empirical advantage is largely forfeited by the epistemological and philosophical naïvety of anthropologists as compared to professional philosophers.

The role of researcher forces the anthropologist to adopt distance and instrumentality vis-à-vis the participants and their cultural orientations, but at the same time the internalisation of local cultural orientations works in exactly the opposite direction. Ethnographic fieldwork is a constant play of seducing and being seduced. It constantly suggests the possibility of such a boundary-crossing as the fieldworker desires, and in this suggestion the boundary between researcher and the researched, far from being denied or perceived, is only *constructed* in the first place. The researcher seeks to be seduced towards participation and knowledge; but the hosts also, in their turn, seduce through word and gesture in order to constantly shift and reduce the boundaries of access, knowledge, trust and intimacy around which every anthropological fieldwork revolves.⁷¹

In playing the game of fieldwork, is the ethnographer the lover or beloved *par excellence* of the society under study — or the cynical manipulator; or both? This question has occasionally been asked within the anthropological discipline.⁷² But it addresses the foundation of that discipline to such an extent that it cannot be answered from within the confines of anthropology itself. Of old, the investigation of foundations is shunned by anthropologists — complacently they are satisfied with their naïve empiricism.⁷³ Anthropologists manage to do their work in fieldwork locations that tend to be distant and inhospitable, and here they think up Spartan alternatives for the standard North Atlantic comforts that are temporarily denied to them. By the same token they are inclined to improvise their way when it comes to epistemological and methodological foundations, thinking up their own solutions and, if they seek help in the process, to limit their search to the writings of fellow-anthropologists. But often this does not yield enough.

In view of the reputation (as being highly philosophical) of Johannes Fabian's seminal book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*,⁷⁴ I was surprised to see, upon a recent re-reading, that its explicit philosophical references are in fact practically limited to Baudrillard, Foucault, Hobbes, Ricoeur en Schutz.⁷⁵ Another explicitly philosophically-orientated book written by an anthropologist, that by Peter Kloos on the philosophy of anthropology,⁷⁶ deals with only an odd selection of philosophical problems in anthropology: the Popperian and logical positivist underpinning — not of fieldwork-based ethnography on one community (which is by far the most standard form of anthropological knowledge production) but with comparative anthropology (i.e. cross-cultural studies). Of fieldwork, mainly the ethical problems of fieldwork in unmistakably imperialist situations are treated. Even so, Fabian and Kloos display a philosophical competence that is absolutely exceptional among anthropologists in Dutch-language environments, with the exception of such (post-)Roman Catholic fortresses as Nijmegen and Louvain, full of (mainly ex-) priests and ex-students for the priesthood, whose standard stock-in-trade has been a decent two-years philosophical training. Characteristically, philosophy has not been part of the secondary school curriculum in the Netherlands; although this situation is about to change. In French, German and American cultural anthropology incidental reference to contemporary philosophy is rather more usual and is beginning to become fashionable; but even there it is very rare to find specific studies exploring the relationship between both disciplines.⁷⁷

Used to roughing it under fieldwork conditions, anthropologists hate to throw away something that may yet come in handy. At the present moment, when philosophy has virtually turned away from the concept of the subject and from body/mind dualism as two major pillars of modernity, we witness how the subject, acting consciously and constructing his world on that basis, settles comfortably as the central point of departure of mainstream anthropology — where transactionalist actor approaches on the basis of methodological individualism have been popular since the 1960s; since the end of the 1980s this paradigm has gained massive political support in that the concept of the market as a maximalising strategy has become the ideological keynote of North Atlantic society. At the present moment when post-structuralist approaches, with considerable delay, seep into anthropology, the structuralist method for the analysis of myths and rites turns out, nonetheless, to have installed itself among the standard professional analytical tool kit of the anthropologist. In the same vein, neo-Marxism as an all-encompassing anthropological paradigm of the 1970s has by far been left behind today, but what has remained, also as part of the lasting tool kit of the anthropologist, is the model of the articulation of modes of production, that could not have been formulated but for Marx's work on the Asiatic mode of production and on other non-Western societies. Used to dissimulate the contradictions of intercultural mediation or to encapsulate these

contradictions in what would appear to be personal eccentricities (cf. my own *sangomahood* as discussed below) rather than to think them through in general analytical terms, anthropologists evidently do not aspire to systematic consistency. In practice they are arch-eclectics.

Philosophers are infinitely more sophisticated on these points. From their self-image composed of intellectual passion, broad intellectual exchange, interdisciplinarity, and their intimate knowledge of the intellectual genealogies of concepts and schools of thought, they can scarcely imagine the specific dynamics of cultural anthropology as an international discipline, where yet the echoes of the wider intellectual climate of our time are heard only with great retardation, at the cost of considerable intra-disciplinary resistance, and often deformed beyond recognition. For instance, the Nietzschean distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian was appropriated by Ruth Benedict in her popular introductory work *Patterns of Culture*, half a century later.⁷⁸ The critique of anthropology for being imperialist (early 1970s) arose in the aftermath of the anti-imperialism permeating the left-wing intellectual and philosophical climate in continental Europe during the 1950s and 1960s. Likewise, we have seen the rise of post-structuralist and post-modern anthropology, a few decades after this was the intellectual fashion in architecture, literature and philosophy. A nice example of oblique anthropological philosophising is also the book *Culture and Practical Reason* by Marshall Sahlins, who for years was leader of one of the world's most renowned departments of anthropology, that at the University of Chicago.⁷⁹ For any philosopher Sahlins' title would in the first refer place to Kant;⁸⁰ however, Sahlins' approach has nothing whatsoever to do with Kant, there is a deliberate non-reference.⁸¹

Only once or twice did anthropology manage to take the initiative in the definition of the wider intellectual climate — notably in the rise of the concept of 'culture', and in Lévi-Strauss' version of structuralism (which however, as is generally known, was amply prepared for by linguistic, sociological and psychoanalytic developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century). Hardly any traces can be found today of what was Wittgenstein's gift to anthropology: the promising discussion, as from the late 1950s, of rationality, magic, and the recognition of the truth problem such as it is posed by the belief systems of different cultural orientations than one's own.⁸² Selected anthropologists did realise that the phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches in philosophy are extraordinarily suitable for the problematisation of the cultural practices of others both within and outside one's own society; however, once these approaches have been introduced into anthropology (by Geertz, among others) they have been localised and canonised there, and hardly any anthropologist still reaches for the original phenomenological texts. In Geertz' approach the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' description corresponds with that between *emic* and *etic*. Geertz has rendered anthropology a not altogether indubious service by adapting Ricoeur's phenomenological

hermeneutics to what Geertz thought were the requirements of ethnography.⁸³ It amounted to a major *coup de force*: notably, the decision to consider as *texts* all the pluriform events — including non-language ones — that lend themselves to ethnographic description. A quarter of a century later — under the influence of the further elaboration of textual theories in literature science — this conception has led, among a minority of anthropologists, to a hermetic view of the ethnographic corpus as complete, introverted, and as detached from the dynamics of social relationships in the social domain that is situated around that corpus and to which that corpus refers in important ways.⁸⁴

If phenomenology only found its way into anthropology at considerable costs and with considerable delay, the development of an anthropological discourse based on Foucault is today — one and a half decade after Foucault's death — becoming a respectable anthropological pastime.⁸⁵ The anthropological reception of Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari is still in its infancy.

Post-modernism only reached anthropology by the late 1980s.⁸⁶ Never has there been so much discussion of modernity in anthropology as in the last few years, often in terms of modernity being a condition that, although still highly coveted among our African subjects of inquiry, is already passed, has already lost its magical appeal, has already been overtaken by post-modernity, among North Atlantic anthropologists themselves in their personal lives as well as in their writings. This does not take away the fact that the majority of anthropologists have tacitly taken a curious position in the debate on modernity and post-modernity. For the ethnographer is on the one hand — the post-modern aspect — the champion of the specific, the local, and the vernacular (the *emic* side); but this often serves as merely a stepping-stone towards something else: towards an attempt to search — and this is the typically modernist aspect of the ethnographic practice — in the local for subsequent generalisations that transcend the local context. This search is informed by the construction of the publishable ethnographic text, and by the general anthropological concepts and theories that feature in such a text as a wider framework (the *etic* side). In this way the specific, local and vernacular is on the one hand — after post-modern fashion — claimed to be 'other' in a unique way that does not allow a relative view; but on the other hand that very same local aspect is — after modernist fashion — dragged along to a dialectics that subsumes that otherness as part of a larger whole, a no-longer-other, an Other reduced to sameness. The anthropologist balances between modernity and post-modernity, in an inimitable circus act that philosophers can very well deconstruct but that they would scarcely feel tempted to emulate.

An important factor in the relative intellectual isolation of the anthropological discipline has been the fact that that discipline has also attracted a remarkable number of outsiders: Jews, women, homosexuals, working-class children like myself, migrants, and moreover the spiritual heirs of the explorers, big-game hunters and missionaries of the nineteenth century, — so many people

who were less welcome in the more established academic disciplines, or who could not take root there. Moreover we can point to a process of professionalisation that has persisted throughout the twentieth century and that brought about the tendency for anthropologists and other social scientists to preferably dissociate themselves from, and antagonise, the very fields of scholarship with which they would have the greatest affinity in terms of problematic and method: philosophical anthropology, history, classics, comparative legal studies, comparative religious studies, linguistics. Instead anthropologists and their fellow social scientists sought counsel with the natural sciences and the latter methodologies and epistemologies. As a result a superficial scientism is often the only, obsolete, philosophical baggage of anthropologists. Besides, many anthropologists combine a rigid orientation towards societies outside the North Atlantic with myopia, not to say contempt, vis-à-vis the social, political and intellectual current events taking place in their own social, political, and academic surroundings beyond anthropology proper.

For decades the distinction between *emic* and *etic* has been one of the most powerful tools among cultural anthropologists in order to define and to approach their knowledge object and the procedures of their knowledge construction. A few years ago the leading logician Quine gave his philosophical *nihil obstat* to the paired concepts.⁸⁷ Yet the distinction, however useful, may easily be criticised. It is cast in the form of a binary opposition, which also provides the standard framework for Levi-Strauss' structuralism, and whose implausibility as a basic unit of culture has been argued in that context. Bhabha demonstrates (in a way inspired by Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions) that colonial practice took shape, not so much by virtue of the binary oppositions that were imposed by the colonial rulers, but by the fuzzy, inconsistent ways in which these binary oppositions were in fact applied.⁸⁸ The distinction moreover posits a modernist juxtaposition between knowing subject (the ethnographer) and known object (the participants, their conscious cultural orientation, and beyond that the underlying postulated reality as reconstructed by the ethnographer). Thus the distinction raises fundamental political and ethical questions concerning the subordinating, even dehumanising nature of the Other's analytical (*etic*) gaze.⁸⁹ Our judgement of the distinction cannot be detached from the debate concerning the controversial claim⁹⁰ of access to a privileged meta-position where an analyst (e.g. the ethnographer) pretends to escape from her own social and cultural determination, as well as from the intercontinental hegemonic structures of domination. Here we had better remind ourselves that what we intend as *etic* (as analytical, as meta-cultural) in all probability merely amounts to our own local *emic* raised to an undeserved status of universality and cultural neutrality. Notably, the *etic* perspective is opposed to a dialogical, intersubjective (in the sense of: between fieldworker and local participants), *emic* perspective of knowledge production, such as is being preferred today. On the other hand the *etic* approach is in line with another and

equally cherished ideal of knowledge production: it is boundary-effacing in this respect that it allows us (not only the ethnographer and the international academic community, but also the local bearers of the cultural orientation under study) to liberate ourselves from the chains of collective positions that have once been adopted and that are being mediated by the *emic* approach.⁹¹ In other words, to the extent to which the *emic* approach mediates the collective representations of others, to that extent the *etic* approach may be said to liberate us from such (inevitably parochial, local, particularistic) collective representations, thus opening up space for our own properly scientific explorations, that tend to universality and should strive to be as free as possible from local collective representations including our own. Moreover the *etic* approach reminds us of the unintended and un-predicted effects of socio-cultural arrangements — social implications of which the actors cannot possibly be conscious and which therefore cannot be approached from an *emic* perspective.⁹² Because of its distancing from the local cultural specificity to which only the fieldworker herself has scientific access, it is precisely the *etic* perspective that promises to provide a solution with regard to the intradisciplinary intersubjectivity in intercultural knowledge production. All in all the distinction *emic/etic* clearly brings out the fundamental dilemmas of cultural anthropology today.

Despite the relative intellectual isolation of anthropology, we can identify in the wider philosophical climate of our time a number of developments that have greatly undermined classic anthropology in the 1970s-80s. The rise of an explicit discourse on alterity, in feminism, anti-colonialism and anti-racism, inevitably had a negative effect on the credibility of the anthropological project as ‘the science of the other, of other cultures’. Johannes Fabian’s book *Time and the Other* has been a major factor in introducing these themes into anthropology.⁹³ This movement converged with that of post-modernism, that proclaimed the end of all Grand Narratives, thus debunking Grand Theory as a totalitarian illusion.⁹⁴ Was not the Grand Narrative a strategy, not of revealing the truth, but of concealing it? Was not the great narrative of anthropology a way of speaking, not even about the other, but about ourselves as participants, partisans, in a process of North Atlantic hegemonic intellectual and ideological subjugation of the world at large? The anti-imperialist critics of anthropology in the 1970s (Asad, Copans, Said)⁹⁵ were still following a Marxist inspiration, but the post-colonial theory approach by such writers as Spivak and Rattansi⁹⁶ reveals the potential also of post-structuralism/ philosophy of difference for bringing out the problems of knowledge production on an intercontinental scale — notwithstanding the North Atlantic entrenchment of most post-structuralist philosophers themselves.

In the course of the last few decades this type of critique has demonstrated that cultural anthropology is so profoundly formed and informed by North Atlantic projects of domination (colonialism, imperialism, world-wide

hegemony) that we can scarcely believe any more that this discipline could take a distance from these antecedents without giving up her disciplinary identity. The inequality between the ethnographer and the group under study in terms of control over the central medium ('participant observation' and 'a textual ethnography') takes care of the fact that, even with the best of intentions, deformations of representation are bound to occur. Since the production of text is ultimately a technology of human control, even the best *emic* representations are bound to be misused for intellectual domination. The ethnographer has an unshakeable belief that it is possible to adequately report on the knowledge acquired during fieldwork, even if this means reporting in a language that in principle is totally different from the one used in the original ethnographic context and therefore far more accessible to the participants than the formal academic language of professional ethnography. Ethnographers (including those ethnographers who call themselves intercultural philosophers) can only claim credibility provided in their fieldwork and in the production of their published texts, ample provision⁹⁷ has been made to turn their ethnography into a form of 'communicative action'.⁹⁸ This requires not only that (along *emic* lines) the participants' representations and evaluations are, to the ethnographer's personal conviction, mediated faithfully and with integrity, but also *that the participants have a decisive say in this process of mediation*. Only on that basis can ethnographic mediation become a form of self-reflexive taking-consciousness that is in line with the participants' own local cultural orientation,⁹⁹ and that enables the underlying epistemological principles of that orientation to effectively fertilise, or transcend, North Atlantic empirical epistemology.

9. *From ethnography to intercultural philosophy: Beyond the ethnographic epistemology*

We are in need of an academic medium that clearly does not have such hegemonic roots as cultural anthropology; and of practitioners of that medium who, because of their background or their radical reorientation later in life, do not take part in that hegemonic process,¹⁰⁰ or seek to disentangle themselves from it. Intercultural philosophy is a discipline attracting intellectuals from outside the North Atlantic. To some extent, African philosophy is even reserved to Africans. Many intercultural and African philosophers conduct — often in a strongly introspective manner — ethnography on the spur of their own knowledge and understanding of one of their cultural orientations (that of their home village, kinship, village ritual), against the background of their command both of their mother tongue and of an international language and idiom of academic communication. Obviously, such researchers are greatly privileged as compared to foreign ethnographers. However, even these philosophers are involved in a process of mediation that springs from the fact that, among their various cultural orientations, the cultural orientation called 'cosmopolitan

philosophy' plays a very important role. In this situation there is a real danger of nostalgic and performative projections on their part; explicit empirical methods strengthening intra-disciplinary intersubjectivity are absolutely indispensable here. A profound awareness of the great challenges on this point distinguishes such cosmopolitan African philosophers as Mudimbe¹⁰¹ and Appiah from their essentialising predecessors of an earlier generation.

The main issue here is not a Northern hereditary burden allegedly preventing Northerners from producing valid intercultural knowledge about the South, nor a Southern birth-right to a monopoly on valid knowledge production about the South, but a radical revolution in our approach to the cultural other. To the extent to which cultural anthropology has entrenched itself in the posed naïveté of an eclectic, apolitical, but fundamentally Eurocentric empiricism, it is only intercultural philosophy that may open our eyes to the epistemological implications of cultural anthropology.

In cultural anthropology statements of certain types are eligible to be assessed as true or false:

- the ethnographer's statement to the effect that her ethnographic description of concrete *emic* details is valid
- the ethnographer's statement to the effect that her abstract theoretical, *etic* analysis is valid
- the individual informants' statements that they render facts, representations and rules validly.

There is however a fourth type of statement that cultural anthropologists absolutely exclude from the question concerning truth:

- the participants' statements to the effect that their collective representations are a valid description of reality (both in its sensory and in its meta-sensory aspect, visible and invisible etc.)¹⁰²

Following the later Wittgenstein, Winch has shown us that the truth of the latter type of statement cannot be established in general and universally, but depends on the language-specific, meaning-defining form of life that is at hand. Whether in a certain society witches do or do not exist, cannot be answered with any universal statement to the effect that witches do exist, or do not exist, but can only be answered by reference to the specific forms of life at hand in that society — and of such forms of life there are always more than one at the same time and place.¹⁰³ The concept of form of life has much in common with my concept of 'cultural orientation' (of which likewise more than one are involved in any society at the same time). Now, cultural relativism as a central professional point of departure of classic anthropology may perhaps imply, theoretically, that the exclusion of this fourth category originates in respect for whatever is true in the

other form of life or cultural orientation; but in practice it nearly always comes down to following. However much the ethnographer has invested in the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge so that local collective representations can be unsealed for her, and however much she gradually internalises these collective representations as a private person — yet in her professional formal utterances (in the form of academic ethnographic writing-up) she does not give the collective representations she has studied the benefit of the doubt, nor the respect she pretends to be due to the collectively other. The tacit point of departure of the cultural anthropological professional practice (and in this respect it does not distance itself from North Atlantic society as a whole) is: Collective representations of other societies under study cannot be true, unless they coincide one hundred percent with the collective representations of the researcher's own society of origin. Of course, both the researcher's society of origin and the cultural orientation under study construct, each in their turn and in a highly different way, a truth-creating life world in the form of a texture of collective representations. This is a situation suggestive of a relativist approach in so far as it would *per definition* be impossible for us to choose between these truths on the basis of an *emic* perspective. *But according to the conventions of ethnography such a life world is to be one-sidedly broken down if it is the Other's life world, and must be left intact if it is the researcher's own.* Just try to realise what this means for the confrontation, throughout the modern world, in institutional, political and media settings, between such major and powerful North Atlantic institutional complexes as democracy, medicine, education, Christianity, and pre-existing local alternatives in the respective fields. The anthropologist may pay lip service to these local alternatives for humanitarian and aesthetic reasons but — for her own sanity and professional survival (not as a impassioned researcher but as a permanent member of her own home society) she has to abide by the adage that they cannot be true.¹⁰⁴

Born in the Netherlands (1947), I was trained at the university of my home town as an anthropologist specialising in religion. From my first fieldwork (1968), when I investigated saint worship and the ecstatic cult in rural North Africa, I have struggled with this problem of the fourth type of truth — that I am inclined to consider as the central problem of interculturality. With gusto I sacrificed to the dead saints in their graves, danced along with the ecstatic dancers, experienced the beginning of mystical ecstasy myself, built an entire network of fictive kinsmen around me. Yet in my ethnography I reduced the very same people to numerical values in a quantitative analysis, and I knew of no better way to describe their religious representations than as the denial of North Atlantic or cosmopolitan natural science.¹⁰⁵ It was only twenty years later when, in the form of a novel (*Een Buik Openen*, i.e. *Opening a Belly*, published in 1988)¹⁰⁶ I found the words to testify to my love for and indulgence in the North African forms of life that I had had to keep at a distance as an ethnographer and as a member of North Atlantic society; and my two-volume,

English-language book manuscript on this research is still lying idly on a shelf. In the course of many years and of four subsequent African fieldwork locations, always operating in the religious and the therapeutic domain, I gradually began to realise that I loathed the cynical professional attitude of anthropology, and that I had increasing difficulty sustaining that attitude. My apprenticeship at the University of Zambia (1971-1974) as a young lecturer and researcher in social science in very close collaboration with such radical scholars as Jack Simons and Jaap van Velsen, in an intellectual climate consistently and incessantly preparing for the democratic liberation of South Africa (in which struggle Jack Simons and his life's companion Ray Alexander played a major part), reinforced the radical lessons I had received from the Asianist Wim Wertheim as a student. As a result I began to shed the blunt positivism that had attended my first fieldwork. I became aware of scholarship's political and ethical responsibilities, and of the potential humiliation and betrayal of the people under study by social researchers in the field. In subsequent years, I was to ask myself more and more the following question: *Who was I that I could afford to make-believe, to pretend, on those points that attracted the undivided serious commitment of my research participants was involved?* Several among them have played a decisive role in my life, as role models, teachers, spiritual masters, loved ones. Experiencing their religion and ritual as an idiom (a symbolic technology) of sociability, I could not forever bear the tension of joining them in the field and betraying them outside the field.

In Guinea-Bissau, in 1983, I did not remain the observer of the oracular priests I had come to study, but I became their patient — like nearly all the born members of the local society were. In the town of Francistown, Botswana, from 1988, under circumstances that I have discussed elsewhere¹⁰⁷ — the usual form of fieldwork became so insupportable to me that I had to throw overboard all professional considerations. I became not only the patient of local diviner-priests (*sangomas*), but at the end of a long therapy course ended up as one of them, and thus as a socially recognised and certified believer in the local collective representations. At the time I primarily justified this as a political deed, from me as a White man in a part of Africa (Botswana's North East District) that had been disrupted by White monopoly capitalism and White racism. Now more than then I realise that it was also and primarily an epistemological position-taking — a revolt against the professional hypocrisy in which the hegemonic perspective of anthropology reveals itself. It was a position-taking that almost expelled me from cultural anthropology and that created the conditions for the step which I finally made when occupying my present chair in intercultural philosophy.

This step means a liberation, not only from an empirical habitus that, along with existential distress, has also yielded me plenty of intellectual delight, adventure, remuneration, and honours; but also liberation from such far-reaching spiritual dependence from my mentors and fellow cult members as originally

characterised my *sangomahood*. Becoming a *sangoma* was a concrete, practical deed of transgression in answer to the contradictions of a practice of intercultural knowledge production that I had engaged in for decades, with increasing experience and success. Becoming an intercultural philosopher means a further step: one that amounts to integrating that transgressive deed in a systematic, reflective and intersubjective framework, in order to augment the anecdotal, autobiographical 'just so' account with theoretical analysis, and to explore the social relevance of an individual experience. For what is at stake here is not merely an autobiographical anecdote. If I struggled with intercultural knowledge production, then my problem coincides with that of the modern world as a whole, where intercultural knowledge production constitutes one of the two or three greatest challenges. If it is possible for me to be at the same time a Botswana *sangoma*, a Dutch professor, husband and father, and an adoptive member of a Zambian royal family, while at the same time burdened by sacrificial obligations, cultural affinities and fictive kin relationships from North and West Africa, then this does not just say something about me (a me that is tormented, post-modern, boundless, one who has lost his original home but after finding, and losing again, new physical and spiritual homes in Africa realises that the construction of homes is as arbitrary and full of risks as it is indispensable and universal among humans, even if one may ultimately find a relatively secure home with one's loved ones and in one's professional practices. Provided we take the appropriate distance and apply the appropriate analytical tools, it also says something about whatever 'culture' is and what it is not. It implies that culture is not bounded, not tied to a place, not unique but multiple, not impossible to combine, blend and transgress, not tied to a human body, an ethnic group, a birth right. And it suggests that ultimately we are much better off as nomads between a plurality of cultures, than as self-imposed prisoners of a smug Eurocentrism (or Afrocentrism, for that matter).

10. *From ethnography to intercultural philosophy: comprehensive correspondences in space and time*

In the 1990s my road from ethnographer to intercultural philosopher would take me to a further exploration of the relativity of cultural specificity (hence by implication the deconstruction of cultural relativism). Once I has become a *sangoma*, I had at my disposal a fairly unique body of cultural knowledge, and a fairly unique status — the status of recognised local religious specialist — but my move to become a diviner-priest-therapist would be rendered meaningless if as a next step I would merely commit this knowledge to writing in a standard ethnographic monograph, with all the distancing and subordinating objectification this entails. Neither could I bring myself to write about the details of the social and psychiatric case material that automatically came my way as the therapist of my Botswana patients. What to do? Could I find a perspective

from which my transcultural stance could yet be combined with a recognisable professional form of scientific knowledge production?

I had now in my possession these mysterious rough wooden tablets of the *sangoma* oracle, consecrated in the blood of my sacrificial goats and periodically revived by the application of the fat of these animals and by immersion in water of a year's first rain. I could throw these tablets, and interpret the sixteen different combinations they could assume in terms of an elaborate interpretative catalogue that I had gradually learned during my training as a *sangoma*; the interpretation would yield me knowledge of the ancestors' wishes, messages and grudges, would reveal a patient's life history to me, as well as his current illness and venues for cure and redress. The tablets seemed to represent the epitome of strictly local cultural particularism. It was as if they had risen from the village soil of Southern Africa at some indefinite Primordial Age, and the same seemed to apply to the interpretation scheme that names the sixteen specific combinations which may be formed by the tablets when these are ritually cast. The local oracle of four tablets had been described by missionaries as long ago as four hundred years.¹⁰⁸ 'The old woman like a stone', 'the old male witch like an axe', 'itching pubic hair like a young woman's', 'the uvula like a youthful penis' — this is how the four tablets are locally circumscribed, and their various combinations have connotations of witchcraft, ancestors, taboos, sacrificial dances, and all varieties of local animal totems. What could be more authentic and more African? Not for nothing had I, at the time, described my initiation (which, after more than twenty years of work as a religious and medical anthropologist, made me an accomplished and recognised specialist in an African divination and therapy system) as 'the end point of a quest to the heart of Africa's symbolic culture'.¹⁰⁹

However, the illusion of immense local authenticity would soon blow up in my face. Soon I had to admit that this romantic suggestion of extreme locality was mere wishful thinking, under which lurked a reality that had enormous consequences for my theoretical and existential stance as an ethnographer and a world citizen. The interpretational scheme, right up to the nomenclature of the sixteen combinations, turned out to be an adaptation of tenth-century (CE) Arabian magic, with a Chinese iconography (consisting, just like in *I Ching*,¹¹⁰ out of configurations of whole and broken lines), and at the same time astrological implication such as had been elaborated another fifteen or twenty centuries earlier, in Babylonia. The local cultural orientation in which the inhabitants of Francistown had entrenched themselves, and from which I initially felt painfully excluded, turned out not to be at all the incarnation of absolute and unbridgeable otherness, but — just like my own cultural orientation as a North Atlantic scholar — a distant offshoot of the civilisations of the Ancient Near East, and like my own branch of science it turned out to have been effectively fertilised by an earlier offshoot from the same stem: the Arabian civilisation.¹¹¹ *I had struggled with the other, as if it were an unassailable,*

utterly alien totality; but parts of it turned out, on second thoughts, to be familiar and kindred, and available for appropriation.

Clearly, such a position smacks of the denial of difference in favour of an imposed claim of sameness, and was destined to make me unpopular among the small group of intercultural philosophers for reasons discussed above (section 3.4). But at the time anthropologists still constituted my main frame of reference. And among them, the insights derived from my *sangoma* divination study have led to a head-on collision¹¹² with the central theory of classic cultural anthropology since the 1930s: the historical and cultural specificity of distinct, for instance African, societies, the assumption of their being closed onto themselves and bounded, of their having a unique internal integration and systematics, in general the idea that something like 'a culture' exists, and the absence, or irrelevance, of comprehensive cultural connections in time and space.

This insight was for me the trigger to start a comprehensive research project, which has meanwhile resulted, among other publications, in an edited collection *Black Athena: Ten Years After* (1997; now being reprinted as *Black Athena Alive*), on the work of Martin Bernal; a book manuscript entitled *Global Bee Flight: Sub-Saharan Africa, Ancient Egypt and the World: Beyond the Black Athena Thesis*; and another book manuscript entitled *Cupmarks, Stellar Maps, and Mankala Board-Games: An Archaeoastronomical and Africanist Excursion into Palaeolithic World-views* — all in the final stages of preparation for publication.

Global Bee Flight is based on a similar *Through the Looking-Glass* (Lewis Carroll)¹¹³ experience as I had in connection with the Francistown divination system. A few years ago I went through my various articles on western Zambian kingship in order to collect these in a single volume. This was shortly after I had spent a year at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) in 1994-95, as the only anthropological member of the Working Group on 'Magic and religion in the Ancient Near East'. After this extensive exposure my eye was suddenly and unexpectedly caught by the many specific and profound parallels between the ceremonies and mythologies surrounding Nkoya kingship in South Central Africa, and Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and South Asia. The parallels were so striking, so detailed, that I had to seriously consider the possibility of cultural diffusion between these various regions and South Central Africa — once again the suggestion of continuities in space and time across thousands of kilometres and across several millennia.

The Francistown divination system and Nkoya kingship are two concrete examples of the kind of serendipities — totally unexpected finds — of cultural convergence and diffusion across the entire Old World, that have occupied a central place in my empirical research since 1990. But there is also a more systematic source of inspiration: the anthropological fieldwork that I have undertaken over the past thirty-odd years in various locations on the African

continent. In some of these African settings I have been treated more as a stranger than in others, but I have always felt to be on fundamentally familiar grounds in Africa, in human life worlds I could readily explore, understand (their languages were quickly picked up), love and even anticipate, full of situations that reverberated deep-seated affinities, instead of in alien and exotic abodes of exile that made no sense to me and left me a total stranger.¹¹⁴ In combination with the scholarly literature, with discussions with my colleagues, and with my involvement in the work of my Leiden colleagues and of my research students, these researches have created a context for comparative hypotheses suggesting considerable correspondences between local cultural orientations, far beyond the strictly local and presentist horizons of classic ethnography — far beyond ‘cultures’...

11. *Against Eurocentrism*

Against this background I immediately recognised a kindred spirit in Martin Bernal, the author of the multi-volume book *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classic Civilization*.¹¹⁵

Bernal intends to expose the Eurocentrism that — as he demonstrates — has been at the roots of the North Atlantic study of Graeco-Roman Antiquity over the past two centuries. In Bernal’s opinion, the widespread idea of being heirs to the genius of Greek civilisation, allegedly without roots in any previous non-European civilisation, has played a major role in the justification of European intercontinental imperialism. His central thesis is that we must recognise the African and Asiatic roots of classical Greek civilisation (especially of its language, philosophy and religion) — and in doing so, we would also recognise the non-European roots of major cultural orientations in today’s North Atlantic civilisation, that is increasingly becoming global anyway. Hence the pragmatic title of Bernal’s *magnum opus*, *Black Athena*: this title is to indicate that the goddess Athena, although the central symbol of classical Greek civilisation, yet had an origin outside Europe, in Africa. The question is not without interest for philosophers for the principal stake in the *Black Athena* debate is the claim concerning the non-European origin of the European philosophical tradition.¹¹⁶

With *Black Athena: Ten Years After* (1997)¹¹⁷ I reopened the debate on Bernal’s work, that appeared to be effectively closed after the devastatingly critical *Black Athena Revisited*.¹¹⁸ With the new book, *Global Bee Flight*, I return to Africa in order to investigate the implication of the *Black Athena* thesis for our Africa research today — and the implication of our Africa research for the *Black Athena* thesis. Because Ancient Egypt occupies a key position in the debates on Africa’s cultural historical relation to Europe and to the rest of the world, a large section of *Global Bee Flight* is occupied by an analysis of the

mutual interpenetration of Ancient Egyptian and sub-Sahara-African themes, in the way of concepts and structures of thought, myths, symbolism, the kingship, state formation, and productive practices. One absolutely surprising outcome of the book (when I started out I sincerely thought I could prove the opposite to be true!) is my confirmation, without the slightest reservation, of one of the most ridiculed ideas of early twentieth century anthropological diffusionism: Egyptocentrism as a possible model for African cultural history. By the end of the fourth millennium before the common era, Ancient Egypt owed its emergence as a civilisation (contrary to what Bernal thinks to be the case) to the interaction between Black African and Eastern Mediterranean / West Asian cultural orientations. But in the next step my analyses demonstrates that Ancient Egypt, in its turn, did have a decisive fertilising effect not only (as stressed in the *Black Athena* thesis) on the eastern Mediterranean basin and hence on Europe, but also, in a most significant feed-back process, on Black Africa, right into the nooks and crannies of many aspects of life, including the kingship, law, ritual and mythology. Instead of the patchwork-quilt blanket of mutually absolutely distinct 'cultures', as in the dominant view both among scholars and in the modern world at large, what thus emerges in the image of Africa that displays a very remarkable cultural unity. And such unity springs, not from any timeless and somatically-based Black mystique of Africanity, but from clearly detectable historical processes: having first served as *a* (not: *the*) major source and subsequently as principal recipient of Ancient Egyptian civilisation, and finally as the recipient of converging Arabian/ Islamic as well as — in the most recent centuries — North Atlantic colonial influences. The general conclusion of *Global Bee Flight* is a radical, positive and (coming from what looks like a White establishment scholar) unexpected revision of our conception of the place of Africa in global cultural history. Meanwhile there is little reason why the same model of qualified continuity over large distances in space and time would not also apply to other continents including Europe, and to the historical connections between various continents.

I have given reasons why (as an apparent reduction of difference to sameness) the argument of the convergence of African cultures (one of the tenets of the recent Afrocentrist movement, and a constant idea in Black consciousness for two centuries) is shunned by post-structuralist intercultural philosophers, but it is strange that this idea of convergence has met with so little acceptance on the part of African philosophers today. Instead they virtually unanimously support the argument of cultural diversity. For instance, with Mudimbe,¹¹⁹ Appiah shares the condition of being a leading philosopher who, while having been born in Africa, has resisted the temptation to identify with the production of a parochial form of African philosophy and instead produces a cosmopolitan, mainstream brand of thought that is eminently acceptable to most North Atlantic academic audiences, not in the least because it shuns all Afrocentrism and in general takes a reserved, deconstructivist attitude towards

any African identity discourse. With reference to the work of the Senegalese natural scientist and cultural philosopher Cheikh Anta Diop, more than with reference to Bernal's work (which however he does not like any more than he does Diop's),¹²⁰ Appiah rejects the idea of any cultural continuity permeating the African continent today. For this he adduces not the fruits of any independent historical research of his own, but two self-evidences that however are untenable in the light of recent historical research: the claim that Ancient Egypt had only a non-specialised, vaguely articulated philosophy that moreover is unrelated, in substance, with current African cultural orientations; and the claim that we cannot expect to find, in Africa, cultural continuities extending over a period of three or more millennia.¹²¹ In Appiah's words:

'If we could have traveled through Africa's many cultures in (...) [precolonial times] from the small groups of Bushman hunter-gatherers, with their stone-age materials, to the Hausa kingdoms, rich in worked metal — we should have felt in every place profoundly different impulses, ideas, and forms of life. To speak of an African identity in the nineteenth century — if an identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought, and patterns of evaluation; in short, a coherent kind of human social psychology — would have been "to give to every nothing a local habitation and a name."'¹²²

In line with this stress on precolonial fragmentation lies the African philosopher's Kaphagawani's thesis on 'C⁴', which is a scientific formula (cf. C¹⁴, the carbon isotope so vital to historical dating) meant to express 'the Contemporary Confluence of Cultures on the Continent of Africa. This is a postcolonial phenomenon where different cultures meet and mingle to form new, hybrid forms'.¹²³

In this formulation the emphasis on a plurality of mutually distinct and bounded cultures does give way to a recognition of greater unity, but extreme multiplicity and fragmentation is still held to be the hallmark of the African past, the point of departure. Such unity between African cultures as is being recognised is taken to be the result of the post-colonial phenomenon of globalisation, which allows this view to salvage the concept of a pristine distinctness of a great number of precolonial cultures in Africa. The entire discussion on Afrocentrism (with its Senegalese precursor Cheikh Anta Diop) appears to be lost on the majority of contemporary African philosophers.¹²⁴ Afrocentrists like Molefi Kete Asante¹²⁵ are scarcely welcomed or cited in the circles of academic African philosophers.

12. *To intercultural philosophy as a medium*

What then could be the contours of an intercultural philosophy that allows itself to be inspired by empirical research, but that essentially renews and transcends such research?

The dialogue is not only one of the oldest philosophical genres, it is also a form of communication that has established itself in the modern, and especially the post-modern, world as the most ideal form: with assumptions of equal contributions from both sides, equal initiative, equal rights, for the participants in the dialogue. One tends to assume that, from a pluralistic perspective, the dialogue offers the best possible conditions for revealing the relevant aspects of a matter, perhaps even revealing truth itself. The word dialogue is often mentioned in the same breath as the word intercultural.¹²⁶ Also in my own work I have repeatedly been occupied with the dialogue as a therapeutic instrument for the illumination of personal and group problems and for the attainment of reconciliation, as a principal African social technology.¹²⁷ Whoever seeks dialogue is not satisfied with the mechanical, cold juxtaposition of difference; agreeing to disagree, to differ, is a sign, not of dialogue, but of the incapability of arriving at dialogue. The dynamics of dialogue always consist in making contradictions visible, then exploring the conditions under which these contradictions may be transcended in the direction of a new point of view that was not yet available from the very first but that emerges creatively from the very dialogue itself. The true dialogue is a form of implicit reconciliation.

The anthropologist Michael Jackson (not to be confused with the once popular singer of that name) is one of the contemporary ethnographers who displays great sensitivity for problems of intercultural philosophy. His inspiration is primarily with Sartre's existentialist philosophy, and with Merleau-Ponty. With his work Jackson seeks to create a dialogue between people of various cultural orientations:

'But while my interest lies in the kind of metacultural understanding that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty sought, this should not be construed as a search for the essence of human Being but for ways of opening up dialogue between people from different cultures or traditions, way of bringing into being modes of understanding that effectively go beyond the intellectual conventions and political ideologies that circumscribe us all'.¹²⁸

Jackson's ethnographic interlocutors do not speak for themselves; Jackson conducts the conversation in his book, and in a form that is not compellingly imposed neither by the people under study, nor by Jackson's professional habitus as an anthropologist within the North Atlantic society.

In which cultural orientation does the ethnographer in fact find herself when she makes pronouncements about the cultural orientation under study: in

an African orientation, a North Atlantic one, in both, or in *neither*? One school of anthropology in which this question has been at the centre of reflection has been the Louvain school, created in the 1980s by René Devisch (one of the people to whom Jackson's major book *Paths Towards a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Enquiry* was dedicated). In the texts produced by the Louvain school, a characteristic figure of style has been the following. The writer leaves unspecified who in fact it is who is speaking: the ethnographer, or a characteristic member of the society she describes. Unmistakably, this practice has been inspired by a justified critique of certain hegemonic and objectifying aspects of the ethnographic relationship. In the Louvain case moreover this practice is usually carried by meticulous ethnographic methods and a profound language mastery. Yet one cannot fail to observe that it is impossible to solve the hegemonic problematic of ethnography, by dissimulating that problematic (as the Louvain figure of style seems to do).

Therefore, and once again: In which cultural orientation do I find myself when as a *sangoma* in The Netherlands I offer a Southern African therapy system that is far from self-evident to most of my Dutch clients, but whose being offered by me is neither self-evident to most of my Southern African clients even though they clearly have no objection?

Mediating between two cultural orientations means that the mediator provides himself with an interface, a plateau, from which access to both cultural orientations may be gained, but that is yet not to be reduced to either. Intercultural communication is always transgressive, innovative, subject to bricolage. Genuine differences, that are based not on a performative act of will but on the inevitable, inescapable parallel implementation of two opposite and mutually irreducible points of departure, can only be reconciled (in dialogue, love, seduction, trade, diplomacy, therapy, ritual, ethnography, intercultural philosophy) in a way that essentially takes a distance from each of these points of departure and that is not compellingly imposed by either. For this purpose a new frame of reference is conjured up, one that on the one hand confirms both positions (they have to be declared valid in order to make the position of the mediator acceptable), but that on the other hand transcends them, while making reference to a good which for both parties — but not necessarily in the same way — represents a major value. This is in a nutshell the mechanism I sketch in my analysis of African reconciliation; it appears as if the same mechanism helps to elucidate, and to facilitate, intercultural exchanges including intercultural knowledge production — but at the cost, for a long time already recognised by modern hermeneutics,¹²⁹ of producing not a faithful representation of the original, but an innovative novel creation whose resemblance to the original may be remote. We continue to be haunted by Kant's epistemology,¹³⁰ distinguishing the allegedly unknowable original from the known and appropriated, but inevitably distorted, mental image we have formed of the original.

I see my task as an intercultural philosopher primarily as that of a mediator, striving towards an empirically underpinned and practically applicable theory of cultural mediation. On the basis on inspiration from the empirical social sciences and of introspection based on my own extensive intercultural experiences, I seek to explode the philosophical self-evidences with regard to 'culture', in so far as the latter form the point of departure for all thinking about interculturality. I seek to explode the social scientific self-evidences of theory and method by reference to the much greater accumulated experience of modern philosophers when it comes to the handling of concepts and methods of thought; evidently, for this task I shall need the constant support and criticism from my new philosophical colleagues. Interculturality presupposes a medium that cannot be relegated to any of the cultural orientations which are being mediated within it; this opens up a immense space for thought experiments and imagination. On the other hand an empirical orientation means that we resign ourselves to impose limitations in this experimental and imaginary space, not only by explicit and intersubjective procedures, but also by a critical awareness of our epistemology and of its globally available alternatives. The challenges and potentials for intercultural philosophy are boundless, and so is its prophetic responsibility in the contemporary world.

13. *Cultural diversity and universality*

These considerations lead us to what is, next to the question of humanisation from pre-human ancestors, and the possibility of intercultural knowledge and of intercultural ethics, one of the central questions of the philosophy of culture: *Why should there be this fragmentation of cultural orientations, this multiplicity of pattern formation?* Is it proper to the human condition? To language? To sensory perception? To thought? To the handling of symbols? To a specific historical phase in the human condition, which perhaps we are at the point of leaving behind us? The latter hardly seems likely, for the predictable stop-gap of every argument on cultural globalisation so far has been the emphasis on the articulation of an ever greater proliferation of separate identities each marked by cultural differences.¹³¹ There is every indication that the philosophy of interculturality will only come of age when she shall have developed a convincing argument explaining the tendency to fragmentation in human collective patterned arrangements.

The Ghanaian philosopher Wiredu posits¹³² that 'cultures' must necessarily contain a universal component because without such a component the communication between 'cultures' would be impossible, whereas yet we see (according to him) everywhere around us that such communication is a fact.

Exactly the same argument is used by Sogolo against what he considers to be Winch's extreme relativism.¹³³ In passing Sogolo appeals to the principle of charity as formulated by Davidson. Sogolo thus applies this principle (as others

tend to do)¹³⁴ as the *deus ex machina* of interculturality.¹³⁵ In Davidson's view, consistency is an indication of truth. The *principle of charity* stipulates that we are prepared to accept for true whatever appears to someone else as true. But underlying this technical logical usage shimmers, not by accent, the more original meaning of charity as *love for thou neighbour*, the Ancient Greek and early Christian concept of *agapè*. The intercultural implications of this view are hardly investigated by Davidson, but they amount to the kind of epistemological relativism that was formally pretended by classic cultural anthropology but that in fact — as I argue above — has never materialised in that discipline. My argument on becoming a *sangoma*¹³⁶ makes it clear that it is precisely the principle of charity, in the Davidsonian sense, that almost expelled me from ethnography.

Apparently Wiredu's intuition brings him close to realising the social implications (i.e. Shen's dilemma) of the problem of 'cultures do not exist'. Yet Wiredu's allegiance to the established concept of culture prevents him from offering an adequate solution, yea even from formulating the question with sufficient precision. Admittedly, interculturality would be an impossibility in a situation marked by the coexistence of a number of absolutely distinct cultures side by side, each culture allegedly offering to its adherents a total ordering of their life world. If we find this an undesirable conclusion (and as world citizens at the beginning of the third millennium CE we have no other choice but abhorring such a conclusion) then we have the following ways out:

- either we postulate (with Wiredu) a universal trait in every 'culture' (which would enable us to retain the established concept of culture as holistic and bounded)
- or we take a fundamentally relative view of the totality and the boundedness of culture, by postulating that every human situation always involves a variety of cultural orientations, between which there is a constant interplay, both within one person with his many, varied, and other contradictory roles, and between a number of persons in their interaction with each other.

In the first case intercultural communication is the exception, in the second case it is the rule, the normal state of affairs. From my argument it is clear that I prefer the second solution by far.

But let us pause a moment to consider Wiredu's argument. What is, in fact, the evidence that 'cultures' — or even, that the far less comprehensive cultural orientations that I would put in the place of 'cultures' — do in fact communicate with one another? How would they be implemented to do that? How can we even so much as perceive 'cultures'? A culture is a highly aggregate, abstract construct (a construct both of the participants, and of the ethnographer), that escapes direct observation precisely as far as concerns its proclaimed totality, for such totality is only presumed and in fact illusory. All

that is open to our sensory perception is the concrete behaviour of persons, and the material effects of that behaviour in the form of objects made or transformed by humans. Our fellow humanity enables us — if only after very substantial ethnographic and linguistic investments — to understand this behaviour and these objects in terms of the participants' intentionality and signification; in this way what we observe becomes more than unpredictable purely individual behaviour: we are capable of discerning collective patterns that persist in more or less unaltered form over a certain period of time — the indications of cultural orientations.

Unmistakably, two regimes of pattern formation may influence each other, as anyone can see from the interference patterns that emerge when one casts two stones of unequal weight simultaneously into the water. But this is *fusion*, not communication; *communication presupposes a medium at both sides of which the communicating entities find themselves, in such a way that in communication their being distinct and separate is both confirmed and dissolved at the same time*, — we might say that they constitute themselves as different precisely in the process of communication, of communicative union, of sameness.

We are used to thinking about 'culture' as a context of communication.¹³⁷ to the extent to which we share the same cultural orientation, we can communicate with each other. But there is a snake under the grass here: to the extent to which we share the same cultural orientation, there may not even be anything left to communicate; intracultural communication is different from intercultural communication, but it is no less problematic: both forms of communication depart from the premise of a difference that is being reduced by communication.

Regardless of the question of whether 'cultures' do or do not communicate with each other, it is an empirical fact that the bearers of explicitly different cultural orientations are capable of establishing at least a measure of communication, however defective, between their respective cultural orientations, and these bearers produce their identities and their cultural orientations precisely in the context of that communication. *Are we then allowed to reverse the argument and to claim that it is not so much the difference between distinct cultural orientations which makes intercultural communication possible, but that it is the communication itself (the intercultural communication, formally, but now we no longer know what meaning to attribute to 'intercultural') which engenders the positions of cultural difference in the first place?* Such a view is perfectly in line with the performative and strategic use of claimed cultural difference in the context of the multicultural society. At the experiential level, it is confirmed by the professional experience of the ethnographer outside the North Atlantic multicultural society. For her professional role forces the ethnographer to a communication in the context of which she initially painfully experiences, and tends to reify, cultural differences

vis-à-vis the local others; but gradually, as she learns and internalises the host cultural orientation, it loses all exotism for her, as a result of which the initial cultural difference appears as a temporary artefact of the initial communication situation. Frederick Barth's path-breaking work on ethnicity could be very well summarised in terms of the idea that communication (and in fact all human interaction is communicative) produces cultural difference instead of a pre-existing cultural difference engendering, secondarily, specific forms of intercultural communication.¹³⁸

And in the end it dawns upon us that this thought constitutes in fact the oldest recorded theory of 'culture': it is the myth that sees in the construction of the tower of Babel (by far mankind's greatest communicative and collective effort to that date, regardless of whether it was real or only mythical) the origin of all cultural and linguistic diversity. It is remarkable that this myth can be found all over Africa under conditions impossible to explain away by reference to the influence of the two world religions Islam and Christianity.¹³⁹ Why would the oldest and most widespread theory of cultural difference no longer be capable of inspiring us?¹⁴⁰

Notes

- ¹ Rural Tunisia, urban Zambia, rural Zambia, rural Guinea Bissau, and urban Botswana.
- ² Van Binsbergen & Doornbos 1987.
- ³ The 'Christian' or 'Common' Era (CE) is a hegemonic North Atlantic concept whose particularism we should not dissimulate. For the great majority of people in the contemporary world, the traditional (and most probably erroneous) year of birth of the founder of Christianity is an unlikely and irrelevant calibration point for time reckoning. As is the case with so many hegemonic concepts, this calendrical concept reveals its hegemonic nature precisely by its unfounded but taken-for-granted claim of universalism.
- ⁴ Kant 1983c.
- ⁵ Kant 1983b; Cf. Kimmerle & Oosterling 2000; my contribution to the latter book examines Kant's aesthetics in the light of an empirical African example.
- ⁶ Cf. Mall 1995: 92.
- ⁷ Notably that of the 'politics of recognition'; cf. Taylor 1992.
- ⁸ For formulations of classic cultural relativism, cf. Herskovits 1973; Nowell-Smith 1971; Rudolph 1968; Tennekes 1971. In many respects, the problematic of cultural relativism is the mirror image of the problematic of interculturality; the field is too complex than to expect that justice will be done to it in the present, limited context. For an interesting exploration, cf. Procée 1991. Around Gellner an important group of critics of cultural relativism has formed, cf.: Aya 1996; Boudon 1996; Gellner 1996. Also cf. the exchange between Geertz and Gellner: Geertz 1995; Gellner 1995; and Geertz 1984.
- ⁹ Shen, in preparation.
- ¹⁰ Tylor 1871.
- ¹¹ Herder n.d.
- ¹² This does however not exonerate him from charges of racism, which in recent debates have been levelled against not only Herder, but also Kant (in his non-critical,

anthropological work) and other Enlightenment philosophers; cf. Eze 1996, 1997; Bernal 1987; Rose 1990; Kant 1983d. However, these allegations have met with forceful defenses of the Enlightenment philosophers as pillars of universalism and tolerance: Palter 1996b; Norton 1996; Jenkyns 1996. The truth is that, while unmistakably, and forgivably, children of their time and age and hence racists, they were often (like Herder in much of his writings, and Kant in his critical work), and to their great credit, able to rise above these limitations.

¹³ Cf. Headland, Pike & Harris 1990; cf. Harris 1969, ch. 20, pp. 568-604 who was seriously criticised by Burling 1969; Müller 1983.

¹⁴ Cf. Beattie 1964.

¹⁵ I am deliberately using the anthropological technical term 'avoidance', that designates a mode of highly elusive and restrictive behaviour of individuals belonging to social categories between which strong structural tensions exist, e.g. son-in-law and mother-in-law.

¹⁶ Van Beek 1991; Kloos 1987; Lewis 1951; Harris 1969.

¹⁷ How fast the social appropriation of the concept of 'culture' has proceeded in recent decades is manifest, for instance, from the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* of 1978, where 'culture' still only occurs in the sense of religious worship (first attested in English in 1483), agriculture (1626), and civilising activity (1510, 1805). Little c.s. 1978 s.v. 'culture'.

¹⁸ Some examples from among countless many are: Appiah 1992; Copleston 1980; Gyegye 1997; Kimmerle 1994a; Mall 1995; Sogolo 1998; the latter article is an excerpt from: Sogolo 1993.

¹⁹ Mall 1995, ch. 1; cf. Mall 1993.

²⁰ Since the nineteenth century (of the North Atlantic era; the self-evidence of the so-called Common Era is in itself a hegemonic claim to be deconstructed!) Eurocentrism has taken a North Atlantic variant which comprises not only Western Europe but also North America.

²¹ Hegel 1992; for a critical distance from the perspective of contemporary intercultural philosophy, cf. Kimmerle 1993; also Eze 1996, 1997.

²² For striking relevant passages, cf. Rorty 1997.

²³ Rattansi 1994.

²⁴ Mudimbe 1988, 1992a; cf. my extensive study of Mudimbe, van Binsbergen 2001.

²⁵ Deleuze c.s. 1980; Deleuze & Guattari 1972, 1991; Guattari 1992; Oosterling & Thisse 1998; van Binsbergen 1999g.

²⁶ For an authoritative overview cf. Hale & Wright 1999.

²⁷ Cf. Hookway 1993; Quine 1960, 1970, 1990b; Gadamer 1967; Volosinov 1973; and the notorious polemics between Searle and Derrida: Searle 1977, 1983; Derrida 1988; cf. Hadreas n.d.

²⁸ Thus it is remarkable that in Genzler's (1993) thorough review of contemporary translation theories in five chapters, only one chapter was to be devoted to philosophical theories notably deconstructionism *à la* Derrida c.s., while the great majority of reflection in this fundamental field of study came from cultural theorists, anthropologists and literary scholars.

²⁹ Cf. Raju 1966.

³⁰ In the face of such global diversity, one is amazed to see the term 'intercultural' frequently used to refer to exchanges between speakers of German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, and Scandinavian languages within the European Union — as if these languages could still legitimately count as the boundary marker of just as many distinct 'cultures'; however, I prefer to see the case as a plurality intimately

related local linguistic forms within one comprehensive North Atlantic civilisation at the beginning of the third millennium of the Common Era.

31 I am grateful to Heinz Kimmerle and Henk Oosterling for pointing out serious shortcomings in an earlier version of this paragraph.

32 Cf. Kimmerle 1990.

33 Perpeet 1974, with exhaustive bibliographical references. The history of the concept of 'culture' between Roman antiquity and the eighteenth century is exhaustively treated in: Niedermann 1941.

34 I define a civilisation as a socio-political system which — by virtue of such institutions as food production, state formation, writing and organised religion — displays a considerable degree of continuity over a vast geographical area and within which a plurality of cultural orientations are comprised. The contradiction between 'culture' and civilisation, as posed by Kant and as elaborated by Spengler, is not fertile from a cultural anthropological perspective. Outside the German language area it has not been common to make such a distinction. Cf. Perpeet 1974, especially cols. 1318f.; Kant 1983a; Spengler 1993: 42f.

35 Spengler 1993.

36 Gehlen 1977; Rothacker 1920, 1926; Schoeps 1966: 216f; Achterhuis 1992.

37 Cf. Palmer 1969.

38 Grawe 1974.

39 Main events in this debate are, in alphabetic order: Appiah 1992; Duerr 1981; Gellner 1959; Gellner 1990; Hallen & Sodipo 1986; Hollis & Lukes 1982; Horton & Finnegan; Horton 1967; Kippenberg & Luchesi 1978; Sogolo 1993; Wilson 1970; Winch 1964, 1970. Winch's main inspiration was: Wittgenstein 1953.

40 For the potential relevance of Guattari & Deleuze's work for contemporary cultural anthropology, cf. van Binsbergen 1999g. Meanwhile this does not take away the fact that — as I argue at length in the article cited — Guattari himself has only realised this potential in a very partial way, while relying on concepts and points of view which are unacceptable for professional anthropologists today.

41 Mall 1995, which leans heavily on the post-structuralist philosophy of difference; Kimmerle 1990, 1994b; Kimmerle & Wimmer 1997; Kimmerle & Oosterling 2000; Oosterling 1989, 1996.

42 Considering the abundance of ethnonymic reference in his work, this is implicitly the — obsolescent — position taken by Lévi-Strauss and by most anthropologists of his generation. The post-structuralist philosophers have only a limited discourse on other cultural orientations than those which have been bundled in contemporary North Atlantic society.

43 Van Binsbergen 1999.

44 Van Binsbergen 1992b, 1993 = 1996d.

45 Godelier 1975; Hindess & Hirst 1975; Jewsiewicki c.s. 1985; Kahn & Llobera 1981; Meillassoux 1975; Rey 1971; Suret-Canale 1974; Terray 1969; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a, 1985b.

46 Cf. van Binsbergen 1981.

47 Van Binsbergen 1997f, 1998a.

48 Needham c.s. 1961, 1956; Beckh 1961.

49 Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998; MacGaffey 1986.

50 Harding 1997, cf. 1994. A rather less extreme form of the same idea underlies: Hountondji 1994.

- 51 Contemporary epistemological insights begin to take a distance from the distinction between natural sciences and humanities ('Geisteswissenschaften' that only one or two generations ago was taken for granted (cf. d'Agostino 1993, who bases himself specifically on: Bernstein 1983; Rorty 1979; Putnam 1978, 1981). I myself also make only a gradual distinction between natural and social sciences when it comes to the possibility and desirability of alternative epistemologies.
- 52 On philosophy as an intersubjective activity, cf. e.g. Luijpen 1980, ch. 1.
- 53 Sokal & Bricmont 1997.
- 54 In Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (Multatuli 2001), the masterpiece of this leading nineteenth-century Dutch novelist, Droogstoppel is an extremely prosaic character, a merchant devoid of all feeling for poetry and for the imaginary in general.
- 55 Sokal 1996a. The result was a minor affair in the pages of *Le Monde* and the *New York Review of Books*: Boghossian 1996; Bricmont 1997; Duclos 1997; Levisalles 1996; Rio 1997; Salomon 1997; Sokal 1996b, 1996c, 1997; Weill 1996; Weinberg 1996; Weinberg *et al.* 1996.
- 56 Cf. van Binsbergen 1999g.
- 57 This is incidentally how I came to support the Egyptocentric variety of academic Afrocentrism: I cynically started to write a book-length attack of it (van Binsbergen, in preparation (a)). Cf below, section 11.
- 58 Ahmad 1992; Breckenridge & van der Veer 1993; Clifford 1988a; Lewis 1993; Said 1978; Turner 1994; van der Veer 1995.
- 59 Cf. on Muchona and Turner: Turner 1967; de Boeck & Devisch 1994; Shorter 1972; Papstein 1978. On Ogotomelli and Griaule: Griaule 1966; Clifford 1988; Copans 1973; Goody 1967; Lettens 1971; Ogono d'Arou 1956; Sarevskaja 1963; the most dismissive reinterpretation of Griaule in the 1990s has been Wouter van Beek's in *Current Anthropology* (van Beek 1991).
- 60 Kimmerle 1997; Odera Oruka 1990b.
- 61 Derrida 1967.
- 62 Albright 1966; Bernal 1990; Best & Woudhuizen 1988; Bottéro 1992; de Mecquenem 1949; Diringier 1996; Evans 1909; Gelb 1963; Gimbutas 1991, ch. 8: 'The sacred script'; Gordon 1982; Hassan 1983; Karlgren 1940; Labat 1988; Lambert 1976; Marshack 1972; Naveh 1982; Parpola 1994; Ray 1986; Schmandt-Besserat 1992; Thompson 1960; Coe 1992; and extensive references contained in these publications. For the anthropological approach to writing, cf. Goody 1968, 1986; Lemaire 1984.
- 63 I am not speaking as an outsider to this field of study; cf. van Binsbergen 1997c, 1997g; and in preparation (b).
- 64 Cf. van Binsbergen 1997c.
- 65 See below, section 9; van Binsbergen 1991.
- 66 Brown 1984.
- 67 Derrida 1972.
- 68 Amselle 1990; Amselle & M'bokolo 1985; Barth 1969; Chrétien & Prunier 1989; Fardon 1987; Gutkind 1970; Helm 1968; Vail 1989b; van Binsbergen 1985, 1992a=1994c, 1997d.
- 69 Cf. Dwyer 1977.
- 70 Lévy-Bruhl 1910, 1922, 1927, 1952.
- 71 Cf. Kristeva 1983.
- 72 Cf. the exchange between van der Geest and myself in *Human Organization*, 38, 2 (1979) (van der Geest 1979; van Binsbergen 1979) and van Binsbergen 1986-87.
- 73 Exceptions are: Salamone 1979; MacGaffey 1986; Kloos 1996; Olivier de Sardan 1995; Todorov 1988; Sperber 1985; Kaplan 1984; Roth 1989.

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- ⁷⁴ Fabian 1983. By a remarkable coincidence, Fabian's title is identical to that of a book published by Levinas in the same year in French. Levinas does not play a role in Fabian's argument; cf. Levinas 1983.
- ⁷⁵ Baudrillard 1976; Foucault 1973; Hobbes 1962; Ricoeur 1975; Schutz 1977, 1990.
- ⁷⁶ Kloos 1987.
- ⁷⁷ Interesting attempts however may be found in: Aya 1996; Azoulay 1994; Bateson 1978; Carruthers *et al.* 1985; Hudson 1989; Jackson 1989; Kaplan 1984; Larson & Deutsch 1988; Leeuw 1987; Müller *et al.* 1984; Northrop & Livingston 1964; Passaro 1997; Salamone 1979; Skorupski 1976.
- ⁷⁸ Benedict 1946; cf. Nietzsche 1967-1980a. Also cf. Barnouw 1949.
- ⁷⁹ Sahlins 1976.
- ⁸⁰ Kant 1983c (*Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, 1781/1787).
- ⁸¹ Cf. Drechsel 1984.
- ⁸² Cf. the above footnote on the discussion initiated by Winch (section 3.4); as is clear from the extensive list of references there, that discussion — however shunned by most contemporary anthropologists — has become a fixed point of orientation within African philosophy.
- ⁸³ Cf. Clifford 1988b: 38f; Ricoeur 1971; Geertz 1973; Geertz 1976; Geertz 1983; Agar 1980.
- ⁸⁴ For a regrettable, though by its own standards impressive, example of such an approach to ethnography, cf. Drews 1995.
- ⁸⁵ For instance the work, very influential in contemporary anthropology, by Jean Comaroff en John Comaroff, 1991-97. This does not take away the fact that Foucault had already been signalled much earlier by a handful of anthropologists such as Rabinow and Clifford, as well as by the anthropologically-inclined literature scholar *cum* philosopher Mudimbe.
- ⁸⁶ Cf. Geuijen 1992.
- ⁸⁷ Quine 1990a.
- ⁸⁸ Bhabha 1986; Young 1995.
- ⁸⁹ Sartre 1943; Luijpen 1980: 280f. The danger of reduction of the other to self is also a recurrent theme in Levinas' work, cf. Levinas 1983, 1972, 1987 ; Becker 1981; Bernasconi 1986.
- ⁹⁰ For a Foucaultian critique of this illusion, based on the concept of genealogy (which is ultimately Nietzschean), see: Rabinow 1984; Foucault 1977. Cf. Kimmerle 1985; and: Nietzsche 1967-1980b. The impossibility of an epistemological Archimedean point is also argued in: Rorty 1979; and from a totally different point of view in: Putnam, 1978, 1981. Such impossibility, in other words, is a received idea in contemporary philosophy.
- ⁹¹ Cf. Koepping 1984; van Binsbergen 1984.
- ⁹² Merton 1968: 51; Hayek 1973-1978.
- ⁹³ Fabian 1983.
- ⁹⁴ Lyotard 1979.
- ⁹⁵ Asad 1973; Copans 1975; Said 1978.
- ⁹⁶ Rattansi 1994; Boyne & Rattansi 1990; Donald & Rattansi 1992; Spivak 1987, 1988, 1990.
- ⁹⁷ For an example of such a strategy, cf. van Binsbergen 1992b: 58f.
- ⁹⁸ Habermas 1982.
- ⁹⁹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1984, 1988b.
- ¹⁰⁰ Cf. Chilungu 1984.

- 101 Mudimbe 1988, 1991, 1992b; Mudimbe & Appiah 1993; Appiah 1992; Jewsiewicki &
Mudimbe 1993. Cf. van Binsbergen 2001.
- 102 Cf. Lewis 1981
- 103 Winch 1970: 100f; Sogolo 1993; Jarvie 1972.
- 104 This argument is carried forward, or so I intended, in the Preface to this book.
- 105 Van Binsbergen 1980a, 1980b; 1985b, forthcoming (c).
- 106 Van Binsbergen 1988a.
- 107 Van Binsbergen 1991.
- 108 Cf. dos Santos 1901; van Binsbergen 1996b.
- 109 Van Binsbergen 1991: 314; obviously I then used the concept of 'culture' in a different
sense from my present argument.
- 110 From numerous discussions of this ancient Chinese divinatory text I mention: Legge
1993; Jung 1974; Wilhelm 1948.
- 111 Van Binsbergen 1994b, 1995, 1996b, 1996c, 1996e, 1999f, in preparation (b).
- 112 This is no exaggeration, cf. the extensive criticism of this line in my work by Amselle
2001: 53f; Amselle's disgust is so great that he can only understand my defense of
Afrocentricity as an act of sheer opportunism — which I then happen to share, much to
my honour and pleasure, with another target of Amselle's, Cathérine Coquery-
Vidrovitch, one of France's leading African historians (Amselle 2001: 109f and n. 90).
- 113 Carroll 1998.
- 114 The topic of Afro-european or Eurafican cultural and historical continuities is pursued at
length in van Binsbergen, in preparation (a), cf. 1997c.
- 115 Bernal 1987, 1991.
- 116 Bernal 1987; Burkert 1992; Evangelidou 1994; James 1973; Lefkowitz 1996; Palter 1996a;
Preus 1992; West 1971.
- 117 Van Binsbergen 1997a.
- 118 Lefkowitz & MacLean Rogers 1996
- 119 Cf. van Binsbergen 2001.
- 120 Cf. Appiah 1993.
- 121 Appiah 1992:161f. For a refutation of these two points, see my *Black Athena Alive* (in
press), especially the contribution by Stricker c.s.; and van Binsbergen, in preparation (a).
- 122 Appiah 1992: 174; cited in approval in: Bell 1997, p. 218f, n. 29.
- 123 Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998: 209.
- 124 However, see: van Binsbergen 1996a, 1997a. For the reception of the *Black Athena*
discussion among African and African American intellectuals, including Appiah en
Mudimbe, cf: van Binsbergen 1997b; Berlinerblau 1999 .
- 125 Asante 1990.
- 126 Cf. Bocker & Nau 1997; Garaudy 1977; Janz 1997; Kimmerle 1992; Kimmerle 1995;
Odera Oruka 1990a. In the background this is informed by a dialogical conception of
philosophy, going back to Plato and having received a new impetus, in modern times, by
Bakhtin and the thought of such great Jewish thinkers as Buber and Levinas; cf. Buber
1962; Levinas 1972, 1973, 1987; and as commentators Bernasconi 1988; Todorov 1981;
Thomson 1991; Simons 1992. From more specifically cultural anthropological
perspectives, cf. Abbink 1989; Dwyer 1977; Dwyer 1982; Pool 1994; Tyler 1987;
Webster 1982.
- 127 Van Binsbergen 1994b, 1995, 1997e; a revised English version of the last article is in
press in my *Intercultural encounters: African lessons for a philosophy of interculturality*;
provisional version available at http://come.to/african_religion.
- 128 Jackson 1989: x.
- 129 Cf. Palmer 1969.

- ¹³⁰ Kant 1983c.
- ¹³¹ Cf. Appadurai 1997; Brightman 1995; Featherstone 1990, 1995; Friedman 1995; Hannerz 1992; Robertson & Lechner 1985; Robertson 1992; van Binsbergen 1994a, 1997f, 1998a.
- ¹³² Wiredu 1996, 1998.
- ¹³³ Sogolo 1993.
- ¹³⁴ E.g. Procée 1991: 143.
- ¹³⁵ Cf. Davidson 1984.
- ¹³⁶ Van Binsbergen 1991, 1998b; an English version of the latter article is in press in my *Intercultural encounters: African lessons for a philosophy of interculturality*; provisional version available at http://come.to/african_religion.
- ¹³⁷ Cf. Baudrillard 1983; Fabian 1979; Leach 1976; Shadid 1993.
- ¹³⁸ Barth 1969; Govers & Vermeulen 1997.
- ¹³⁹ Cf. Sasson 1980; Frobenius 1931: 169; Roberts 1973: 30f, 147f; van Binsbergen 1981: 335; van Binsbergen 1992b: 149f, 235. Babel is mentioned once in the *Qur'an* (2: 96), but as a centre of magic, not of architecture nor of ethnic or linguistic diversity.

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LES PARTICULARISMES CULTURELS NEGRO-AFRICAINS FACE A LA DYNAMIQUE UNIVERSALISATRICE DE LA TECHNIQUE ET DE LA DEMOCRATIE

Lazare Marcelin Poame

Aujourd'hui, c'est presque devenu un truisme de déclarer que le pouls des sociétés contemporaines bat au rythme de la dynamique universalisatrice du phénomène technique et de la démocratie. Force est également de reconnaître que cette dynamique, apparaissant à la conscience des contemporains comme opacité, est génératrice de conflits qui se traduisent par l'affirmation des particularismes culturels et la montée d'un différentialisme agressif.

Une appréhension simpliste de cette situation a souvent conduit à opposer la culture de l'ensemble socio-historico-technique du Nord à celle du Sud. C'est ainsi que certains africanistes, identifiant la rationalisation-technicisation à l'occidentalisation, ont voulu opposer au processus de technicisation-démocratisation de la planète, les cultures négro-africaines. Cette opposition a souvent été présentée sous la forme d'une alternative, celle de la résistance à l'hégémonie de la culture occidentale (à prétention universaliste) ou la dilution dans l'universel.

Une approche lucide du problème doit partir du présupposé que la technique et la démocratie ne sont l'apanage d'aucune race, d'aucun peuple, d'aucune culture. Elles doivent plutôt être considérées comme constitutives du patrimoine commun de l'humanité, comme l'expression d'un universel concret.

1. De l'universalité du phénomène technique et de la démocratie

Une des caractéristiques fondamentales du phénomène technique est son universalité. On distingue, depuis l'œuvre de Jaques Ellul¹, deux aspects de l'universalité technique, l'un géographique et l'autre qualitatif.

L'universalité géographique est la tendance de la technique contemporaine à gagner tous les pays, tous les continents et à identifier son aire d'action avec le globe. Un des signes les plus perceptibles de cette universalité est le phénomène massif de l'urbanisation qui est la transformation progressive du globe tout entier en une vaste mégalopolis qui absorbe par phagocytose les parcelles de la nature qui tentent de lui résister. C'est donc sous le signe de la prolifération du technocosme² que se manifeste l'universalité géographique. En clair, cette universalité est la réalisation de ce qu'on pourrait appeler le village planétaire avec la constitution d'objets techniques en « réseaux com-

plexes qui tissent un maillage parfois très serré, coextensif à des territoires excédant, éventuellement, celui des Etats³ ».

Mais ce ne sont pas seulement les espaces géographiques qui sont investis par la technique, ce sont aussi les activités des hommes qui tendent presque toutes à être techniquement récupérées. Nous amorçons ici l'autre dimension de l'universalité technique, à savoir l'universalité qualitative.

Le signe de cette universalité est l'invasion de la technique dans les domaines les plus divers, des tâches les plus humbles aux plus élevées, de l'activité culinaire primitive à l'activité intellectuelle et artistique. L'universalité qualitative est l'expression d'un changement (de disposition) par lequel se substitue à l'appropriation manuelle du monde naturel, une appropriation mentale par symboles et images du technocosme. Cette nouvelle forme d'appropriation s'accompagne d'une homogénéisation du langage par le biais de l'informatique et de la réalisation progressive de ce que Joël de Rosnay a appelé "le cerveau planétaire"⁴.

Du village planétaire au cerveau planétaire, la dynamique universalisatrice du phénomène technique est loin d'être un épiphénomène. C'est même un des traits dominants de notre époque. Géographiquement et qualitativement universel, le phénomène technique, du fait de son articulation fondamentale à la science qui lui confère par ailleurs l'appellation de technoscience, est donc par nature voué à l'universel.

Il en est de même pour la démocratie qui nous semble tenir son universalité de son articulation à la Déclaration universelle des Droits de l'Homme et à la raison critique qui se manifeste entre autres par la capacité du sujet à faire prévaloir son privilège anthropologique par une assomption (raisonnable) du dissensus. A la différence du phénomène technique, l'universalité de la démocratie (qu'il serait mal aisé de présenter sous le double aspect géographique et qualitatif) est moins fortement ressentie en raison même du principe qui la fonde : le principe de liberté. Cette universalité est en réalité plus principielle que factuelle. Pour en rendre véritablement compte, on substituera si nécessaire au mot universalité celui d'universalisation.

L'universalisation du phénomène démocratique, qui n'est pas un phénomène de mode, nous semble aller de pair avec l'universalité du phénomène technique. En effet, la prolifération universelle du technocosme est, comme nous le constatons, génératrice de mutations sociétales qui requièrent des solutions à l'échelle de la planète et qui appellent un contrôle démocratique transétatique de la technoscience.

Cette approche du phénomène technique et de la démocratie est utile pour penser ces deux réalités au double point de vue intérieur et extérieur à leur aire d'origine de développement. Aussi, voudrions-nous, par cette appro-

che, nous donner les moyens de penser le rapport de l'universel technique et démocratique aux particularismes culturels.

2. *Le choc de l'universel technique / démocratique et des particularismes culturels négro-Africains*

La rencontre entre l'universel technique / démocratique et les particularismes culturels entraîne souvent chez ceux-ci des déchirements dus aux effets de « réarrangement » et de « dérangement » internes qu'appelle cette rencontre. De fait, une culture quelle qu'elle soit, ne se conserve pas intacte au contact du phénomène technique et des principes universels de la démocratie à moins de se situer en marge de la loi du dynamisme propre à toute culture.

En ce qui concerne l'Afrique, son contact avec le phénomène technique et la démocratie moderne a été vécu comme un choc duquel la culture négro-africaine est sortie meurtrie, déchirée.

Reste maintenant à savoir si cette culture survivra à ce choc. Pour le savoir, il nous faut tout d'abord « mettre sur le tapis » les aspects de cette culture pouvant tenir lieu de particularismes culturels. Ceux-ci nous semblent pour l'essentiel constitués du legs ancestral. Il faut y voir non pas une essence constitutive d'un être particulier, l'*homo africanus* en l'occurrence, mais plutôt une spécificité ontique dynamique et cela par opposition à l'ontologique.

L'Afrique est le nom singulier d'une réalité plurielle. De l'Afrique blanche à l'Afrique noire, les traditions culturelles sont multiples et diverses, voire opposées. Mais, abstraction faite de sa composante blanche que nous connaissons peu ou prou, l'Afrique a une cosmogonie qui confère aux différentes cultures du continent une unicité essentielle ; celle-ci est perceptible entre autres dans la relation de l'individu à la communauté, dans les rapports de l'homme au temps et à la nature.

Dans les sociétés traditionnelles africaines, la personne humaine, notamment l'individu, 'se réalise non par l'affirmation de ses particularités, mais au contraire par le sentiment de sa participation à un tout qui le dépasse [...] à un tout de la communauté. Dans toutes les cultures négro-africaines authentiques, tout ce qui est fruit du « penser » de l'homme, les valeurs, les catégories, les significations, est attribué au groupe⁵ ». Mais cette importance reconnue au groupe ne doit pas conduire à une phagocytose de l'individu même si l'idée de la personne conçue comme entité individualiste reste quasiment absente dans le monde traditionnel négro-africain. Y est également absente, l'idée de respect dû à l'individu pour lui-même, comme personne humaine. En effet, du fait de la hiérarchie fondée sur l'âge comme preuve de sa-

gesse et condition de respectabilité, l'individu ne peut être assuré du respect des autres si son âge ne lui permet pas de se targuer du droit d'aïnesse. Asphyxié par les contreforts des gérontes, l'individu dans la communauté manifeste somme toute une présence-absente.

Dans son rapport au temps et à la nature, l'homme des sociétés traditionnelles africaines s'abandonne au cycle naturel des choses. Il a une conception cyclique du temps. Cette circularité de la temporalité, précise Bidima commentant Kagamé, "n'est pas un cercle fermé, mais une circularité en forme de spirale. Comme l'éternel retour de Nietzsche, la circularité temporelle en Afrique serait l'éternel retour non du Même mais du différent⁶". Entirement soumis au rythme (mouvement cyclique) des saisons, le système de production de l'homme des sociétés traditionnelles africaines est étranger aux artefacts (engrais chimiques, pesticides et autres objets techniques) aujourd'hui utilisés comme moyen d'accélération des cultures agricoles. Ce système faut-il le rappeler, est fondé sur une conception maternelle et déifiante de la nature.

De ce qui précède, il convient de retenir pour l'essentiel que les différents aspects de la culture négro-africaine ci-dessus esquissés auxquels il faut ajouter l'oralité et l'hospitalité, bien connues de tous, ont subi, au contact du phénomène technique et de la démocratie moderne, un choc déstabilisateur. En effet, l'esprit communautaire s'est considérablement désagrégé, le système de production s'est profondément dépersonnifié, le temps linéaire a supplanté le temps cyclique, la nature est presque entièrement désacralisée, l'écriture a pris le pas sur l'oralité et l'hospitalité est devenue évanescence.

Que deviennent les particularismes culturels négro-africains dans un tel contexte ?

Certains africanistes les condamnent à l'alternative de la résistance à la technicisation-démocratisation ou de la dilution dans l'universel technique et démocratique.

La première branche de cette alternative, nourrie aux sources de la Négritude, part du présupposé que technique et démocratie sont des produits de la culture occidentale. Par conséquent, pour préserver ces particularismes culturels contre l'hégémonie de la culture occidentale, l'Afrique doit opposer une farouche résistance à l'Occident par l'affirmation vigoureuse d'un retour aux sources et la revendication d'une authenticité africaine.

La seconde branche, fondée sur un présupposé analogue au précédent, trouve chez le philosophe camerounais Marcien Towa (illustre fossoyeur de la Négritude), un point de chute. Contre les idéologies du retour aux sources et de l'authenticité africaine, il suggère qu'il faut s'eupéaniser, "nier notre être intime pour devenir l'autre⁷". Aussi paradoxal que cela puisse paraître, Towa

prétend sauver le Nègre par la négation de soi, par le sacrifice de son identité (culturelle) ou encore par la dilution dans l'Autre.

La notion de sacrifice est en fait au cœur des préoccupations de Towa. C'est pourquoi, pour étayer ses vues, il invoque ce propos de la Grande Royale (héroïne de *L'Aventure ambiguë* de Cheick Hamidou Khane) que voici : « L'école où je pousse nos enfants, dit la Grande Royale, tuera en eux ce qu'aujourd'hui nous aimons et conservons avec soin, à juste titre. Peut-être notre souvenir lui-même mourra-t-il en eux [...]. Ce que je propose, c'est que nous acceptions de mourir en nos enfants et que les étrangers qui nous ont défaits prennent en eux toute la place que nous aurons laissée libre [...]. Que faisons-nous de nos réserves de graines quand il a plu ? Nous voudrions bien les manger, mais nous les enfouissons en terre. La tornade qui annonce le grand hivernage de notre peuple est arrivée avec les étrangers [...]. Mon avis à moi, Grande Royale, c'est que nos meilleures graines et nos champs les plus chers ce sont nos enfants⁸ ».

Towa, nous semble-t-il, a lu un peu trop vite ce passage de *L'Aventure ambiguë*. De fait, la Grande Royale, en proposant d'envoyer les enfants à l'école occidentale, n'entend pas les européaniser au point d'annihiler leurs acquis socio-culturels ; elle veut simplement "combler" en ces enfants l'espace laissé vacant par les premières années de l'éducation traditionnelle. La métaphore de la graine utilisée par la Grande Royale est assez éloquente, car lorsqu'on enfouit dans le sol une graine d'arachide, ce n'est pas pour récolter du tournesol. C'est dire que la question de la libération ne peut, contrairement aux vues de Towa, se résoudre par un effet de transmutation.

Somme toute, le présupposé qui semble fonder cette position (la résistance ou la dilution) doit être reconsidéré si l'on veut examiner avec plus de sérieux la question du rapport de l'universel technique et démocratique aux particularismes culturels négro-africains. En effet, quiconque aborde de façon sérieuse cette question doit se convaincre de l'idée que la technique et la démocratie modernes, bien qu'ayant leur aire d'origine de développement en Europe, ne sont pas l'apanage de l'Occident qui pour l'instant entretient avec elles un rapport privilégié. Il doit également se convaincre de l'idée que ce privilège n'est pas celui d'une race ou d'une culture donnée ; car il s'agit d'un privilège anthropologique qui s'obtient par un travail de la culture sur elle-même. Partant, le produit de ce travail qui doit être déclaré patrimoine commun de l'humanité devient cette viande commune que chaque peuple peut mordre à belles dents. Bien des peuples aujourd'hui (ceux notamment du continent asiatique) sont passés maîtres dans la manipulation et la production des techniques de pointe considérées naguère comme l'apanage de l'Occident. Demain, viendra le tour de l'Afrique appelée à relever les défis technologi-

ques et culturels en se libérant de l'alternative de la résistance à l'Occident ou de la dilution dans l'universel technique et démocratique.

N'étant pas condamnée à s'orienter dans l'un ou dans l'autre sens de cette alternative, l'Afrique est cependant sommée de faire valoir le privilège anthropologique de ses âmes en articulant adroitement ses particularismes culturels avec l'universel technique et démocratique. Dans l'amorce d'une telle articulation, l'Afrique doit aujourd'hui faire face à une série d'obstacles qu'on pourrait subsumer sous le concept d'analphabétisme techno-démocratique et qui renferme, d'une part l'analphabétisme tout court et de l'autre, la méconnaissance des principes et exigences du phénomène technique et de la démocratie moderne.

L'analphabétisme tout court, c'est-à-dire le fait de ne savoir ni lire ni écrire, complique aussi bien le rapport aux objets techniques que le jeu démocratique. L'incidence de cet analphabétisme sur l'usage des objets techniques pose à l'Afrique (notamment aux populations rurales) d'énormes difficultés qui se passent d'énumération. Son incidence sur le processus démocratique en Afrique compromet le jeu démocratique pourtant plein de promesses. En effet, l'analphabétisme des masses, exploité à des fins électorales, a contribué à donner une orientation grossièrement tribale aux choix politiques opérés par les électeurs. Pour ces électeurs analphabètes assimilables à un bétail électoral, aller aux urnes devient aussi banal que faire un tour dans un urinoir.

Ce qui précède appelle au moins une question, celle qui consiste à se demander s'il suffit de savoir lire et écrire pour faire une bonne lecture de l'universel technique et démocratique. Si l'on peut lire sans comprendre, la bonne lecture quant à elle suppose une compréhension minimale et idéalement, une bonne compréhension. Cette compréhension qui n'est pas seulement appréhension est invitation à prendre avec soi (au sens de *cum prendere*) ce qui se présente à soi. Alors la question se précise : suffit-il de savoir lire et écrire pour prendre avec soi l'universel technique et démocratique ? La réponse est non. Et cela en raison des attitudes culturelles des citoyens "lettrés" à l'égard de la technique. Ceux-ci, bien que sachant lire et écrire, entretiennent avec les objets techniques des relations empreintes d'un esprit magique et d'un irrationalisme archaïsant. Au début des années 80, la Côte d'Ivoire battait le record mondial des accidents de la route. Mais, qu'on ne s'y trompe pas, les raisons de ce triste record ne sont pas à chercher dans l'état des routes, puisque ce pays est doté de l'un des meilleurs réseaux routiers du continent africain. Ces raisons sont plutôt à chercher dans l'état d'esprit des automobilistes : un esprit magique doublé d'une « déresponsabilisation » de l'individu placé sous la tutelle « déresponsabilisante » du groupe ou du clan. En effet, bien des automobilistes, même en faute d'après les constats objectivement

établis par les services compétents, ne se sentent jamais entièrement responsables des accidents causés par une défaillance technique visible et prévisible de leur véhicule⁹. Et les parents des victimes, tout comme les automobilistes, en imputent parfois la responsabilité à des forces occultes, à des esprits malfaisants.

A cette attitude à l'égard de la technique, il faut ajouter la persistance dans le jeu démocratique de l'esprit magique qui, chez les citoyens dits lettrés, se manifeste entre autres par le recours au marabout supposé détenir des pouvoirs occultes permettant de changer le cours des élections au profit du candidat qui le sollicite. En plus de l'esprit magique, s'observent chez les citoyens "lettrés" une survivance pernicieuse du réflexe ethno-religieux ainsi que le refus du débat contradictoire. Lettrés en apparence, ces citoyens sont en réalité des analphabètes ; ce sont des analphabètes de second degré, des personnes en proie à un déficit de culture technique et démocratique.

3. *L'exigence d'une culture technique et démocratique*

L'idée d'une culture technique est aujourd'hui devenue problématique au point de faire passer l'exigence soulignée ci-dessus pour une pétition de principe.

Pour les négateurs de la culture technique, la question de la culture technique doit se poser non pas en termes de besoin ou de nécessité, mais en termes de possibilité. Pour ceux-ci, ce qui est en jeu, c'est la possibilité même d'une culture technique ou technoscientifique. Pour Jacques Ellul, un des contempteurs les plus connus de l'idée d'une culture technique, il ne peut y avoir de culture technique.

Quels sont les arguments qui sous-tendent ce déni ? *Le bluff technologique* de Jacques Ellul nous les révèle comme suit : « La culture est nécessairement humaniste ou bien elle n'existe pas. Humaniste en ce sens qu'elle a pour thème central, pour préoccupation unique l'humain, en ce sens encore qu'elle ne se préoccupe que de l'expression de l'humain, en ce sens enfin qu'elle a pour centre ce qui sert l'homme [...]. Et bien entendu, cela comporte tout ce que l'homme peut se poser comme question sur le sens de sa vie [...]. Or de tout ceci, la technique n'a cure. Elle [...] ne porte d'intérêt qu'à elle-même. Elle est autojustifiée, elle est auto-satisfaisante [...] tout ce qui est technique [...] ne concerne en rien le sens de la vie et récuse toute relation aux valeurs. Ainsi, par toutes les voies d'approche, nous constatons que ces deux termes, culture et technologie, sont radicalement séparés. Aucun pont n'est possible entre les deux. Les accoupler est un abus de sens et un non-sens¹⁰ ».

Comme on le constate, ce texte longuement cité pour les besoins de la démonstration situe technique et culture dans une relation d'exclusion réciproque. Une culture technique ou technoscientifique est un cercle carré.

Le postulat sous-jacent à ce déni est la thèse de l'autonomie du phénomène technique qui jalonne les principales œuvres d'Ellul. Cette thèse offre en effet l'image d'une technique obéissant à un principe de développement téléologique immanent et par conséquent inassignable, c'est-à-dire hors de toute inscription anthropologique ou symbolique. Cette thèse maintes fois critiquée dans nos travaux (Thèse de Doctorat, ouvrage collectif sur Jacques Ellul publié en France aux éditions Esprit du Temps) et vigoureusement combattue par bien des penseurs contemporains de la technique (Friedrich Rapp, Günter Ropohl et Pierre Lévy pour ne citer que ceux-ci) a évidemment l'inconvénient de surévaluer la dynamique technicienne. En effet, obnubilé par sa conception du système technicien, un système qui n'a de réalité que virtuelle (ce qu'il semble parfaitement ignorer), Ellul ne pouvait qu'occulter la dimension sociale de la technique ainsi que la part de l'invention contenue dans les objets techniques sophistiqués.

En radicalisant de la sorte l'altérité de la technique et du symbolique, Ellul et avec lui les négateurs de la culture transmutent abusivement la différence en indifférence en rendant le phénomène technique exempt de toute influence symbolique.

Il nous faut donc prendre congé de cette vision illusionniste. Une culture technique est à notre sens non seulement possible, mais réelle. Autrement dit, la question de la culture technique doit être inscrite dans la sphère de l'effectivité. Cette ligne de pensée est entièrement partagée par les partisans de la culture technique parmi lesquels il faut distinguer deux tendances : la tendance minimaliste et la tendance maximaliste.

La tendance minimaliste plaide pour le maintien de toute la culture ancienne (orientée vers l'art et la littérature) à laquelle viendraient s'ajouter la connaissance et l'usage des objets techniques.

La tendance maximaliste quant à elle prône, sur la base d'une remise en cause globale des cadres culturels existants, l'invention d'une nouvelle culture technocentrée. Pour cette tendance en effet, ces cadres culturels devenus complètement inopérants doivent être totalement abandonnés.

Ces positions qui oscillent entre des extrêmes opposés appellent quelques commentaires.

D'abord la tendance minimaliste, en opérant à l'instar des négateurs de la culture technique (volontairement ou involontairement) une scission entre culture et technique, croit naïvement que la culture technique se construit par l'effet d'un phénomène additionnel. De fait, la culture technique n'est pas la

somme de la culture (ancienne) et des connaissances techniques. Elle ne saurait se construire par le jeu des règles arithmétiques qui n'en ferait qu'une réalité sans épaisseur, c'est-à-dire une pseudo-culture.

Ensuite la tendance maximaliste, en préconisant une sorte de table rase sur laquelle viendrait s'inscrire une nouvelle culture, peut donner raison aux négateurs de la culture technique simplement parce que la *tabula rasa* préconisée est impossible.

Ni minimaliste, ni maximaliste, notre position dans ce débat se veut médiane. Son point d'articulation est la nécessaire corrélation entre Technique et Culture.

A partir de ces considérations, nous pouvons esquisser une définition de la culture technique moins controversée. Nous entendons par culture technique ou technoscientifique, le système formé par les interactions entre les connaissances littéraires et artistiques et les connaissances technoscientifiques. Loin de se juxtaposer, les éléments constitutifs de ce système sont pris dans "un rapport d'emboîtement fractal et réciproque"¹¹, leur garantissant consistance et homogénéité. Plus encore : la culture technique est à prendre à la fois comme connaissance technique transtechnique, comme connaissance du mode d'existence de l'objet technique et prise de conscience des valeurs qui doivent accompagner, voire structurer la dynamique technicienne.

Par la promotion et la diffusion de la culture technique telle que définie ci-dessus, les acteurs sociaux se donneront les moyens de rendre transparente à leur conscience l'opacité du technocosme naissant et s'assurer un minimum de maîtrise sur leur environnement ainsi qu'un contrôle sur la technocratie ou "l'expertocratie".

Plus qu'un besoin, la culture technique dans laquelle nous reconnaissons les linéaments de la *technologische Aufklärung* du philosophe allemand Günter Ropohl est une nécessité inhérente à la dynamique du monde moderne. Et le philosophe de faire remarquer : "plus le monde (actuel) se modernise, plus l'*Aufklärung* technologique devient inévitable"¹².

Tout aussi inévitable nous semble être la culture démocratique dont le principe consiste dans ce qu'il convient d'appeler avec Habermas "la formation démocratique de la volonté"¹³. C'est la formation par la discussion argumentée dans une démarche de respect et d'écoute de l'autre.

De fait, la culture démocratique telle que nous l'entendons suppose une libération de la parole pensante, une intériorisation (en plus des éléments constitutifs classiques des institutions démocratiques¹⁴) des exigences de fondation ou de justification rationnelles et la recherche d'un consensus qui serait le produit des subjectivités rationnellement surmontées.

Ce que nous venons ainsi de présenter comme culture technique et démocratique est, rappelons-le, une exigence des temps modernes. Pour ce qui nous préoccupe, la question est de savoir comment rendre effectif le développement d'une culture technique et démocratique en Afrique sans annihiler les particularismes culturels négro-africains.

L'enracinement et le développement d'une culture technique dans l'espace culturel négro-africain est avant tout fonction de notre aptitude à comprendre qu'une véritable culture technique ne peut s'acquérir de l'extérieur comme on acquiert des objets techniques par le biais d'un transfert (transport) de technologies¹⁵. Cette indication est également valable pour la culture démocratique qui "en Afrique apparaît comme le transfert ou l'emprunt d'un ordre qui a sa source ailleurs"¹⁶.

Cela bien compris, on tâchera de faire venir au jour une culture technique et démocratique par une véritable mise à jour des particularismes culturels négro-africains. Cette mise à jour s'effectuera par la mise en route d'une dialectique des pertes et des profits. Il s'agit en effet de procéder à une ablation de certains particularismes qui entrent en conflit plus ou moins flagrant avec les exigences des temps nouveaux supposées promouvoir l'humain¹⁷. Au nombre de ces particularismes, il y a l'esprit magique, la mentalité de cueillette que justifiait une nature généreuse, la subordination du respect de la personne au poids de l'âge et une dialectique postiche entre l'individu et le groupe.

Mais les particularismes culturels négro-africains, en perdant certains de leurs aspects ci-dessus dénombrés, ne se perdent pas pour autant ; car les pertes sont compensées par des profits constitués entre autres du respect de la nature, du sens de la famille et de la recherche du consensus par débats publics sous l'arbre à palabres soigneusement émondé à l'aide des sécateurs de la modernité pour n'en conserver que le noyau rationnel que constitue le principe de la discussion. Le processus d'universalisation de la démocratie qui a permis, au début des années 90, ce que l'on a appelé le renouveau démocratique en Afrique, a été pour les Africains l'occasion de faire valoir et même prévaloir une des dimensions fondamentales de la culture négro-africaine, à savoir la Palabre. Celle-ci, jadis synonyme de folklore et condamnée à une survivance moribonde, refait surface et se revivifie en prenant la dénomination de Conférence nationale ou forum de réconciliation nationale, cette "grande palabre", selon l'expression de Paulin Hountondji¹⁸, revendiquée dans beaucoup de pays africains (Bénin, Congo, Togo, Niger, Ex Zaïre, Madagascar, Tchad pour la Conférence nationale, Afrique du Sud et Côte d'Ivoire pour le forum de réconciliation nationale). Quoi qu'on pense, quoi qu'on dise, la "grande palabre" reste une voie originale de transition

démocratique. Jugée originale par son enracinement dans la tradition africaine, cette voie, sous la poussée des nouvelles exigences de la démocratie, s'est considérablement enrichie avec les voix des femmes et des jeunes qui n'avaient pas de place sous l'arbre à palabres. En même temps qu'elle démocratise la prise de parole, la "grande palabre" est célébration de la parole, cet élément essentiel de la démocratie (régime de la parole libre et libératrice) et de la tradition orale négro-africaine. Cette tradition réhabilitée par le jeu de l'universalisation de la démocratie est par ailleurs soutenue par la dynamique technicienne à travers les supports que constituent entre autres le téléphone mobile et la téléphonie rurale.

S'il est entendu que la culture technique et démocratique doit s'acquérir par un travail des cultures sur elles-mêmes, la première tâche à accomplir est la transcription, la traduction et l'interprétation en langues africaines des textes fondateurs de la culture technique et démocratique. Ainsi, ces langues, en plus de la *Weltanschauung* ou vision du monde qu'elles véhiculent, serviront de support à la transmission et à la diffusion des connaissances technoscientifiques et des principes fondateurs et régulateurs de la démocratie. En faisant nôtre le présupposé d'après lequel le peuple comprend mieux ce qui est exprimé dans sa langue, nous pensons que par cette démarche, les populations rurales africaines parviendront à s'approprier bien plus aisément qu'on ne le croît à la fois les règles universelles du jeu démocratique et les savoirs requis pour un meilleur usage des nouvelles technologies de l'information et de la communication.

En guise de conclusion

Une réflexion sur une question aussi délicate (la rencontre de l'universel et du particulier) se prête mal à une conclusion. En effet, réussir à articuler dans une entreprise individuelle comme celle-là, l'universel technique / démocratique et les particularismes culturels négro-africains, nous semble relever d'une véritable gageure.

C'est pourquoi, à défaut de pouvoir conclure, nous terminons sur deux observations :

1. La reconnaissance et la sauvegarde des particularismes culturels négro-africains dans la dynamique universalisatrice du phénomène technique et démocratique ne doit pas donner lieu à l'érection d'un *homo africanus* cristallisé. De fait, ces particularismes jadis vécus par d'autres peuples, en l'occurrence l'Europe pré-moderne, ne sont pas à prendre pour des essences, car il s'agit de pratiques appelées à évoluer dans l'espace et dans le

temps. On ne saurait cependant perdre de vue la spécificité de l'*homo africanus*, celle d'un étant pris dans le jeu de la co-présence hétéroclite des objets techniques sophistiqués et des valeurs culturelles sous-tendues par le legs ancestral.

2. Si ce qui reste encore des particularismes culturels négro-africains autorise l'affirmation d'un être-au-monde authentique incarné par l'*homo africanus*, celui-ci en sa vérité ne peut se donner à penser que comme figure particulière de l'*homo* à la fois *faber* et *loquax*. En lui, *loquax* semble supplanter *faber* et c'est en tant que tel¹⁹ qu'il devra relever les défis technologiques et culturels du 21^{ème} siècle en se donnant comme axe prioritaire le déficit démocratique à combler.

Notes

- ¹ C'est en référence à cet auteur que nous employons le concept de phénomène technique qu'il distingue de l'opération technique. A la différence de celle-ci qui a toujours existé au cours de l'histoire, le phénomène technique, préfiguré par le passage de l'artisanat au machinisme et inextricablement lié à la science, date d'environ trois cents ans. Il correspond à ce que G. Hottois et F. Tinland décrivent par ailleurs sous le nom de technoscience et qui est l'expression d'un véritable enchevêtrement de la science et de la technique.
- ² "Le technocosme, c'est ce milieu technicien qui tend à devenir planétaire, universel et qui trouve sa densité maximale dans la ville" (G. Hottois, *Le signe et la technique*, Paris, Aubier, Res l'invention philosophique 1984, p. 88).
- ³ Tinland (F.).- "La technique comme médiation et comme système", in : *la Technoscience en question*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 1990, pp. 108 -109.
- ⁴ C'est le titre donné à son livre publié en 1968 aux éditions Orban.
- ⁵ Diakité (S.).- *Les techniques de pointe et l'Afrique*, Abidjan, Les Nouvelles éditions africaines, 1988, p. 63.
- ⁶ Bidima (J. -G.).- *La philosophie négro-africaine*, Paris, PUF, Que sais-je, 1995 , p. 71.
- ⁷ Towa (M.).- Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle, Yaoundé, Clé, quatrième édition, 1986, p. 39.
- ⁸ Hamidou Khane (C.).- *L'Aventure ambiguë*, Paris, Union générale d'éditions, collection 10/18, 1988, pp. 57 – 58.
- ⁹ Même au volant d'un véhicule sans freins, bien des Africains ne se reprochent rien ; ils ne savent qu'une chose, faire rouler la machine et confier le reste aux forces surnaturelles, à l'esprit des Ancêtres ou à Dieu. Le philosophe bioéthicien Gilbert Hottois , arrivé pour la première fois en Côte d'Ivoire (en décembre 1996) pour une mission d'enseignement à l'université de Bouaké nous a raconté, la mort dans l'âme, comment il a vécu l'expérience de cette irresponsabilité avec un conducteur de taxi. Ayant en effet constaté à mi-parcours que le taxi qui le transportait de l'aéroport à la ville n'avait pas de freins, il interpella le conducteur qui lui répondit gentiment : « Patron, on va arriver sans problème grâce à Dieu ».

- ¹⁰ Ellul (J.).- *Le bluff technologique*, Paris, Hachette, 1988, p. 182. La même année, est apparu aux éditions Grasset un autre déni de la culture technique publié par M. Henri sous le titre : *La barbarie*.
- ¹¹ Lévy (P.).- *Les technologies de l'intelligence*, Paris, Ed. La découverte, 1990, p. 197.
- ¹² Ropohl (G.).- *Technologische Aufklärung. Beiträge zur Technikphilosophie*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1992, p. 50. On lit exactement dans le texte : "...je moderniser die moderne Welt wird, desto unvermeidlicher wird die technologische Aufklärung".
- ¹³ Habermas (J.).- *L'intégration républicaine*, Trad. R. Rochlitz, Paris, Fayard, 1998, p. 253.
- ¹⁴ Il s'agit bien entendu de la séparation des pouvoirs, du pluralisme politique, du droit de vote, de la liberté d'expression et de la reconnaissance du droit à la vie et à la propriété.
- ¹⁵ Sur la réalité du transfert de technologies en Afrique, nous renvoyons à notre texte (Lecture du processus de modernisation en Afrique à la lueur de l'œuvre de J. Ellul) paru en 1994 dans un ouvrage collectif intitulé : *Sur Jacques Ellul*, (Préface de Ivan Illich), Bordeaux, Editions Esprit du temps.
- ¹⁶ Akindès (F.).- *Les mirages de la démocratie en Afrique subsaharienne francophone*, Dakar, Editions du Codesria, 1995, p. 167. Cela justifie d'ailleurs le titre de l'ouvrage.
- ¹⁷ Presque dans le même esprit, a été créé en août 1996 en Côte d'Ivoire, sous l'impulsion des organisations non gouvernementales (ONG), des syndicats et des parlementaires ivoiriens, un comité national de lutte contre les pratiques traditionnelles néfastes.
- ¹⁸ Hountondji (P. J.).- « Les rationalités des processus de démocratisation en Afrique » in : *Philosophie et démocratie en Afrique*, Séminaire organisé par l'UNESCO, Yamoussoukro, 10-13 mars 1999, Document de travail N°2, p. 13.

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L'ANTERIORITE DES CIVILISATIONS NEGRES MOTIF DE FIERTE OU D'ORGUEIL?

Pierre Nzinzi

Le débat autour de l'afrocentrisme n'est pas un débat opposant des Blancs et des Noirs, comme aux échecs, mais les tenants d'une réflexion historique qui n'est rien l'apanage de l'Occident et ceux qui rejettent ce qu'ils considèrent comme une tradition européenne en même temps qu'ils dénoncent la domination passée et présente de l'Occident sur les mondes noirs.

F-X. Fauvelle-Aymar et alii, *Afrocentrismes*, Karthala, 2000, p 22

Que Diop ait réussi à faire entrer l'Afrique dans l'Histoire, de laquelle l'Occident a longtemps exclu l'humanité non européenne en général, par la porte de l'*antériorité* des civilisations nègres dont l'Egypte est la clé est sans doute méritoire. Pourtant, cette porte semble s'être aussitôt enfermée sur nous-mêmes, au regard des difficultés que semble nous causer, des deux côtés, la thèse antérieuriste. D'abord *extérieurement*, avec la disqualification de la problématique de l'« aliénation », c'est-à-dire de notre rapport à certaines idéologies apparemment particulières (marxisme, judéo-christianisme), voire à la science universelle elle-même, en tant que son rapport à la Tradition, et en particulier à la nôtre propre ne se fait pas sans « coût ». Ensuite *intérieurement*, d'autres difficultés se présentent, concentrées au point où Diop essaie d'articuler, fort difficilement, une façon particulièrement *universalisante* de lire l'Histoire et une autre, plutôt *particulariste* de l'écrire, la sienne propre, en tant qu'écriture de l'histoire de l'Afrique, plus précisément de son antériorité civilisatrice. Qui plus est, certains ont vu dans cet effort contradictoire une certaine fixation passéiste¹, voire une mythification de l'histoire nègre² qui seraient moins préoccupantes si elles ne nous dispensaient ou ne nous empêchaient pas de penser notre *faillibilité* à assumer correctement l'héritage d'un passé glorieux ou d'une pensée universelle à laquelle nous aurions pourtant initié les Autres, mais qui semblent ensuite avoir réussi à les mieux porter, voire développer. Cette thèse aboutit ainsi à la nécessité de trouver une interprétation satisfaisante du *progrès* historique qui ne consiste pas à en souligner le caractère discontinu ou aléatoire ou même à indiquer les causes exogènes du retard de l'Afrique qui, de la Traite des Noirs à la colonisation, en passant par les diverses formes d'impérialisme, justifient le plaidoyer réparateur actuel. Car, la colonisation en particulier, loin d'être un alibi imparable, trahit au contraire notre faiblesse historique qui l'a facilement

rendue possible en Afrique. D'où l'intérêt de méditer sur le paradoxe de ce que M.Diallo appelle l' « aliénation salutaire », qui réévalue la question de notre rapport à l'Occident que Diop croyait avoir réglée facilement, à l'aide d'arguments à la fois *antérieuristes* et *monogénistes*, c'est-à-dire *particularistes* et *universalistes*.

Aux sources égyptiennes de la science universelle

Dans la mesure où l'Egypte est la mère lointaine de la science et de la culture occidentales (...) la plupart des idées que nous baptisons étrangères ne sont souvent que des images, brouillées, renversées, modifiées, perfectionnées des créations de nos ancêtres : judaïsme, christianisme, islam, dialectique, théorie de l'être, sciences exactes, arithmétique, géométrie, mécanique, astronomie, médecine, (...) architecture, arts etc... On mesure alors, combien est bien impropre, quant au fond, la notion si souvent ressassée d'importations d'idéologies étrangères en Afrique : elle découle d'une parfaite ignorance du passé africain. Autant la technologie et la science modernes viennent d'Europe, autant dans l'antiquité, le savoir universel coulait de la vallée du Nil vers le reste du monde, et en particulier de l'Europe, qui servira de maillon intermédiaire. Par conséquent, aucune pensée, aucune idéologie, n'est, par essence étrangère à l'Afrique, qui fut la terre de leur enfantement. C'est donc en toute liberté que les Africains doivent puiser dans l'héritage intellectuel de l'humanité, en ne se laisser guider que par les notions d'utilité, d'efficience.³

On peut ici craindre que Diop ne parvienne jamais à mettre ainsi fin au débat sur l'existence ou non de la science en Afrique, où les arguments proprement *logiques*⁴ semblent compter autant que ceux d'ordre *idéologique* - préjugés raciaux, *a priori* colonialistes, conceptions contradictoires du nationalisme. En effet, à la conception ethno-nationaliste ou relativiste qui consiste à inventorier nos contributions à la Civilisation universelle s'oppose celle qui évite habilement le piège - idéologique - de la différence, qui semble loin de produire l'effet escompté, à savoir l'*affirmation* positive de l'Afrique face à la *négation* colonialiste ou impérialiste. Ainsi, au risque de se voir accusée d'occidentalisme, de « défaitisme intellectuel » ou d'autres sentiments de type psychanalytique comme la « haine de soi »⁵ ou le syndrome de Stockholm, la conception universaliste ou rationaliste reproche-t-elle à la conception opposée de manquer souvent de discernement ; au point d'être souvent peu attentive à la qualité des objets que nous présentons sur notre « site afrocentriste »⁶. En particulier, les critiques de l'ethnophilosophie n'admettent

pas toujours la précaution de l'abbé Kagame en particulier d'appeler des mythes, des contes et autres cosmogonies « philosophie des peuples sans philosophe ». De plus, il est douteux que Diop arrive jamais à dépasser ainsi un débat, où il paraît à la fois juge et partie.

Il y a donc lieu de prendre ici les limites de son intervention, de sa capacité à y mettre un terme, définitif. Ces limites révèlent alors tout un ensemble de questions qu'il délaie ainsi, qu'il laisse en l'état, à moins qu'il ne les esquivé. Appelons au-delà tout ce domaine qu'il laisse ainsi inexploré, toutes ces questions *internes*, mais qu'il a pourtant *extériorisées*. Loin donc d'être un dépassement à proprement parler, Diop éviterait simplement au-delà toute la problématique, grave et urgente, de notre rapport à la tradition occidentale que, de manière un peu trop cavalière, un peu trop hâtive, à notre avis, l'auteur de *Barbarie ou civilisation* règle ainsi. Ce qui pourrait bien lui être reproché, jusque dans certaines enceintes internationales qui préviennent pourtant la violence entre les hommes et les cultures.

L'hypothèque universaliste

En effet, si l'antériorité des civilisations nègres les préservait vraiment de toute dépersonnalisation culturelle, bien d'efforts individuels et institutionnels seraient rendus vains, et la notion de *mondialisation* pourrait être trouvée exempte de toute équivocité, le projet antadiopien lui-même de toute *contradiction*.

1. L'UNESCO n'aurait peut-être pas jugé utile de convoquer, à plusieurs reprises, à sa tribune, les hommes de science et de culture de divers horizons pour réfléchir sur les *enjeux de la rationalité*, c'est-à-dire les bouleversements et les déstructurations que les sociétés traditionnelles subissent en termes de « coût social » du progrès⁷. Au cours de l'une de ses rencontres, le Dr Kato a réussi à décrire le potentiel critique, et le changement social qu'il induit, comme résultant, au sein d'une société, de la coexistence des valeurs universalistes (*U*) ou modernes, auxquelles adhèrent généralement l'élite, et celles, particularistes (*P*) et traditionnelles, auxquelles les masses en général restent souvent attachées. Inversement, une société sera relativement stable lorsque toutes les valeurs appartiennent à *U* ou à *P*. Ensuite, il a montré comment cette situation critique atteint facilement des dimensions mondiales, en raison de la solidarité actuelle et inhabituelle des destins historiques, qui appelle l'invention urgente d'une « synthèse culturelle originale » consistant à respecter l'homme ou les fins des cultures particulières, sans pourtant ôter

à la science la place qu'elle mérite au service du destin ou plutôt de la survie de l'humanité⁸. Cette situation semble devenir d'autant plus préoccupante que cette science, considérée comme facteur principal d'un progrès dont nul ne peut plus prétendre se détourner ou échapper, sous prétexte de sauver sa personnalité culturelle, semble s'intégrer plus facilement, c'est-à-dire à moindre frais, dans un patrimoine reconnu depuis longtemps comme occidental.⁹ Le progrès comporte donc un inestimable « coût social », qui serait la *contradiction* fondamentale du projet universaliste, porté par les valeurs scientifiques et techniques, imputables actuellement à l'Occident moderne. Ce qui suffit à montrer que ces valeurs ne sont pas aussi universelles qu'on le croit. Il en est ainsi par exemple de la tolérance à laquelle nous prédispose en particulier la génétique des populations ; alors que l'enquête anthropologique a rapporté que les sociétés dites « archaïques » s'enferment plutôt dans le « solipsisme culturel », en vertu duquel elles considèrent que l'humanité s'arrête aux frontières du village, du clan ou de la tribu, au-delà desquels ceux qui se désignent par un nom qui signifie généralement les « hommes » - exprimant l'« excellence » physique, sociale, et politique, en un mot identitaire, des Grecs, tout entourés des barbares – ne verraient que des « mauvais », des « méchants », des « singes de terre » ou des « oeufs de poux », voire des « fantômes », quand l'altérité devient vraiment radicale, c'est-à-dire exprime l'étrangeté de l'étranger¹⁰. Qu'on laisse de côté l'ethnonyme de « Bantu », dont on sait désormais qu'il est primitivement une catégorie linguistique et non un nom que les populations d'une grande partie du continent se sont données à eux-mêmes¹¹, ne voudrait pas cependant dire que, en Afrique, on serait plus tolérants qu'en Occident, où le pragmatisme de Putnam en particulier a su lier le progrès interne de la morale à celui de la connaissance : savoir que les hommes sont égaux ou que l'esprit de l'homme n'est pas ontologiquement différent de celui de la femme, c'est savoir des choses fondamentales, qu'Aristote lui-même ignorait alors, et qui modifient notre rapport à l'altérité, que nous apprenons alors à relativiser. Castoriadis, on le sait, est passé ici à la limite, en tirant, paradoxalement, du relativisme culturel et génétique que l'anthropologie et la biologie ont enseigné à l'Occident, depuis peu, sa supériorité sur les autres cultures, la supériorité de la seule culture qui reconnaît l'égalité des cultures.

2. La thèse antérieuriste ne donnerait plus de raison de penser notre destin politique¹², du moins en ce temps où l'histoire n'était pas encore considérée comme « finie », c'est-à-dire où l'on pouvait encore choisir entre le capitalisme et le marxisme, déterminer les conditions de leur

adaptabilité sur notre continent ou encore ouvrir une « voie africaine au socialisme ». Or, N'Krumah lui-même a conçu son consciencisme comme une expérience originale, en tant qu'il visait à dialectiser, c'est-à-dire à dépasser toute contradiction entre l'expérience socialiste africaine avec ce qu'il considérait comme des apports étrangers, en particulier les valeurs du Christianisme et de l'Islam. Quant à Senghor, il soutient que le socialisme africain ne saurait nier la spiritualité de l'« âme noire » ni privilégier la lutte de classes, au détriment de la suppression du clivage entre pays développés et pays sous-développés¹³. Enfin, Nyerere a présenté également son socialisme *ujamua*, issu de la Déclaration d'Arusha, comme une expérience tout aussi originale, voire audacieuse, fondée - là également - sur notre passé ou notre personnalité culturelle¹⁴.

3. Cette thèse peut faire difficilement comprendre l'intérêt de la problématique proprement théologique de l'« enculturation » du christianisme dans notre tradition, pour laquelle certains de nos théologiens n'ont pas hésité de prendre le risque de s'aliéner Rome qui, extrêmement circonspecte, voire méfiante, l'a, pendant longtemps, difficilement tolérée, y voyant, à tort ou à raison, une menace, sinon une provocation à peine voilée contre l'unité et l'universalité de l'Eglise catholique. Ainsi la Congrégation romaine de la doctrine de la foi ne semble-t-elle pas toujours favorable à la suggestion d'"eucharistier" notre manioc local par exemple. C'est donc dire que la position de Diop ne convient ici qu'à ceux qui s'accrochent facilement, c'est-à-dire dogmatiquement, à l'orthodoxie universaliste qui ne semble, du reste, s'affirmer clairement que dans la Nouvelle Alliance en Jésus, c'est-à-dire dans le *Nouveau Testament* ; alors que l'*Ancien* est nettement plus particulariste, en tant qu'il rend davantage compte de l'Alliance de Dieu et d'un peuple terrestre, à savoir Israël. Le dogme universaliste ne peut donc tout au plus réussir ici - encore une fois - qu'à évacuer un débat, interne à l'Eglise, et qui concerne son rapport, en tant qu'Eglise universelle, aux « nations », c'est-à-dire aux cultures particulières païennes. Or, les apôtres eux-mêmes en ont débattu, notamment dans leurs *Actes 10 ; 11*. En dépit des apparences, l'Abbé Kagame ne semble pas totalement laissé le dogme universaliste en l'état, puisqu'il fait valoir que la civilisation occidentale, qui a été dans le monde entier le missionnaire de la doctrine chrétienne, n'est, au vrai, qu'une civilisation christianisée, qui se serait trouvée là, comme par hasard, au plus proche du foyer originaire du christianisme ; de telle sorte que, celui-ci étant universel, toutes les autres civilisations sont, au regard du plan divin, « christianisables », c'est-à-dire appelées également à répondre à l'appel divin, au salut en Jésus-Christ, à un

moment ou à un autre de l'Histoire. La problématique kagamienne est assez complexe, qui distingue entre une civilisation missionnaire particulière et une mission évangélique universelle dont est porteuse cette civilisation. C'est en cela qu'elle ne laisse pas totalement le dogme universaliste en l'état, à la différence la modernité religieuse africaine qui, quoique réinventant le religieux, continue à débattre du rapport entre le Christianisme et l'Afrique dans deux directions assez convergentes, mais, chaque fois, parallèles au « bricolage » synchrétique qui la caractérise un peu partout en Afrique¹⁵ :

- 3.1 l'*éthiopisation* de l'église africaine, c'est-à-dire son antériorité au soi-disant christianisme occidental et son affranchissement de la domination coloniale ;
- 3.2 la défense d'un discours de type *afrikania* qui revendique également l'antériorité, donc l'africanité ou l'authenticité africaine des valeurs fondamentales du judéo-christianisme, en particulier le monothéisme ici imputable plutôt au pharaon Akhenaton¹⁶.
4. Enfin, la thèse antérieuriste peut faire oublier que la mondialisation en cours s'opère sous le signe de la science et de la technologie, c'est-à-dire des valeurs de l'Occident, en tout cas qu'il a réussi à développer dans son « monde historique » ; de telle sorte qu'on ne verrait plus ce qu'il y a d'hypocrite sous ce processus de mondialisation, au sens où il exprime, en fait, l'occidentalisation du monde. On ne verrait donc plus que cette standardisation des principales dimensions de la vie, l'imaginaire y compris – les feuilletons américains en particulier arrivent maintenant à tenir presque le monde entier en haleine, au même titre que le mondial de football ou les jeux olympiques - n'est que le mode par lequel se manifestent les structures de la domination occidentale sur les autres cultures, en tant que structures de déstructuration de celles-ci¹⁷. Et, à force de vouloir oublier cette uniformisation des comportements, des modes de vie, voire d'existence, certains des nationalistes africains risquent de rater une bonne occasion de compléter, à tort et à raison, la liste des griefs contre l'Occident colonialiste et impérialiste. L'accusation mériterait sans doute d'être nuancée. Car, si son « oeuvre de déracinement planétaire » réussit si bien, c'est bien aussi en tant qu'il y a chez le colonisé une mentalité intrinsèque de colonisé, c'est-à-dire de fascination par l'Occident, que Memmi par exemple n'a pas manqué de faire ressortir dans son fidèle *Portrait du colonisé*.

Au bilan, l'antérieurisme de Diop ne manquerait pas seulement de voir tout cela, il ne disqualifierait pas non plus seulement toute la problématique qui cherche à penser notre rapport à la tradition occidentale ; en un certain

sens, il serait, comme malgré lui, en train de casser le ressort principal de notre processus de réappropriation de l'Histoire, qu'indiquent à la fois le mot d'ordre ki-zerbien de recommencement de l'histoire et sa propre exigence de «réconciliation des civilisations africaines avec l'histoire», grâce en particulier à une juste interprétation de celle-ci. Imprudemment, Diop liquiderait donc ainsi la question des conditions de possibilité d'une histoire, tant soit peu, différente de celle de l'Occident, si tant est que, à la limite, l'humanité, en son ensemble, ait marché sur la même voie, en tout cas, sur des chemins d'une histoire cyclique, qui se recouper ou s'entrecroisent, suivant son *ultra-diffusionnisme*.

L'au-delà a été circonscrit, de l'autre côté du propos diopien. Il comprend le domaine des questions particulières, que nous devons nous poser nous-mêmes, en tant que particuliers, et que Diop prétend résoudre, en les dissolvant dans un antériorisme, plutôt quiet ou démissionnaire. Pour autant qu'il prétende ainsi que notre rapport à l'Histoire va de soi, l'antériorisme diopien ne saurait alors faire ressortir l'intérêt de la « synthèse », alors conçue pourtant comme réponse aux défis ou aux enjeux historiques actuels. Présentée comme le moyen susceptible de nous éviter d'être des intellectuels « décervelés », que redoutait Césaire, la synthèse, à laquelle nous expose inéluctablement notre hétéroculture, consiste précisément à trouver, face aux défis conjugués du développement, de la démocratie et de la mondialisation une médiation entre les termes contradictoires que sont notre tradition particulière, la modernité et la postmodernité, associées généralement à l'historicité occidentale. Dans une Afrique dont Balandier soulignait déjà à l'époque l'ambiguïté, issue de la « situation coloniale », l'hétéronomie hétéroculturelle, fait de chacun de nous des Samba Diallo, en acte ou en puissance, en tout cas confrontés, à un moment ou à un autre, à quelque aventure ambiguë, c'est-à-dire à la difficulté de choisir, de s'engager dans une histoire hétérochtone qui a réussi à faire sonner le glas du romantisme herdérien ou encore à trouver un sens à une existence qui nous exige de véritables facultés de structuration existentielle. Or, S.Diallo ne semble pas plus les avoir que Roquentin. En témoigne l'essoufflement du synthétisme qui se traduit par notre tendance à nous enfoncer plutôt davantage dans la « déraison du mimétisme », pour reprendre la juste expression de A.Teveodjire. Au regard de cette « angoisse existentielle », que l'antériorisme diopien continue à fonctionner comme moyen d'ajourner des questions urgentes concernant notre propre historicité peut paraître assez préoccupant.

Lire et écrire l'Histoire : mode particulier

Le mode différentiel sous lequel Diop lit et écrit l'histoire appelle quelques remarques, de bon sens. D'abord, en s'opposant à tout particularisme, à toute forme d'ethnocentrisme, il inaugure sans doute là une façon peut-être pas d'écrire l'histoire, du moins de la lire. Aussi n'hésite-t-il pas y à raturer toute position ethnocentrique qui consiste à placer sa propre culture dans l'Histoire et à en exclure les Autres - et en particulier l'Afrique qui l'aurait pourtant comme mise en mouvement - ou à les exclure de certaines institutions « historiques » prestigieuses, telles que la philosophie, la religion révélée et l'art, comme l'a fait Hegel en particulier, en amont de la « période germanique » de l'Histoire. Mais, en même temps, ce sont toutes les écritures qui, d'une certaine façon, ont essayé de prendre le contre-pied du corpus ethnocentrique qui, à leur tour, se voient, en un certain sens, biffées par le geste restaurateur diopien, au nom de la « Civilisation planétaire ». Or, de telles ratures dans le livre de l'Histoire devraient normalement faire disparaître sa propre écriture antérieuriste, en tant qu'écriture de la différence africaine. En tout cas, l'antérieurisme semble tenir les deux bouts d'un discours qui, rapprochés, pourraient se révéler contradictoires. D'un côté, il continue lui-même d'écrire *une* histoire, l'histoire en termes particularistes, l'histoire de l'Afrique dont l'un des thèmes majeurs est le rappel des origines nègres de la civilisation égyptienne, partie du cœur de l'Afrique, du Sud vers le Nord, la royauté nubienne, qui lui a donné naissance, étant antérieure à celle de la Haute-Egypte¹⁸. De l'autre, il exige que la lecture de l'Histoire, tenant compte des cycles historiques, se fasse plutôt de façon universaliste, qui semble alors tout à l'avantage de certains particuliers, les civilisations nègres, antérieures. En effet, en tenant compte du vecteur historique, celles-ci ne sauraient être fondées à craindre la perte de leur identité en s'y fondant, en y choisissant tel système théorique ou axiologique. Ainsi donc le propos de Diop est-il interprétable diversement, selon que l'on s'attache à la façon dont il écrit lui-même l'histoire ou plutôt propose qu'on la lise. En s'intéressant d'abord à son écriture, on rencontre une doctrine dont le mérite principal est peut-être de se poser comme une tentative visant à effacer nombre d'écritures particularistes sur le registre de l'Histoire universelle ; avec d'autant plus d'énergie qu'elles sont depuis longtemps dénoncées comme essentiellement « barbares »¹⁹. On comprend donc que s'il prend le parti d'écrire l'histoire au singulier, c'est simplement pour contribuer utilement au projet d'une Histoire universelle, complète. C'est pour mieux en restituer l'authenticité et la rectitude. Ecrire un chapitre particulier de l'Histoire, c'est oeuvrer utilement de façon que tout le monde puisse, enfin, la lire correctement. Mais, Diop a-t-il vraiment toujours

lu l'Histoire comme il le suggère lui-même? Ne privilégie-t-il pas seulement la lecture de certains signes particuliers, ceux antérieurement écrits par l'Afrique sur le registre de l'Histoire? Ne sacrifie-t-il donc pas trop au particulier quand il se met à lire l'universel? L'introduction de *Civilisation ou barbarie* donne l'impression que c'est le cas : « *L'Africain qui nous a compris est celui-là qui, après la lecture de nos ouvrages, aura senti naître en lui un autre homme, animé d'une certaine conscience historique, un vrai créateur, un Prométhée porteur d'une nouvelle civilisation et parfaitement conscient de ce que la terre entière doit à son génie ancestral dans tous les domaines de la science, de la culture et de la religion. /Aujourd'hui, chaque peuple, armé de son identité culturelle, retrouvée ou renforcée, arrive au seuil de l'ère post-industrielle. Un optimisme atavique, mais vigilant, nous incline à souhaiter que toutes les nations se donnent la main pour bâtir la civilisation planétaire au lieu de sombrer dans la barbarie.* »²⁰

La dérive afrocentriste

Au sens de Wilson, « charitablement », on pourrait comprendre cette sorte de rappel « libérateur » à l'intention de celui dont le caractère préhellénique des civilisations africaines établit les ascendances ancestrales sur l'Histoire universelle, à celui dont la « terre entière » est redevable au génie ancestral comme l'affirmation d'un ethnocentrisme réciproque, qui a été rencontré partout²¹. On n'aurait alors pas grand-chose à craindre. Or, en affirmant en particulier que les Phéniciens étaient bien nègres²², Diop lui-même a non seulement banalisé un ethnocentrisme que Lévi-Strauss ne dénonce pas moins, mais il semble aussi avoir ajouté à l'égyptologie un niveau précaire, franchement *égyptologiste*, celui investi par l'afrocentrisme, qui ira jusqu'à inverser la colonisation. Ainsi voit-on Winters par exemple, facilement, s'y fonder pour dire, à son tour, annonçant vraisemblablement le *Black Athéna* de Bernal, que, jusqu'à 600 av. J.C, c'est-à-dire avant la conquête aryenne, la Grèce est dominée, tant sur le plan politique que culturel, par les Pélasges, population venue d'Afrique. Ce qui fait que non seulement les héros de la mythologie grecque, mais aussi nombre de personnalités associées étroitement au génie ou au « miracle » grecs seraient simplement d'origine africaine: « *Les Noirs joueront un rôle important dans la création et le développement de la civilisation grecque. Selon les traditions grecques, Cécrops ou Kheops, de la VIIe dynastie, fonda l'attique. Cadmos, le Cananéen, introduisit l'écriture en Grèce et Aegyptes, l'agriculture en Argolide. (...) Nombre de personnalités importantes de la culture grecque*

sont noires. Le Pr B.Lumpkin de Chicago et le Dr Pappademos (...) de l'Université de Chicago et de Crète affirment qu'Euclide était Noir. En outre G.Higgins (...) donne des preuves convaincantes que Socrate était aussi un Noir. »²³ Preuves que Lefkowitz vient de confirmer ou d'apporter aussi pour d'autres personnages dont de Cléopâtre. Or, pour s'y être aussi attentivement penché, Walker vient de conseiller la plus grande prudence à leur sujet, en particulier en arrivant, hors des voies habituelles de la biologie et de l'anthropologie physique, à *relativiser* la notion de race qui, dans l'antiquité, n'est pas du tout, selon lui, une « catégorie attributive » ou un marqueur de statut social, qu'il a reçus dans le contexte idéologique de l'Amérique ségrégationniste²⁴ en particulier. Quoi qu'il en soit, ces preuves ne posent pas moins la question de l'intérêt véritable d'un projet qui, visiblement, en cherchant à établir l'origine africaine ou plutôt nègre des Grecs ayant contribué à ce que Winters appelle l'« âge héroïque » de la Grèce, excède les limites de l'ultra-diffusionnisme au-delà duquel l'égyptologie elle-même, dont dérive l'afrocentrisme, commence à poser sérieusement des questions. Sans doute l'afrocentrisme égyptologiste y gagne-t-il, en parvenant à relativiser doublement le « miracle grec », d'abord en reprenant à l'égyptologie l'idée que celui-ci n'est, en fait, que la « répétition » d'une expérience originaire qui a eu primitivement lieu en Egypte pharaonique et nègre ; ensuite, en présentant les principaux acteurs de cette expérience non plus comme des indigènes, mais des étrangers, des colons venus d'Afrique. Le gain idéologique est substantiel, fût-il fourni par les preuves les plus irréfutables : pour les Afro-américains d'abord dont le projet intégrateur représente un échec, dans une Amérique que leurs ancêtres auraient pourtant découverte, puis colonisée ; mais, au-delà, le gain est pour tous les « damnés de la terre » dont une bonne partie de l'élite ne cesse de revendiquer les réparations pour les graves préjudices historiques subis²⁵ ; au point que certains en sont venus à renouveler la question, d'inspiration sopho-nietzschéenne, des Droits de l'homme comme invention devant protéger les faibles²⁶.

Le progrès historique en question

Supposons maintenant que rappeler au « miracle grec », c'est-à-dire, en fait, à la culture occidentale ses propres origines africaines, redonne confiance à l'homme noir dont on connaît par ailleurs les tribulations ou le mauvais lot historique. Supposons encore que ce rappel lui permette, en même temps, de faire une entrée remarquée dans l'hémicycle de l'Histoire dont il a été

longtemps proscrit. Il reste cependant à méditer l'essentiel, à partir des prémisses suivantes :

1. Le mythe de Thot affirme l'origine égyptienne de l'*écriture*, des langues et des savoirs, anticipant, en un certain sens, sur les études grammatologiques qui présenteront l'écriture comme la technologie ayant permis de structurer autrement la forme du discours et son contenu, c'est-à-dire de construire logiquement la rationalité scientifique, hors de toute hypothèque contradictoire²⁷; au point que, dépassant la simple revendication mythique des origines graphiques, donc de la rationalité, voire la revalorisation par Diop lui-même de la particularité africaine, sous le rapport de l'oralité dont le phonocentrisme a souligné par ailleurs l'antériorité par rapport à l'écriture, Obenga en particulier s'est précipité dans l'inventaire des « systèmes graphiques africains »²⁸, au sujet desquels Hountondji n'a pas manqué d'exprimer des réserves auxquelles il aurait pu être sensible .
2. Sans doute un tel inventaire vise-t-il à confirmer l'*antériorité* des civilisations nègres, c'est-à-dire leur exemption de tout emprunt envers aucune autre civilisation, nécessairement particulière et postérieure ; si bien que, chez Diop lui-même, cette antériorité, en tant qu'elle exprime plutôt une universalité, en vertu de laquelle toutes les autres civilisations sont redevables aux civilisations nègres dont les emprunts n'auraient alors rien d'aliénant, se trouve cependant incapable de réduire complètement la *contradiction* qui, au cœur de son projet, résulte de la réévaluation par ailleurs de la particularité, en l'espèce sous le rapport de l'oralité.

Mais, revenons plutôt à l'essentiel qui est dans la question *critique* du « développement inégal » de la rationalité dont on nous exhorte aujourd'hui à réclamer la paternité, mais qui a pu se développer seulement ailleurs. Autrement dit, pourquoi le premier maillon de la chaîne du développement historique de la raison a-t-il cassé ; tandis que le « maillon intermédiaire », - c'est-à-dire la Grèce a su au contraire porter et répercuter, de façon presque ininterrompue, ce mouvement que nous avons inauguré, auquel surtout nous avons même pourtant initié les autres ? En un mot, pourquoi les initiateurs se sont-ils retrouvés parmi les derniers ? Bien pis, pourquoi chercheraient-ils maintenant, comme par conscience malheureuse, à verser dans ce que Kant décrit comme une conception *mythique* de l'histoire, initiée par tous les vieux poèmes et repris par la « religion des prêtres », qui place le Bien au commencement ; conception qu'il oppose à la conception *philosophique* qui montre au contraire que l'histoire, en dépit des apparences et des avatars de toutes sortes, va toujours, globalement ou par reconstruction rationnelle *a posteriori*, dans le bon sens. Pourquoi ne pas cultiver plutôt ce que Rorty appelle l'« espoir », l'optimisme que le meilleur est devant nous, que l'on

retrouve aussi bien dans l'évolutionnisme, dont Popper a dénoncé le caractère mythique, que dans la *Genèse* qui semble en représenter la version téléologique, en tout cas, celle qui fait encore une place au sujet, alors qu'il n'en a plus dans le « mythe de l'évolution »?

A notre sens donc, la question des origines de la raison n'est ici pleinement satisfaisante qu'à condition d'être, en quelque sorte, une question « ouverte », ce genre de question qui renseignerait à la fois et sur ces origines elles-mêmes et sur les motifs de la décélération, voire de l'arrêt d'un mouvement qui s'est au contraire amplifié et poursuivi ailleurs, de façon tout à fait remarquable. En d'autres termes, l'intérêt de la question est lié simplement à sa transformation en véritable question *historique*, au sens critique qu'a ce qualificatif dans l'épistémologie contemporaine qui le porte.

On pourra dire que Diop lui-même y a répondu, en invoquant le primat africain de l'initiation sur la recherche, et la coupure qui s'en est suivie et qui est finalement devenue un sérieux « obstacle épistémologique ». On dira encore que le problème soulevé ici est le type même de ce que Lévi-Strauss appelle, dans sa défense du relativisme culturel, « faux évolutionnisme », auquel il reproche alors de manquer de voir que le propre du progrès historique est d'être discontinu et *aléatoire*, rompant ainsi avec la conception *nécessaire* classique de l'historicisme, de Kant à Hegel, en passant par Comte et Marx. Passons sur l'investissement idéologique du relativisme, promu comme doctrine pouvant préserver la tolérance, donc la paix civile, pratiquement depuis les Lumières²⁹. Disons simplement que ce problème ne peut facilement ici être rattaché à ce type d'évolutionnisme que si l'on néglige tout son intérêt critique : le rapport critique qu'il établit avec nous-mêmes. C'est donc dire que son « ouverture » se fait dans le sens d'une transformation en interrogation critique portant à la fois sur nos mérites et nos faiblesses ou nos manques. Sinon, c'est-à-dire à vouloir fermer cette direction critique où nous pourrions comprendre le rapport sous lequel nous avons failli pour continuer à développer la science et la technologie dans notre monde, nous continuerions à nous regarder avec complaisance, en croyant que notre fierté est au-dessus de tout soupçon ; nous risquerions alors de tomber facilement, dans un ethnocentrisme passif, passéiste et chétif, que les contingences historiques, dont la colonisation, ne feraient qu'« affaiblir » davantage. En effet, on peut facilement accepter que cette dernière n'est que la sanction de la supériorité scientifique et technique de l'Occident sur les autres cultures : l'ignorance du « secret de l'Occident »³⁰ en a favorisé la réussite en Afrique en particulier.

C.A. Diop : égyptologie ou égyptologisme?

L'écriture antadiopienne de l'histoire, en tant qu'elle interfère avec son ethno-nationalisme, voire avec son militantisme, a été largement dénoncée : on a souligné qu'elle fait constamment référence à la « solidarité de la « race » »³¹ aboutissant, inversement, à écarter toute procédure externe de validation ou de confirmation, c'est-à-dire qui soit le fait de ces idéologues occidentaux qui se couvrent du manteau scientifique³². Elle oublierait ou négligerait alors que la méthode historique, comme toute méthode scientifique, structure nécessairement une distance qui, englobant l'illusion cartésienne de la transparence à soi, est seule susceptible d'en exprimer l'objectivité des résultats : « *Le récit historique est toujours un récit à distance (temporelle et/ou spatiale), position où nul (fût-il, aujourd'hui, romain, européen, égyptien ou africain) n'est plus à sa place qu'un autre, à moins de renoncer à ce métier. Que l'on soit noir ou blanc de peau, se croire davantage « chez soi » lorsque l'on parle des « Négro-africains » ou des « Indo-européens » relève moins d'une position scientifique que d'une posture idéologique, par laquelle l'historien exhibe sa carte d'identité (...) et exige celle des autres.* »³³

Voici pourquoi cette écriture de l'histoire a été dénoncée vigoureusement comme moment inaugural de cette prétendue « science africaine » que Foukoue en particulier applaudit néanmoins à tout rompre ou encore de cette « science de la libération » que Gome oppose alors à la « science de la domination », promue par Froment, critique bien connu de Diop. En un mot, on la critique au motif que son investissement *idéologique* altère profondément la valeur proprement *logique* de son oeuvre, dont on souligne par ailleurs les entorses méthodologiques³⁴. On trouve donc que Diop ne satisfait pas aux réquisits de « neutralité méthodologique » dont on a pourtant montré qu'elle n'est que le dernier avatar de l'illusion positiviste. Toutefois, on peut mieux prendre son parti, c'est-à-dire sans *passion* ethno-nationaliste, sans chercher à saluer sa transposition réussie sur le terrain de la recherche historique de la lutte contre le colonialisme, mais en montrant simplement que, après tout, l'entrelacs des faits et des valeurs – largement souligné par le pragmatisme qui fait reposer toute connaissance sur des normes³⁵ - n'est nullement la spécificité de sa méthode. Car, l'idéologie n'est pas toujours loin de la science. Attentif, P. Thuillier l'a entendu souvent parler dans le ventre de celle-ci. En tout cas, dans le cas précis, Fauvelle-Aymar et les autres trouvent « afrocentriste » tout chercheur qui voit le monde depuis le centre (d'intérêt) qu'il s'est assigné en Afrique³⁶. La connaissance, on le sait depuis Kant et la nouvelle Ecole de Francfort, est donc solidaire d'« intérêts » multiples, dont ici la réhabilitation diopienne de l'homme noir, que la

tradition externaliste, par souci de dépasser le clivage science/idéologie, pourrait situer plutôt du côté du « contexte de la découverte ». C'est donc dans ce contexte de profond enracinement ou de l'universalité axiologiques que la méthode de Diop - sans doute largement informée dans son souci de restituer la vérité historique par le concept de *maât*, à la fois logique et éthique qu'elle trouve dans l'horizon du monde égyptien - paraîtrait moins déconcertante. Toutefois, si les valeurs ou les « intérêts », quels qu'ils soient, sont si prégnants en science - au point que Canguilhem, ruinant l'illusion marxiste et positiviste d'un savoir « objectif », s'est trouvé conduit à parler d'« idéologie scientifique »³⁷ ; il ne reste pas moins que tous les discours scientifiques n'y cèdent pas de la même façon. Canguilhem note en particulier qu'il y a des discours qui accèdent au statut de science, notamment en abandonnant l'idéologie à leurs sources. En tout cas, il y en a qui arrivent à établir un rapport critique aux valeurs, c'est-à-dire à s'en distancer, donc à être « objectifs »,³⁸ se distinguant ainsi de ceux qui n'y arrivent pas, retenus qu'ils sont par toutes sortes de « préjugés ». Ceci est une affaire de *stratégie* discursive personnelle qui, selon Derrida, est diversement à l'œuvre en philosophie - où il l'a lui-même adoptée, en dé-construisant la tradition logocentrique³⁹, et en sciences humaines - par exemple en ethnologie, victime à la fois du phonocentrisme et de l'ethnocentrisme⁴⁰. Finalement, l'alternative égyptologie ou égyptologisme n'a pas beaucoup de sens, si elle est réduite à un simple problème de *topologie*. Or, il est plutôt question de stratégie, c'est-à-dire de rapport critique à notre histoire, qui engage alors effectivement notre responsabilité et notre projet, au sens sartrien de ces mots, c'est-à-dire notre faculté à triompher, comme l'y encourageait déjà Fanon, véritablement de notre passé. Sartre, descendu de sa montagne d'alors pour prendre notre parti⁴¹, comprendrait peut-être difficilement qu'il en fût autrement, au regard de la liberté à laquelle il condamne chacun de nous.

Conclusion

Il ne serait peut-être pas superflu de rappeler que la tradition rationaliste a toujours conçu l'universel comme le moyen de dépasser le *conflit* soit entre l'unité et la multiplicité soit entre le rationnel et le réel. Les moyens utilisés vont de la logique à la métaphysique⁴². Le dépassement opéré par Hegel est particulièrement intéressant, au sein d'une philosophie de l'histoire qui, se confondant avec l'histoire de la philosophie, arrive à ruiner complètement le relativisme historique, en montrant en particulier que même si la philosophie, lieu conceptuel d'inscription de l'universel, est toujours fille de son temps, elle

n'échappe pas moins aux déterminations historiques⁴³; de telle sorte que Putman vient de parachever la révolution hégélienne par la reconnaissance de la nécessaire historisation du sens qui n'implique cependant plus le relativisme comme conséquence⁴⁴. Or, lorsque l'universel devient simplement le nom que prend l'antériorité des civilisations historiquement déterminées, alors il charrie nécessairement toutes les difficultés d'un « faux universalisme », difficultés d'un particulier qui passe pour universel, c'est-à-dire les difficultés de l'ethnocentrisme⁴⁵. Telle nous semble être la nature des difficultés que le projet antadiopien, au demeurant courageux et ambitieux, ne paraît pas avoir surmontées, et que la passion ethno-nationaliste ou afrocentriste nous a fait malheureusement sous-estimer. Nous ignorons si elles sont réelles ni si notre interprétation des conséquences de l'antériorisme antadiopien est assez « charitable ». Mais, si notre inquiétude pouvait jamais être fondée, alors nous verrions que, au lieu de nous rendre notre fierté, celui-ci nous aurait plutôt rendu à notre orgueil, c'est-à-dire à l'usage afrocentriste ou *idéologique* de la notion de primauté, et non à son usage *évolutionniste*, positif, car renvoyant au primitif, à l'inachevé, qui, depuis la fondation du monde, l'ouvre, déroule le temps⁴⁶, en même temps que la connaissance que nous y acquérons, comme l'a si bien montré l'épistémologie historique⁴⁷.

Notes

- ¹ Fanon (F), *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Seuil, 1975, p. 182-183
- ² Ebouissi-Boulaga (F) : « La suite de C.A. Diop » in *Revue Africaine de Sciences Sociales*, I.
- ³ Diop (C.A) : *Civilisation ou barbarie*, Présence africaine, 1981, p 12. Nous soulignons.
- ⁴ Hountondji (P.J) : *Sur la « philosophie africaine »*, Présence africaine, 1979 ; « Occidentalisme, élitisme : réponse à deux critiques » in *Recherche, Pédagogie et Culture*, Janvier-février, 1982
- ⁵ Bruckner (P), *Le sanglot de l'homme blanc*, Seuil, 1983
- ⁶ Wim van Binsbergen vient d'en créer un : [http : //come.to/black_athena](http://come.to/black_athena)
- ⁷ Ladriere (J) : *Les enjeux de la rationalité*. Le défi de la science et de la technique aux cultures, Aubier/Unesco, 1977
- ⁸ Dr Kato (S) et al.: *La science et la diversité des cultures*, P.U.F/Unesco, 1974, p 22-27
- ⁹ *ibid.* p 21
- ¹⁰ Levi-Strauss, C. : *Race et histoire*, Gonthier, 1961, p 21-22
- ¹¹ Chretien (J-L) : « Les bantous, de la philologie allemande à l'authenticité africaine. Un mythe racial contemporain » in *Vingtième Siècle*, oct-déc. 1985 ; KAGAME (A) : *La philosophie bantou comparée*, Présence africaine, 1976, p 52-53
- ¹² N'Diaye (J.P) : *Monde noir et destin politique*, Présence africaine/Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1976
- ¹³ Senghor (L.S): *Nations et voie africaine du socialisme*, Présence africaine, 1961

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- ¹⁴ Nyerere (J): *Liberté et socialisme*, Clé, 1972
- ¹⁵ Sur cette réinvention du religieux, on pourra consulter avec profit en particulier les travaux d'André Mary sur le terrain gabonais.
- ¹⁶ Fauvelle-Aymar (F-X et alii) : *Afrocentrismes. L'histoire des Africains entre Egypte et Amérique*, Karthala, 2000 , p. 331-341
- ¹⁷ Lelouche (S) : *L'occidentalisation du monde*, La découverte, 1989
- ¹⁸ Diop (C.A) : *op. cit.* p 15
- ¹⁹ Levi-Strauss, C.: *op. cit.* ; VERNANT (J-P) : *La mort dans les yeux*. Les figures de l'altérité dans la Grèce ancienne, Hachette, 1985
- ²⁰ Diop (C.A) : *op. cit.* p 16
- ²¹ Levi-Strauss, C.: *op.cit*
- ²² Diop (C.A) : *Nations nègres et culture*, Présence africaine, 1979
- ²³ Winters (A.C) : « Les fondateurs de la Grèce seraient venus d'Afrique en passant par la Crète » in *Afrique Histoire*, 1983
- ²⁴ Fauvelle-Aymar (F-X et alii), *op.cit.* p 71-75
- ²⁵ *ibid.* p 16 ; 18 ; 20
- ²⁶ Nguema, I, « De la violence en Afrique », *Le livre des anthropologues du droit*, disciples et amis du recteur M.Alliot, Publication de la Sorbonne, 2000, p.12
- ²⁷ Goody (J) : *Entre l'oralité et l'écriture*, P.U.F, 1994
- ²⁸ Obenga (T) : *L'Afrique dans l'antiquité*. Egypte pharaonique Afrique noire, Présence africaine, 1973
- ²⁹ Rousseau (J-J) : *Du Contrat social, IV*, Booking International, 1996
- ³⁰ Towa (M) : *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle*, Clé, 1971, p 40-41
- ³¹ *Science et conscience : le combat ambigu de Cheik Anta Diop*, Colloque du cinquantenaire de l'ORSTOM, Paris, 20 septembre, 1994
- ³² Diop (C.A), Préface à T.OBENGA : *op. cit.*
- ³³ Fauvelle-Aymar (F-X et alii), *op.cit.* p 21
- ³⁴ *Science et conscience, op.cit.*
- ³⁵ Putnam (H) : *Le réalisme à visage humain*, Seuil, 1994
- ³⁶ Fauvelle-Aymar (F-X et alii), *op.cit.* p 11
- ³⁷ Canguilhem (G) : *Idéologie et rationalité dans les sciences de la vie*. Nouvelles études d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences, Vrin, 1977
- ³⁸ Popper (K) : *La connaissance objective*, Aubier, 1991
- ³⁹ Derrida (J) : *De la grammatologie*, Minuit, 1967
- ⁴⁰ Derrida (J) : *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, p 414
- ⁴¹ Sartre (J-P) : « Orphée noir » in L.S. SENGHOR, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, P.U.F, 1943
- ⁴² Aristote : *Organon*, IV, Vrin , 1936 ; PLATON : *La République*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1940-1942
- ⁴³ Hegel (G.F) : *Principes de la philosophie du droit*, Vrin, 1975, p 57-58,
- ⁴⁴ Putnam (H) : *Raison, vérité et histoire*, Minuit, 1984, p 8
- ⁴⁵ Todorov (T) : 1989 *Nous et les autres*, Seuil
- ⁴⁶ Fauvelle-Aymar (F-X et alii) : *op.cit.* p 120
- ⁴⁷ Popper (K): *Un univers de propensions*, L'éclat, 1992

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PHILOSOPHIE ET TRADITION¹

Mahamadé Savadogo

Il est bien évident que la tradition qui se profile à la lecture de notre titre ne désigne pas une somme d'habitudes propre à une communauté particulière mais un phénomène universel qui traverse toutes les sociétés. La tradition est une empreinte qui se détache de l'itinéraire de tout regroupement humain : qu'elle soit considérée comme "traditionnelle" ou "moderne", toute forme d'organisation de l'existence collective institue une manière de se rapporter à la tradition. L'expérience de la tradition s'impose à toute manifestation de la vie collective. Elle est universelle, sans frontières. Quel rapport ce phénomène universel qu'est la tradition entretient-il avec la philosophie ?

Indépendamment des principes des différentes doctrines, l'esprit général de la philosophie consiste à interroger le langage ordinaire pour retrouver progressivement la signification ultime des notions impliquées dans une question. L'universalité de la pensée qui s'exprime dans le langage sert de caution à la démarche philosophique. Appliquée à notre thème, cette exigence nous enjoint de commencer par découvrir la compréhension la plus accessible de la tradition avant d'entreprendre de nous prononcer sur son rapport avec la philosophie.

Il est vrai que cette compréhension la plus accessible de la tradition à la découverte de laquelle nous partons ne saurait se révéler qu'à un regard qui s'inspire déjà de la philosophie. Notre démarche est ainsi circulaire. Cette circularité ne doit cependant pas nous embarrasser car il est ici question de philosophie et non pas d'une autre forme de savoir. La philosophie se présuppose dans le sens commun pour se développer mais l'acte même de son développement ne saurait être tenu pour vain. Ce n'est que par sa médiation que la philosophie conquiert sa propre justification, qu'elle cesse de se **pressentir** pour se **savoir**, que, de simple opinion, elle se mue en théorie. L'explicitation de la pensée qui se suppose dans le langage ordinaire est identique à l'élaboration de la réflexion philosophique.

Il ne semble pas bien difficile de s'entendre sur la signification de la tradition. Le mot désigne d'ordinaire un ensemble de manières d'agir, d'habitudes de comportement héritées du passé. Toute habitude n'est cependant pas à confondre avec une tradition. L'habitude caractéristique de la tradition est celle qui prend sa source dans un temps si reculé que nul ne saurait le situer avec exactitude. L'imprécision de son origine est essentielle à l'autorité de la tradition. Elle lui permet de s'imposer à l'ensemble des membres d'une communauté sans discussion. Puisque personne ne sait quand une tradition est apparue, il est difficile qu'elle puisse être soupçonnée de favoriser telle ou telle catégorie

d'individus à l'intérieur de la collectivité. La tradition constitue le bien commun. Elle est la vivante consécration de l'unité d'un regroupement humain.

L'expression de l'unité d'une communauté dans la tradition n'exige pas un document écrit. La tradition ne se manifeste pas dans une règle de conduite explicitement codifiée, une constitution, dans laquelle se reconnaissent les membres d'une communauté. L'adoption de constitutions écrites destinées à régir les rapports entre les citoyens, la proclamation solennelle de droits, marque généralement dans l'histoire de l'humanité la rupture de la modernité avec le monde traditionnel. L'unité de la collectivité qu'organise la tradition se traduit essentiellement par des attitudes communes à ses membres. La tradition se vit. Elle se pratique. Elle est une pratique. Elle ne se compose pas d'une somme de principes généraux proposés à orienter les comportements des citoyens, servant à les apprécier, mais d'une suite de réactions face à des circonstances ayant contribué à sauver une communauté de la destruction. La tradition est une succession de précédents, de victoires remportées qui suggèrent des attitudes à adopter pour le reste du temps. L'efficacité est le critère de sélection de la conduite qui fonde une tradition.

Dans une société dominée par la tradition, il est rare que l'on s'interroge sur le sens de son existence. Chacun sait quel rôle il lui revient de remplir dans le cadre général de la division du travail. Selon sa naissance, le citoyen est prédestiné à telle ou telle occupation et il est inconcevable qu'un individu aspire à une fonction qui n'est pas réservée à sa catégorie sociale. Puisque le destin de chacun est ainsi scellé par avance, il n'a pas à se soucier de savoir quelle est pour lui la meilleure façon de vivre, à se demander conformément à quel principe il convient qu'il se comporte : il doit seulement agir, suivre l'exemple que ses semblables lui montrent. La tradition ne soulève pas de questions, elle véhicule des certitudes. En elle la pratique l'emporte sur la théorie, l'acte sur le discours.

Cette remarque ne signifie cependant pas que toute théorie est étrangère à la tradition. Comme toute attitude humaine, la tradition s'accompagne d'un discours qui la justifie. Ce qui est visé à travers cette observation, ce n'est pas simplement le récit qui rapporte en les magnifiant, les victoires des héros fondateurs d'une collectivité, **l'épopée**. Cette forme de savoir antérieure à l'histoire scientifique qui en est la rationalisation, qui se retrouve en Afrique sous l'appellation "tradition orale", indique certes que le langage est essentiel à l'institution de la tradition. Le langage fixe l'événement pour toujours et contribue ainsi à l'édification de la mémoire qui engage la collectivité à s'élever à la conscience de son propre itinéraire. Une collectivité se constitue en sujet à travers la parole qui retrace son cheminement. Les princes accumulent les victoires, les griots les racontent et les générations nouvelles se reconnaissent en elles. Ainsi se maintient l'identité d'un regroupement humain.

L'exemple du récit des défis relevés par une collectivité, de l'épopée, illustre relativement l'emprise du discours, de la théorie, sur la tradition. Mais l'importance de la théorie dans la conception de la tradition s'avère encore plus décisive. L'épopée est un simple récit de faits. Elle prépare la collectivité à prendre conscience de son itinéraire mais elle ne constitue pas une justification de son existence dans sa totalité et de celle de ses membres pris individuellement. Cette justification intervient dans une forme de savoir plus élaborée que l'épopée, plus profonde, qui supporte la tradition dans son ensemble. Les victoires remportées par les héros d'une communauté, les échecs essuyés, du point de vue de la tradition, ne sont jamais simplement dûs à un concours de circonstances, à un hasard. Ils obéissent à une logique. Ils s'inscrivent à la suite d'une série d'événements dont l'enchaînement remonte à une source unique. Cette source fonde un type de savoir autre que l'épopée, une vision d'ensemble des rapports entre les êtres à l'intérieur de laquelle l'homme se trouve assigné une position, une **théorie** au sens propre du mot. Cette théorie ne prend pas toujours la forme d'une doctrine explicitement développée et diffusée mais elle n'en demeure pas moins attachée à toute tradition. Dans beaucoup de sociétés, notamment en Afrique, elle demeure implicite, ou plutôt secrète : rarement développée dans ses moindres implications, l'accès à ses éléments essentiels est réservé à de rares initiés.

Cette forme de savoir plus importante à la tradition que l'épopée, révèle en général à une collectivité sa provenance et lui indique sa destination dans l'histoire. Elle définit la position de l'humanité dans sa globalité par rapport aux autres types d'êtres et surtout elle situe une collectivité déterminée dans ses relations avec d'autres regroupements humains. En principe, elle isole un regroupement humain en lui prescrivant la mission de guider le reste de l'humanité, en exhortant ses membres à incarner la meilleure façon de vivre humainement. Ils sont les interlocuteurs privilégiés du maître de l'univers, ceux à travers qui son activité créatrice parvient à son épanouissement.

En fait peu nous importe le contenu de la théorie liée à la tradition, celui-ci varie selon les sociétés. Il est intéressant par contre de remarquer que cette théorie recèle une justification des événements constitutifs du monde : en elle, l'existence des êtres inanimés comme celle des vivants, celle de l'animal aussi bien que celle de l'homme se comprend. Le savoir de la tradition oriente l'homme, il lui assigne un sens à son existence. Par lui, à la fois la collectivité et l'individu découvrent des réponses aux questions qui se posent à eux. La tradition justifie l'existence humaine en comprenant le monde dans sa totalité. La vocation de la philosophie n'est-elle pas ici atteinte ? Le sens de la réflexion philosophique ne se trouve-t-il pas accompli dans la tradition ? La philosophie ne coïncide-t-elle pas avec le savoir de la tradition, avec la tradition tout court ?

Il est significatif de constater que l'on a souvent voulu, surtout en Afrique, ramener la philosophie au savoir propre à une société. La philosophie ainsi comprise est à la portée de tous. Bien qu'elle s'acharne généralement à rester implicite, la théorie liée à la tradition n'oppose pas une résistance particulièrement difficile à vaincre à celui qui souhaiterait la développer en une doctrine explicite, cohérente, et la publier. Ainsi traitée, il est facile de la présenter comme de la philosophie voire comme la philosophie. D'ailleurs Dilthey n'a-t-il pas soutenu que la philosophie est une vision du monde développée sous la forme d'un langage conceptuel ?

Mais outre que rien n'oblige à être du même avis que Dilthey, il convient de remarquer que la démarche employée pour ériger le savoir traditionnel en philosophie laisse perplexe tout familier de la réflexion philosophique à commencer par le disciple de Dilthey lui-même. Pour expliciter un savoir caché, il faut retrouver ses détenteurs, les interroger, confronter leurs réponses, dégager des conclusions, les rapporter à leurs attitudes ... en supposant avant tout qu'ils veuillent bien trahir ce qu'ils tiennent pour leur secret ! Il est manifeste qu'une telle manière de procéder relève plus de la science positive, dans le cas précis, de **l'anthropologie**, que de la philosophie. Ce qui a été indexé, non sans passion, comme "ethnophilosophie" et qui, avec plus de sérénité, devrait s'appeler savoir traditionnel est affaire d'anthropologue.

En supposant même que la théorie liée à la tradition soit d'emblée explicitée, codifiée, et qu'aucun effort ultérieur ne soit nécessaire pour l'élaborer, il ne serait pas bien indiqué de vouloir la confondre avec la philosophie. Il est en effet bien connu, tous les manuels le répètent, que la philosophie se caractérise par l'esprit critique. Le savoir philosophique n'est pas une masse de certitudes qui s'impose aux hommes. Il s'élabore à travers une démarche au cours de laquelle il se remet en cause pour se légitimer, en d'autres termes, sa validité s'érige explicitement en un problème pour lui. La théorie philosophique s'inaugure par et institue un recul à l'égard de nos convictions les plus solidement établies.

Il en est autrement avec le savoir traditionnel. Par principe, la tradition exclut toute interrogation concernant sa genèse. Elle exige de l'individu une adhésion sans condition, sans médiation, inconditionnelle, immédiate. La parole révélatrice du savoir fondateur de la tradition est reçue de la divinité elle-même. Il n'appartient pas au misérable être qu'est l'homme de demander comment elle s'est constituée. Il s'ensuit que la tradition se rapporte essentiellement à l'individu sous la forme de l'autorité : il faut obéir. A celui qui risque la question "pourquoi ?", il convient de rétorquer simplement "parce que d'autres ont obéi avant toi !".

La démarche même de l'anthropologue qui veut rendre compte de la cohérence du savoir traditionnel est ainsi dérangement à l'égard de la tradition. Elle s'avère une pratique étrangère, voire hostile, dont il est recommandé de se méfier. La curiosité pour la tradition est en soi suspecte, elle traduit à qui sait l'interpréter un déclin de celle-ci. La force de la tradition consiste à susciter l'assentiment sans interrogation. Le savoir traditionnel, qu'il soit implicite ou explicite, secret ou publiquement révélé, ne se discute pas. Il en découle ainsi non seulement qu'il est inacceptable de le confondre avec la philosophie, mais surtout, qu'il faut considérer que la philosophie lui est résolument hostile. La philosophie s'édifie sur les ruines de la tradition.

Il est couramment admis que le savoir philosophique prend historiquement forme en Grèce. En tant qu'entreprise humaine l'apparition de la philosophie est nécessairement localisée à la fois dans l'espace et dans le temps. L'individu philosophe est membre d'une collectivité dont les conditions d'existence, la configuration, déterminent la conception de son projet. De ce constat autour duquel tous les esprits s'accordent, on a voulu cependant déduire la conclusion que le savoir philosophique est la systématisation de la vision grecque du monde, que la philosophie ne s'épanouit qu'en Grèce, qu'elle parle grec, que le grec est la langue philosophique par excellence... Pour avancer de telles assertions, qui se retrouvent malheureusement chez beaucoup d'auteurs et non des moindres, il faut cependant oublier que Socrate, qui est le véritable inaugurateur de l'esprit philosophique (les pré-socratiques proclament des certitudes, ils endoctrinent alors que Socrate interroge, il libère), a entrepris une lutte résolue contre la tradition en Grèce et qu'il l'a payé de sa vie. On ne mesurera jamais assez la signification de la mort de Socrate. Socrate n'a pas été un bon grec. Il n'était pas le meilleur représentant de l'esprit athénien. Il a été véritablement un subversif. Il voulait que l'existence humaine fût fondée sur la raison et non sur la tradition. Il exigeait que toute conviction et toute pratique fût justifiée selon une démarche accessible à tous. La raison était le seul juge qu'il reconnaissait par opposition à la tradition qui recommandait la soumission à telle ou telle autorité. L'humanité pour laquelle Socrate s'est dévoué transcende visiblement les limites de la Grèce. Elle inclut des communautés autres que les cités grecques. Elle embrasse tout homme capable de raisonner. Celui qui est esclave pour la cité, réduit au statut d'instrument animé, ne l'est pas pour la philosophie incarnée par Socrate. Husserl a déjà fortement souligné la rupture qu'introduit la figure de Socrate dans la conception de l'humanité.² Il n'est pas nécessaire d'insister encore sur ce point. Il nous suffit de retenir que l'humanité visée dans la philosophie excède les contours de la Grèce. Elle est plus que grecque. La philosophie ne se réduit pas à ses conditions historiques de manifestation. Son sens ne s'épuise pas sur son lieu de naissance. La Grèce n'est

pas la patrie de la philosophie. Le savoir philosophique est fondamentalement apatride.

La philosophie n'est pas un langage à travers lequel une communauté humaine s'adresse à elle-même à l'exclusion de toute autre. Bien qu'elle prenne naissance à l'intérieur d'une société déterminée, elle oblige celle-ci à s'ouvrir à d'autres hommes, elle ébranle son unité, détruit la confiance qu'elle entretient en elle-même et la prépare à se confondre à d'autres. Alors que toute tradition, qu'elle soit européenne, asiatique ou africaine exhorte une société à se replier sur elle-même, le savoir philosophique quant à lui encourage l'humanité à ignorer les frontières qui la divisent. Il vise la constitution d'une communauté fondée sur une base autre que la langue, la religion, l'histoire ou la géographie, une société des esprits ou la principale vertu attendue du citoyen est l'aptitude à penser. Tout familier de la philosophie en a clairement conscience. La virulence des contradictions entre les doctrines ne devrait pas nous cacher l'unité profonde de l'intention philosophique. Les différents systèmes philosophiques, aussi clos puissent-ils apparaître, incarnent chacun à sa manière, l'esprit critique caractéristique de la philosophie, l'exigence de rendre raison de ce qui est, tout ce qui est. En posant la question de savoir ce qui est en vérité indépendamment de toute autorité, de tout héritage, Socrate a dégagé en fait un projet dont l'accomplissement sollicite une diversité de contributions, si ce n'est une infinité. Chaque philosophe reprend à son compte cette tâche de comprendre ce qui est sans présupposer au départ une théorie établie. Il étend cette ambition au domaine de la réalité qui lui paraît le plus essentiel et ainsi diverses régions de ce qui est se découvrent à la réflexion philosophique : la nature, l'esprit, l'art, la religion, la morale, la politique, la philosophie elle-même etc... La conquête de ce qui est en vérité ne s'achève pas dans un système et le sens même de la raison se transforme à travers les doctrines. La raison de ce qui est que réclame l'exigence socratique de rendre raison de ce qui est se conçoit de différentes manières selon les philosophes.

Il n'est pas nécessaire pour le présent propos de vouloir décider qui d'entre eux il est préférable de suivre. L'évidence qui s'impose et qui nous importe le plus est qu'aucun philosophe ne se confie à la tradition pour lui enseigner ce qui est en vérité. Chacun veut, tel Descartes, retrouver par lui-même le chemin de la vérité. En s'employant ainsi à s'affranchir de l'emprise de la tradition représentée par celle de sa communauté, l'individu philosophe délivre à travers lui chaque homme de la tradition. L'accès au savoir philosophique convertit l'homme à la solitude. Les philosophes ne sont nulle part chez eux. Le destinataire du savoir philosophique n'est plus le représentant d'une société particulière. Sous l'emprise de la philosophie les sociétés se décomposent en individus, l'humanité se comprend comme une communauté d'individus. La philosophie n'a pas de

nationalité, elle est universelle de par son enjeu. De par son enjeu seulement. De par sa visée, son intention, son ambition... Car en fait, il reste incontestable qu'aucune théorie philosophique particulière, déterminée, ne suscite un accord universel autour de ses prescriptions. L'ambition philosophique se disperse en une multiplicité de doctrines. Cette diversité des oeuvres philosophiques dont l'unité de l'intention philosophique nous a tantôt masqué la force ne trahit-elle pas en définitive sinon la suprématie, du moins l'emprise de la tradition sur la philosophie ? N'est-ce pas l'opposition que la tradition entretient entre les sociétés qu'il convient de lire à travers la diversification des discours philosophiques ? La tradition n'a-t-elle pas toujours survécu à sa tentative de subversion par le savoir philosophique ?

Il est très tentant de ne voir dans la philosophie que la conception du monde propre à une société élevée à sa conscience à travers une doctrine cohérente. Rappelons le : le philosophe est un individu concret, un homme comme les autres, issu d'une famille, élément de telle classe sociale, citoyen d'un État, fils de telle époque... Il est cependant éclairant d'observer que Dilthey, qui considère la philosophie comme une vision du monde traduite dans un langage conceptuel, souligne lui-même que le savoir philosophique prétend à l'universalité. La philosophie n'est pas le seul type de vision du monde. Il en existe d'autres comme la religion ou la poésie. La philosophie se distingue de la première par sa quête d'une validité universelle et de la seconde par sa volonté de réformer l'existence³. Dilthey met donc bien en évidence la prétention à l'universalité du savoir philosophique. Mais il est sans doute plus facile de dégager ce qui constitue un obstacle à cette ambition et qui se résume aux considérations évoquées plus haut que d'indiquer le chemin préparant à son accomplissement. Husserl, qui s'est très rapidement heurté à cette difficulté⁴, a été amené à rejeter complètement la désignation de la philosophie comme une vision du monde.

Son exemple est instructif. La réduction transcendantale dont la thématization caractérise toute son oeuvre n'est pas un vain artifice dont il aurait pu se passer comme ont voulu le croire certains de ses interprètes. Cette opération exprime l'exigence adressée au philosophe de se libérer de l'emprise du monde, de se soustraire à l'influence de son entourage, afin que le savoir philosophique parvienne à revendiquer une validité universelle. En se soumettant à l'épreuve de la réduction transcendantale, l'individu philosophe est censé se convertir en sujet universel dont les intuitions sont valables partout et pour toujours. Il s'institue en source absolue de toute vérité, il devient l'unique monde dont l'explicitation des éléments constitutifs forme la principale tâche de la philosophie. L'opération de la réduction est la garantie radicale de la validité du savoir philosophique. Tant que la philosophie présuppose une réalité qui la précède à laquelle elle doit

d'appliquer pour se constituer, tant qu'elle admet un monde dont elle se voudrait d'être la vision, elle portera l'empreinte des limites de cette réalité, de ce monde. Elle demeurera incapable de prétendre au titre de savoir universel, de "science universelle rigoureuse" pour employer les termes mêmes de Husserl. La portée d'une vision du monde est relativisée par le monde dont elle est la vision : cette évidence a été bien comprise par l'initiateur de la phénoménologie contemporaine.

Il n'est pas indispensable de discuter ici le problème de la motivation de la réduction transcendantale, la question de savoir où l'individu philosophe doit-il puiser les ressources pour s'arracher à l'emprise de son environnement. Il faut seulement se contenter de relever que Heidegger, qui à la différence de son maître Husserl, abandonne l'exigence d'une rupture radicale avec le monde quotidien, repousse également la conception de la philosophie comme une vision du monde. S'appuyant sur le principe de la différence ontologique entre l'être et l'étant, Heidegger considère qu'une vision du monde est un savoir de l'étant, un savoir positif, alors que la philosophie est une science de l'être, une science apriorique. Une vision du monde suppose une réalité déjà donnée à connaître alors que la science de l'être, l'ontologie, se construit spéculativement. La valeur du savoir positif qu'est la vision du monde est relative alors que la science de l'être, la philosophie, se doit de valoir universellement. Le passage de la science positive à la science apriorique réclame une conversion du regard que Heidegger, reprenant le vocabulaire de Husserl, appelle une réduction⁵. Bien évidemment il ne s'agit plus de la réduction transcendantale qui doit couper résolument l'individu philosophe de l'influence du monde quotidien. La philosophie se comprend comme une possibilité de l'homme qui est essentiellement voué à appartenir à un monde dont la quotidienneté est une dimension. Comment admettre qu'un tel être soit en mesure de concevoir une science apriorique, valable universellement? L'universalité du savoir philosophique ne demeure-t-elle une prétention ?

Les difficultés auxquelles Husserl et Heidegger se sont retrouvés confrontés semblent induire à penser que l'universalité du savoir philosophique est en effet une vaine ambition et que la tradition est invincible par essence. Pour renoncer cependant à s'abandonner à une telle conviction, il suffit d'observer que la subversion de la tradition que voudrait systématiser la philosophie n'est pas un mystérieux projet brutalement tombé du ciel mais un événement déjà survenu dans l'histoire. Il en est exactement de la tradition comme de la philosophie : elle est universelle dans sa forme mais elle se disperse en une diversité de contenus. La tradition n'est pas la même dans chaque communauté humaine. Cette diversité originaire des traditions est la matrice de la subversion de la tradition. Quand par l'intermédiaire du commerce ou de la guerre, par un

échange pacifique ou une confrontation violente, deux collectivités se rencontrent, leurs traditions se frottent et s'effritent.

Il est bien connu que l'intervention de Socrate dans l'histoire est consécutive à une décomposition des mœurs de sa cité. Peu nous importent les raisons historiques qui expliquent cette crise : la leçon à en extraire est que Socrate s'est manifesté parce que la cité n'est pas restée fidèle à elle-même. Il ne faut surtout pas s'obstiner à retrouver dans cette indication la preuve que la philosophie est fondamentalement grecque. Au contraire, elle atteste que l'épanouissement de la Grèce est incompatible avec le développement de la philosophie. L'apparition de la philosophie suggère l'avènement d'un monde autre que celui où domine la Grèce. L'intervention de la philosophie consacre la subversion de la tradition, elle ne l'introduit pas. La philosophie conçoit ce qui a commencé à se réaliser dans l'histoire. Hegel nous l'a déjà appris. L'histoire a entraîné toutes les sociétés à se rencontrer, se croiser, s'interpénétrer. Les chemins empruntés pour aboutir à cette situation doivent laisser ici indifférent. La violence a souvent pris le pas sur l'échange pacifique, la guerre a précédé le commerce qui à son tour a préparé la conquête. Le résultat qui seul doit nous préoccuper dans ce propos est qu'aucune collectivité ne vit ignorée des autres. Ce processus d'unification de l'humanité a provoqué une corrosion des traditions. Vainqueur ou vaincu, agresseur ou victime, aucun regroupement humain n'est désormais en mesure de se soustraire au jugement des autres. Les membres d'une collectivité ne se jugent plus selon leurs seuls principes mais également selon les principes des autres. La tradition se trouve ainsi durablement éprouvée partout et sa revendication à travers le traditionalisme est paradoxalement l'expression même de cette crise. Le traditionalisme se constitue en réaction contre l'affaiblissement de la tradition. Mais cet affaiblissement est un processus auquel il est bien difficile de résister⁶.

La philosophie prend acte de la subversion de la tradition à travers l'histoire. L'universalité dont la visée la caractérise n'est pas un objectif dont elle se condamne à ne jamais retrouver les conditions d'atteinte. L'histoire est la motivation la plus éclatante de toute réduction, de toute conversion du regard: elle nous éduque à nous affranchir de l'emprise de la particularité pour nous ouvrir à l'universel.

Cependant, la philosophie, contrairement à ce que laisse croire la lettre du discours hegelien, n'a pas besoin d'attendre que l'histoire achève son oeuvre. La philosophie intervient après l'événement historique mais elle anticipe sur son sens. La tradition se subvertit à travers l'histoire mais la philosophie accélère sa corruption. En assumant consciemment la quête d'une validité universelle, la philosophie prépare une société qui excède les limites des différentes communautés humaines, elle s'oppose à l'esprit de fermeture de toute tradition.

Philosophie et tradition s'affrontent. Cet affrontement définit notre actualité, il faudrait dire plus précisément: toute actualité.

Notes

- ¹ Le présent titre reprend une contribution à un colloque organisé à l'Université de Ouagadougou en octobre 1996 autour du thème " La pensée africaine face au défis du monde contemporain".
- ² Cf. Wilhelm DILTHEY: *Das Wesen der Philosophie*, Félix Meiner Verlag Hamburg 1984.
- ³ Cf. *Das Wesen der Philosophie*.
- ⁴ Cf. Edmund HUSSERL: *La philosophie comme science rigoureuse*. Traduction M.B. DE LAUNAY P.U.F. Paris 1989. Le texte original date de 1911.
- ⁵ Cf. Martin HEIDEGGER : *Les problèmes fondamentaux de la phénoménologie*. Traduction J.F. COURTINE Gallimard Paris 1985.
- ⁶ Cf. A ce sujet le lecteur pourra se rapporter à l'article d'Eric WEIL intitulé "Tradition et traditionalisme" in *Essais et conférences tome 2*, Vrin Paris 1991.

KWASI WIREDU AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONCEPTUAL DECOLONIZATION

Sanya Osha

Kwasi Wiredu, the Ghanaian philosopher is important to African philosophical discourse several reasons. First, he has been able to appropriate most the major signposts of Western philosophy which is a feat that has hardly been accomplished by many Western-trained African philosophers. Secondly, he is very aware of the need for a desirable African mode of selfhood within a broadly modern framework. Very few African philosophers, indeed intellectuals have been able to achieve this, In this regard, one can mention Wole Soyinka as an Intellectual - and of course literary artist-who has been able to attain a high degree of cultural ambidexterity in adopting a considerable percentage of the crucial elements of Western culture in conjunction with those of his indigenous heritage. But obviously Wiredu's project is different from Soyinka's by virtue of the fact that they operate within two disparate disciplines. Soyinka is granted more creative freedom as a literary artist, a freedom that he brings to bear heavily even on his more intellectual reflections. Wiredu on the other hand has to restrict himself to the language of scholarly philosophical discourse, a restriction which one would think makes his task rather more difficult. This difficulty is for a large part the subject of this article which is also a critical examination of a new volume of essays by the renowned Ghanaian philosopher.

The volume entitled *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, (which has an illuminating introduction by Olusegun Oladipo who is himself a prominent Nigerian philosopher) is in fact an apt summation of Wiredu's philosophical interests to date. For those who are familiar with his landmark philosophical work, *Philosophy and an African Culture* published first in 1980, this new volume would serve as a fertile source for greater elucidation.

Wiredu writes, in the second essay of the volume entitled "The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy" (in relation to the issue decolonization) that "with an even greater sense of urgency, the intervening decade does not seem to have brought any indications of a widespread realization of the need for conceptual decolonization in African philosophy"¹. Now, why this is not the usual survey is that it seeks to examine some of the ways in which Wiredu has been involved in the frustrating task of decolonization. Decolonization in itself is a painful ordeal because it necessitates the destruction of certain conceptual attitudes that inform our worldviews. Secondly, it usually entails an arduous attempt at the retrieval of a more or less fragmented historical heritage. In the Fanonian sense decolonization is a necessity for all colonized peoples and more importantly "a programme of

complete disorder"². However, we are talking of decolonization here as a matter of a purely practical interest. This is not to say that Fanon had no plan for the project of decolonization in the intellectual sphere. Connected with this project as it was then conceived, was a struggle for the mental elevation of the colonized African peoples. It was indeed a programme of violence in more senses than one.

But with Wiredu, there is not an outright endorsement of violence, for decolonization in this instance amounts to conceptual subversion if one may be permitted the use of the expression. As a logical consequence, we might as well stress the difference between Fanon's conception of decolonization and Wiredu's. Fanon, we may state, can be regarded as belonging to the same crucial philosophical tendency that harbours figures like, Nkrumah, Senghor, Nyerere and Sekou Toure, "the philosopher-kings of early post-independence Africa"³ as Wiredu calls them. Those "spiritual uncles" of professional African philosophers were engaged as Wiredu tells us in a strictly political struggle and whatever philosophical insight they possessed was put at the disposal of this struggle instead of a merely theoretical endeavour. So for Fanon and the so-called philosopher-kings, decolonization was invested with a Pan-African mandate and appeal. We must note in full, this disparity with what we shall soon demonstrate to be the Wiredu conception of decolonization. But whether we accept it or not, Africans generally would have to continue to ponder the entire issue of decolonization as long as our sense of selfhood remains obscured, our economies in a state of prostration and our social and political institutions plagued by cancerous disintegration.

There is however, a fashionable dimension to the question of decolonization that is now engaging the attention of Third World scholars and researchers on Third World issues. As we know, the end of colonization in Africa and other Third World countries did not imply the end of imperialism and the dominance of the metropolitan countries. Instead, the politics of dominance assumed a more complex if more subtle form. African economic systems floundered alongside African political institutions and all manner of major and minor crises have been engendered as a result, such that we shall still have to address for a long time to come. Let us look briefly at the intellectual sphere for that is what concerns us immediately. A segment of post-colonial theory involves the entry of Third World scholars into the Western archive as it were with the intention of dislodging the erroneous epistemological assumptions and structures regarding their peoples. This, one might argue, is another variant of decolonization. Wiredu partakes of this type of discourse but sometimes, he carries the programme even further. We shall now look at how he does this. He affirms:

Until Africa can have a lingua franca, we will have to communicate suitable parts of our work in our multifarious vernaculars, and in other

forms of popular discourse, while using the metropolitan languages for international communication.⁴

This conviction has been a guiding principle with Wiredu for several years. In fact, it is not merely a conviction, there are several commendable attempts within the broad spectrum of his philosophical corpus where he puts it into practice. Some of such attempts are his essays entitled "The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language" and "The Akan Concept of Mind". In the first named article, Wiredu informs us that "there is no one word in Akan for truth"⁵. Similarly, we are told that "another linguistic contrast between Akan and English is that there is no word 'fact'"⁶. For reasons of economy I shall cite an extract I deem to be the central thesis of the essay and it is, "to make a metadoctrinal point which reflection on the African language enables us to see, which is that a theory of truth is not of any real universal significance unless it offers some account of the notion of being so"⁷. Wiredu's argument faces several problems, such that make his notion of decolonization seem a little suspect due mainly to what one may regard as a form of epistemological hesitation. In many respects, Wiredu is only computing component parts of the English language with the Akan language and not always with a view to drawing out "any real universal significance" as he says. The entire approach seems -to be irreparably futile. But before we go on, it is of considerable importance to stress a distinction that Wiredu does not appear to bear constantly in mind. One is not saying that he is totally unaware of it, but that he doesn't put it consistently in the foreground of his reflections. This distinction is that which lies between an oral culture and a textual one. Most African Intellectuals usually gloss over this difference even though they acknowledge it as it were. And the difference is, indeed very immense because of the many imponderables that come into play. We first of all have to admit the fatal circumstance of stasis occasioned within an oral culture. The scope for discursive reflection is circumscribed by the very constraints of orality while the discursive mobility attendant upon an inter-textual situation is all too evident. Once again, we have the discursive dichotomy that characterizes the distance between traditionalism and modernity. And, once again, we are confronted with the stereotypes of the colonial script, one that reacts violently against most notions of "Westernity" or modernity as conceived solely by the West or a dogmatic recourse to indigenous culture. It is this kind of situation that further frustrates efforts of decolonization. To be sure, Wiredu has not adequately interrogated the distance between orality and textuality. Because if he has sufficiently done so, he would not be too confident about the manner in which he thinks he can dislodge certain Western philosophical structures that should be in the main, the concern of the West primarily. Herein lies another problem with the issue of decolonization. Where do we establish the limits? Does decolonization end with the conceptual structures that concern formerly colonized peoples or does it approach or seek to

contest all Western epistemological structures that indicate a tendency towards global dominance and universality? If the second aspect of the question is the case, then violence at once becomes a central theme in Wiredu's conception of 'decolonization since we have accepted the unlimited or unrestricted scope of the decolonizing operation. Wiredu is a careful philosopher, he constantly stresses the view that:

if we approach... the philosophic suggestions of other cultures (as, for example, those of the Orient) in the spirit of due reflection, being always on the look out for any conceptual snares, perhaps we can combine insights extracted from those sources with those gained from our own indigenous philosophical resources to create for ourselves and our peoples modern philosophies from which both the East and the West might learn something.⁸

"Due reflection" is the key expression but one would have to admit that it is a problematic one for the very meaning of what is to be so classified is a highly philosophical matter. Wiredu illustrates some instances in which he mentions how the process of due reflection could be applied which we shall look at later. But let us be forewarned that not all the instances are altogether satisfactory. Any reflective activity upon a given concept or situation in the effort towards decolonization is an extremely hazardous task for the mere reason that there are no readily available criteria, in other words, all push debates can only lie resolved empirically or pragmatically and the methods by which they are resolved are beyond any concise or predetermined approach. So much for now on "due reflection."

Another essay by Wiredu entitled "The Akan Concept of Mind" (published much earlier than "Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy") is also an attempt at conceptual recontextualization to employ a much milder expression this time. Wiredu begins by stating that he is restricting himself to a study of the Akans of Ghana in order "to keep the discussion within reasonable anthropological bounds"⁹. His objective is a modest but nevertheless an important one since it sits very well with his entire philosophical project which as we have noted earlier is concerned with ironing out philosophical issues "on independent grounds" and possibly in one's own language and the metropolitan language bequeathed by the colonial heritage¹⁰. So we are to proceed gradually, transversing the problematic interfaces between various languages in search of satisfactory structures of meaning. As mentioned earlier, even if this approach is a modest one, it is also a highly engrossing one. The most immediate effect would be a radical diminishing of the entire concept of African philosophy, a term which under these circumstances would have to become a misnomer in the sense that in order to achieve the remotest resemblance of a homogenous whole we have to embark on the lung detour through conceptual fragmentation. To

arrive at the being of African philosophy, we shall have to dismember the monolith that it now, is by discovering innumerable rants of ethnic philosophies and from this scene of epistemic dissemination construct a more representative monologue of African philosophy.. This is an issue if not a problem that will invariably confront the African philosopher if we adopt the Wiredu approach.

Furthermore, in' dealing with a traditional Akan conceptual system or any other for that matter, eve must always bear in mind that we are relating to "a folk philosophy, a body of originally unwritten ideas preserved in the oral traditions, customs and usages of a people"¹¹. Wiredu is fully aware of this but what remains is the manner in which he negotiates the wide expanse between the assumptions of a textual culture and the illusions an oral culture presents. This is a very grave problem indeed.

We should however, attempt to look more closely at his article, "The Akan Concept of Mind", which is the subject of' this part of our discussion, Wiredu again enumerates the ways In which the English conception of mind differs markedly franc that of the Akan due in a large part to certain fundamental linguistic dissimilarities. Another major point he raises is that "the Akans most certainty do not regard mind as one of the entities that go to constitute a person"¹².

It is alright to know all this but where does it lead? In addressing these obvious errors in a metropolitan language and with a modern system of reference, the entire exercise becomes somewhat suspect. Having reformulated traditional Western philosophical problems to suit African conditions, it remains to be seeing how African epistemological claims can be substantiated using the natural and logical procedures available to them. In spite of all claims to the contrary; behind every quest for decolonization is the quest to diminish irrevocably the role of the Other. In other words, there is essentially a latent taste for violence. Wiredu for instance says that:

by comparison with the conflation of the concepts of mind and soul prevalent in Western philosophy, the Akan separation of the "okra" from "adwene" suggests a more analytical awareness of the sanctification of human personality."¹³

We need to substantiate more rigorously claims such as this because we may also be making a category-mistake in establishing certain troublesome linguistic or philosophical correspondences between two disparate cultures or traditions. Another crucial if distressing feature of decolonization is that it always has to measure itself up with the colonizing Other, that is, it finds it almost impossible to create its own image so to speak by the employment of autochthonous strategies. One is not asserting that decolonization has to always avail itself of indigenous procedures but isn't the very concept of decolonization concerned with a breaking away from imperial structures of dominance in order to state a

will to self-identity or presence? To be sure, the Other is always present, defacing all claims to full presence. The Other is always there to present the criteria by which one is adjudged either favourably or uncharitably. There is no getting around the Other as it is introduced in the latent violence inherent in invariably all projects of decolonization. The only recourse in this case would be to begin the process of decolonization from within, that is to hold up the mirror of selfhood before one's self and begun the painful ordeal of recreation with all the traces of the Other finally evaded. Of course, this is easier said than done but if Wiredu could go as far as stating that conceptual decolonization entails at least partially, the reformulation of Western philosophical problems in African languages to see if they remain tenable in their new contexts, then almost any other option is acceptable.

To go back to a problem that was raised earlier, that is, the problem of relating an oral culture to one in which established forms of textuality prevail, in an oral culture, one observes mainly static conceptual modes and consequently the entire discursive potential of such a community is severely restricted when compared with a culture of textuality. To buttress this point, one notices that in presenting the Akan concept of mind, Wiredu has only a few related concepts at his disposal unlike the plenitude of Western alternatives to a similar philosophical issue. This problem as mentioned earlier arises primarily from the alternatives and range enjoyed by a textual culture as opposed to a basically oral one.

One would submit that some of Wiredu's more recent attempts at conceptual decolonization have been highly stimulating. A such attempt would have to be his essay entitled "Custom and Morality: A Comparative Analysis of some African and Western Conceptions of Morals". He is able to explore at greater length some of the conceptual confusions that, arise as a result of the implantation of Western ideas in the African collective psyche. This wholesale transference of foreign ideas and conceptual models has caused the occurrence of severe cases of loss of identity and to borrow a more apposite term, colonial mentality. Indeed, one of the aims of Wiredu's efforts at decolonization is to indicate instances of colonial mentality and determine strategies by which they can be minimized. So, he does nuke a lot of sense when he argues that polygamy in a traditional setting amounts to efficient social thinking but is most inappropriate within a modern framework¹⁴. In this way, Wiredu is offering a critique of a certain traditional practice that ought to be discarded on account of the demands and realities of a modern economy.

In the same vein, he demonstrates how the Western idea of ethics regarding marriage differs immensely from the Akan conception. To be precise, "Christianity, as it came to us in Africa through the missionaries, proscribed premarital sex, as totally incompatible with morality"¹⁵ but on the other hand among the Akans, "considerable mutual knowledge between both principles, including "carnal" knowledge, is regarded as a commonsensical requirement"¹⁶.

He concludes this line of argument by affirming that "in regard to this notion of the dependence, of morality on religion, we encounter a rather striking contrast, for it does not even make sense in the Akan context"¹⁷. This essay, one may add, accomplishes a lot of stimulating results. The reason being that the theoretical models employed are able to engage highly practical considerations in a highly fruitful manner.

However, one cannot ascribe a similar quality to his essay "Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity". In this essay, Wiredu argues that:

The Ashanti system was a consensual democracy. It was a democracy because government was by the consent, and subject to the control, of the people as expressed through their representatives. It was consensual because, as a rule, that consent was negotiated on the principle of consensus. (By contrast, the majoritarian system might be said to be, in principle, based on "consent" without consensus)¹⁸.

In other words, political party structures are to be dismantled in favour of expressly consensual politics and nothing captures the urgency of this conviction more than the concluding remark that "far from the complexities of contemporary African life making the consensual, non-party precedents of traditional African politics now unusable, they make them indispensable". Wiredu does not seem to have estimated the distance between a past disfigured by the decisive onslaughts of a colonial encounter and the exigencies of the perplexing machinations of modernity. The African mind is inevitably caught between these two frustrating and elusive sets of circumstances. To hold that a certain African historical reality may be summoned at will and completely is to underestimate the extremely excruciating impact absorbed by the African self in relation to the decisive event of the colonial encounter. This event we must never fail to remind ourselves (go matter how tempting it is to forget or reduce it) should be the yardstick by which we attempt to retrieve whatever can be recalled from the past.

Notes

¹ Kwasi Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 4 essays, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995, p. 23

² Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1980, p. 27.

³ Kwasi Wiredu *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 1995, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibid* p. 20.

⁵ Kwasi Wiredu "The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language" in *Philosophy in Africa: Trends and Perspectives* (ed), P.O. Bodunrin, Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., 1985, p. 46.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid p. 52.

⁸ Kwasi Wiredu *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 1995, p. 21.

⁹ Kwasi Wiredu "The Akan Concept of Mind" in *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies*,* No. 3, October 1983, p. 113.

¹⁰ Kwasi Wiredu *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 1995, p. 24.

¹¹ Kwasi Wiredu "The Akan Concept of Mind", 1983, p: 113.

¹² Ibid p. 121.

¹³ Ibid p. 128.

¹⁴ Kwasi Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy*, 1995, p. 44.

¹⁵ Ibid p. 46.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid p. 48.

¹⁸ Ibid pp. 58 - 59.

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