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Placide tempels' 'Bantu Philosophy': a study of its introduction and reception

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P. PLACIDE TEMPELS
FRANCISCAIN

LA PHILOSOPHIE BANTOUE

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A. RUBBENS
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P. Placide Tempels

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Placide Tempels’ ‘Bantu Philosophy’: A study of its introduction and reception

1.0 Introduction

It’s an honour to be invited to write the preface to the reprint of the Franciscan priest Placide Tempels’ ‘La Philosophie Bantoue’ (ed. Elisabethville/Elisabethstad 1945, translated from Flemish Dutch¹ by Dr Antoine Rubbens). This book was the first French translation of the ‘Bantoe Filosofie’ draft in Flemish, also published in 1945. This draft appeared in separate chapters in the Congolese journals ‘Band’ (Leopoldstad) and ‘Equatoria’ (vol. 9.3, 81-90). Placide Tempels’ book version of ‘Bantoe Filosofie’ was also published in Flemish in 1946 by the Sikkels in Antwerp, Belgium. The book of 1946 was based on the earlier eponymous draft chapters, but it was published as part of the Congo Overseas Library as ‘the original text’. The book was, however, a revised, improved and updated version of the journal’s draft chapters of 1945. In a sense, these draft chapters on which the French translation was based, were thus the most original source of ‘Bantoe Filosofie’. To gain the best understanding of ‘Tempels’ book one should return to this source in Flemish. For those who speak French, the book’s first French translation of 1945 in front of you is the best alternative.

I am a native Dutch speaker and proficient in English, German, and French. I have also focused on various translations of ‘Bantoe Filosofie’. I have found that their interpretations differ substantially between the languages. The large variations in the translations have had a high impact on the distinct reception history of Tempels’ book in English, German, French or Flemish Dutch-speaking countries in Europe and Africa. A final introductory remark is that to avoid misinterpretations, the innovative nature of Tempels’ ‘Bantoe Filosofie’ needs to be understood in the context of its time.

The structure of this introduction is as follows. In section 1.1, I will focus on ‘La Philosophie Bantoue’ (1946) and its Flemish author; Father Placide Tempels. Section 1.2 will concentrate on why we should read both ‘Bantoe Filosofie’ and ‘La philosophie Bantoue’, section 1.3 focuses on the translation history of ‘Bantoe Filosofie’, section 1.4 on the history of the

1. My native language is Dutch of which Flemish, which is the language in which ‘Bantu Philosophy’ was written, is a Dutch dialect.

book's translation in various languages, and section 1.5 on the book's reception and ongoing legacy in African philosophical circles. A short conclusion will follow the sections.

1.1 Tempels: a short biography

Frans Tempels was born on February 18, 1906, in Berlaar, Belgium. In 1924, he took the monastery name Placidus or Placied/Placide on his entry at the seminary of the Franciscan Minor Friars in Tielt, Belgium. In 1930, Tempels became ordained as a priest. In 1932, he finished his philosophical and theological studies in the study houses Rekem and Sint-Truiden and the Franciscan monastery in Turnhout. In 1933, he was assigned to go to Dilolo in the Katanga region in the Belgian Congo (today's Democratic Republic of Congo). His first destination was the apostolic vicariate of Lulua-Katanga, where he taught at the minor seminary of Luabo. In 1935, he was sent to the mission-post of Lukonzolwa where he founded a school and regularly visited the inhabitants of the Congolese villages in the hinterland, the Baluba-Shankadi and the Bashila. In 1938, Placide was transferred to the mission-post of Kamina in West Katanga where he stayed without interruption until the end of the Second World War. In total, Tempels lived for twenty-nine years among the Baluba and Babemba Bantu people in Belgian Congo and learnt and spoke several Bantu languages (e.g. Kiswahili, Kibemba, Kiluba). His time in Congo was interrupted by two short stays back in Belgium. In 1946 he involuntarily turned back to the Franciscan monastery in Hasselt. Tempels had to return to Belgium because his book 'Bantoe Filosofie' encountered great resistance within his church circle. In the book, Tempels had namely uttered his doubts about the successfulness of the Catholic missionary method of conversion. Tempels' work received particular attention from Mgr. Jean-Félix de Hemptinne (1876-1958), the apostolic vicar of Katanga, perceived 'Bantoe Filosofie' as a frontal attack on traditional evangelization, and accused Tempels of playing the population into the hands of Bantu nationalism. Also the papal legate in Leopoldville, Mgr. Giovanni Dellepiane (1889-1961), was quick to accuse Tempels of using unorthodox theories in the field of ethnology (Smet 1981:169-170). Tempels aimed to adapt the catechesis to the Bantu religion in 'interreligious/cultural dialogue' with the Baluba people to make it comprehensible to them². This method of conversion was new in Roman Catholic circles. Tempels' engagement with the Bantu people set him apart from his Catholic missionary colleagues. No doubt, however, Tempels remained a missionary,

2. In this type of missionary communication, the dialogue is submitted to the goals of the mission. The theology of dialogue is that of inculturation. Syncretically, Christianity is given an African form by entering a 'third space' by crossing the border of the Christian religious system.

and he worked in service of the Belgian government thereby officially supporting the colonial aims and goals of the Belgian colonial regime. Despite his so-called ‘theory of adaption’ (today better known as ‘inculturation’), ‘Bantoe Filosofie’ was thus written in service of European colonialism³.

In 1950, Tempels was allowed to leave the Belgian monastery and return to Belgian Congo where he first became active as a missionary in West Katanga. In the period between 1953 and 1957, he worked as a priest in the diocese of the Union Minière in Ruwe, near Kolwezi. Between 1957 and 1962, he stayed in the nearby city of Musonoi where he experienced the transition to the Independence of Congo in 1960. In 1962, when his health deteriorated, Placide returned to the Franciscan monastery in Hasselt where he stayed until his death on October 9, 1977⁴.

1.2 Why should we read ‘Bantoe Filosofie’ and ‘La philosophie Bantoue’?

Reading ‘Bantoe Filosofie’/ ‘La philosophie Bantoue’ helps to gain a better understanding of the missionary and ethnographical history of the study of religion and methods of conversion in Africa. Besides, Tempels has been regarded as a pioneer in the academic field of African (ethno) Philosophy.

In short, Tempels’ ‘Bantu philosophy’ comprises the following ideas. In the opinion of Tempels, the Bantu live in a universe of forces that are hierarchically organised. Above all other forces stands a Creator God (Mwine bukomo bwandi) who has its source of power. God is the one who strengthens the power of others and is, therefore, known as a source of life force for the ancestors and all human beings. In Tempels’ eyes, the Bantu (and other black Africans) believe that white men are technically superior and, hence, they have more life force than them (Tempels 1946:33-36). Below the human being or *muntu* are the animals, plants and minerals. Magic rites, such as circumcision, can strengthen someone’s vital force, but natural forces can also weaken or strengthen the ‘life force’ of an individual. Some examples of forces that can lead to the diminution of one’s life force in the domain of witches or sorcerers. Forces that can help a person are, instead, those in the domain of healers or traditional priests, such as ancestral spirits or deities (Tempels 1946:78-79, 92-93). Furthermore, the Bantu people believe that human beings can directly utilize life force to the advantage or the disadvantage of others (Tempels 1946:67, 76).

Why was Tempels so interested in writing down what he perceived as the ontology of the Bantu people? This had everything to do with his con-

3. His ‘theory of adaption’ was not uncommon among other-than-Catholic missionaries in Africa in his lifetime.

4. https://www.kaowarsom.be/nl/notices_tempels_frans_placied

viction that the mainstream method of conversion among Catholic missionaries was ineffective, rightly because the ontology of those for whom it was meant was not being studied. In 'Bantu Philosophy', 'he' wrote: 'By having failed to explore the ontology of the Bantu, we lack the power to offer them either a spiritual body of teaching that they are capable of assimilating, or an intellectual synthesis that they can understand' (Dennett 1907, Gabriel 1928, Tempels 1959:28). Tempels felt that the existing terms about their religion were too vague and unsystematic and pleaded for a more scientific approach of the study of the belief system of Africans. Terms of his predecessors, such as 'mysticism', dynamism or animism were too unclearly defined to gain a good scientific understanding of the religion of the Bantu people and other Africans (Tempels 1946:10-11).

Was Tempels right to claim that Europeans had not studied the Bantu properly scientifically? In his lifetime, a British anthropologist named Robert Ranulph Marett (13 June 1866 - 18 February 1943) and the British phenomenologists of religion Edwin William Smith and Geoffrey Parrinder had already been involved in the systematic study of the religion of Africans. However, they were indeed one of a few. Marett believed that a mystic energy occupied Africans and their religious practice and thought. This energy was all pervasive in living beings and inanimate objects. The dynamism of the Africans was comparable to the idea of cosmic mana among the Polynesians (Van Rinsum 2003:50). Smith was the first phenomenologist of religion who outlined the chief characteristics of African Traditional Religion including the belief in a Supreme Being, a sense of dynamic power, a focus on localized kingships and ancestral spirits (Young 2002:216-217). Smith was a so-called liberal theologian. Before Tempels, he believed Africans already had an idea of God before the European missionaries came to Africa and that Africans were reasonable human beings. Smith wrote:

'...Africans, like all humans, can recognise God in the natural world of sun and rain, thunder and lightning, and through the power of human reason.' (Smith 1936:29)

British social anthropologists, who were active in the same period and area of Belgian Congo as Tempels, already described the religion of the Bantu people but only unsystematic and in descriptive terms. W. F. P. Burton, for instance, only mentioned that the Baluba Bantu people in Central Katanga believed in a withdrawn but self-evident Creator God (or Supreme Being) to whom they give little attention. Furthermore, they believed that human beings had a disembodied spirit that remained in the neighbourhood of the body of the deceased for some time, which they provided with food, and in a subconscious self (an embodied spirit that dies with the death of a person) (Burton 1927:334-335).

To conclude, Tempels was thus right to remark that in his time the systematic study of the religion of the Bantu people was in its infancy and so was the study of their philosophy. No ontology had yet been written about any African people and so Tempels was a trailblazer in writing down the philosophy of the Bantu people. Tempels' 'Bantoe Filosofie' was probably closest to the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule's (1938) research on the Dogon cosmology of the people of Mali. In 1949, Griaule reacted to Tempels' 'La Philosophie Bantoue' (Griaule 1949) so there was also a scholarly interaction between them about (the) African worldview(s)⁵.

Unlike Griaule, Tempels, however, brought the study of African religion to the field of philosophy, and this was relatively new in his lifetime⁶. In terms of religious ideas about the Bantu, Tempels nevertheless missed out on the fact that the Bantu believed there were two spirits as mentioned by Burton. Tempels wrote about the Bantu belief in a shadow that ceases to exist after a person passes away. He did not, however, describe the shadow (of the subconscious self) as a spirit. He also believed that the Bantu had no idea of a soul or that element of a person that continues to exist after he dies. Tempels wrote:

'De Bantu onderscheiden in den mensch: zijn lichaam, zijn schaduw, eveneens zijn adem die natuurlijk ook de manifestatie, het uiterlijke teeken van het leven is. Maar dit alles is vergankelijk en geeft niet weer wat wij onder ziel verstaan, namelijk dat wat na den dood levend blijft voortbestaan ook nadat het lichaam vergaan is en de schaduw en de adem niet meer zijn. Benevens die uiterlijkheden kennen zij enkel het onzichtbare: het ding of de kracht zelf. De Bantu beschikken over geen term die zou aanduiden dat deel van den mensch het welk na den dood blijft voortbestaan' (Tempels 1946:28).

'The Bantu distinguish in man: his body, his shadow, and at the same time his breath, which is of course also the manifestation, the outward sign of life. But all this is transitory and does not reflect what we understand by soul, namely that which continues to exist alive after death, even after the body has decayed and the shadow and the breath are no more. Besides these appearances, they only know the invisible: the thing or the force itself. The Bantu have no term that would indicate that part of the human being which continues to exist after death' [My English translation of the text in the Dutch book version of Tempels' 'Bantoe Filosofie' of 1946].

'Lorsque «nous» distinguons en l'homme l'âme et le corps, comme on le voit dans certains écrits occidentaux, nous sommes embar-rassés d'exprimer où a passé

5. Tempels was asked to write the foreword of the 1949 French edition of 'Bantoe Filosofie' published by *Présence Africaine* and did so, but it was replaced by the preface by Alioune Diop; the founder and director of the journal.

6. Dennett (1907) preceded Tempels in writing about Bantu philosophy, but he only wrote one chapter about the Philosophy of the Bavili Bantu people of Congo. Gabriel (1928: 63-63, 57) confirms that Africans (the Baluba) have their own philosophy and that the Luba language is philosophical potential.

« l'homme » après que ces eux composants se trouvent fractionnés. Si nous voulions, avec notre mentalité européenne, chercher chez les bantous des termes adéquats pour exprimer cette pensée, nous nous heurterions aux plus graves difficultés, notamment si nous allions parler de l'âme de l'homme. Sauf sous l'influence européenne, les bantous ne s'expriment pas de la sorte. Eux distinguent en l'homme, le corps, l'ombre, le souffle; ce souffle est bien sûr la manifestation, le signe apparent de la vie, mais qui est périssable et ne rend nullement ce que nous entendons par l'âme, notamment, ce qui subsiste après la mort, lorsque le corps avec son ombre et son souffle ont disparu' (Tempels 1945:13 sur 51).

'Unless under European influence, the Bantu do not thus express themselves. They distinguish in man's body, shadow and breath. This breath is the assumed manifestation, the evident sign of life, though it is mortal and in no way corresponds with what we understand by the soul, especially the soul as subsisting after death, when the body with its shadow and its breath will have disappeared [Untranslated part: Besides these appearances, they only know the invisible: the thing or the force itself.] What lives on after death is not called by the Bantu a term part of a man' (Tempels 1959:54).

As one can see, the meanings in the translations differ from each other. In both the second French translation of 'Bantoe Filosofie' published in 1946 and the English one based on the third French translation of 1959 one can read that the Bantu only express themselves under European influences about an idea of a soul. According to Tempels, the Bantu themselves, have no term for 'soul' or that what remains after a person has passed away. In the Dutch book version, it's, however, not mentioned that the Bantu only talk about the idea of a soul under European influence, but it does mention that the Bantu do not have a term for the human soul (not that they don't have one). What we further know is that Burton reported that the Bantu have a disembodied spirit (so not a soul) and did not mention the word 'soul' in his proximity. This disembodies spirit was, however, eternal by nature and so, according to Burton and in contradiction to what Tempels wrote, the Bantu did have an idea of a part of man that lived on after the death of a person although it was known as a spirit (and thus not a soul).

Tempels' way of reasoning was that the Bantu had no soul but that they were inspired by a vital force (force vital, life force); a personal strength that could increase or decrease thereby changing a person's power of life over death. Besides, he also acknowledged that the Bantu had ideas about good and wrong behaviour thus having developed some sense of ethos. Unlike contemporary African philosophers, however, Tempels did not link the amount of one's vital force to any normative moral theory. He acknowledged that vital force was something personal and that e.g. illness could weaken one's life force but he did not regard the term vital force to be relational.

These days, on the contrary, the concept of vital force is used by African philosophers in the context of achievements and rewards of good behav-

our within a communal setting (Molefe 2018: 24-30). In the Bantu/ubuntu philosophy of today, it is believed that one can become more (ubuntu) or less (into) human (untu) by being compassionate, generous, hospitable, friendly and caring (yu ubuntu) in one's behaviour towards others (Tutu 2011).

The question is whether these moral implications of loss and gain of vital force by the morality of one's behaviour were that prominent before the South African bishop Desmond Tutu's Christianization of Bantu/ubuntu philosophy, which I doubt. Nevertheless, the differences in translations of 'Bantoe Filosofie' demonstrate that translators have given different interpretations as to whether the Bantu themselves had a concept of a soul. Section 1.3. will further demonstrate that the translators of 'Bantoe Filosofie' had distinct opinions on how to interpret Tempels' book.

1.3 The translation history of 'Bantoe Filosofie'

As mentioned in section 1.0, 'La philosophie Bantoue' (ed. Elisabethvielle/Elisabethstad, 1945) was the first French translation of the draft chapters of 'Bantoe Filosofie'. In 1949, the Dutch book version of 'Bantoe Filosofie' was translated for the second time into French, again by Dr A. Rubbens, and published in the journal *Présence Africaine* in Paris. In 1969, this journal published a third version in French, which was translated by Rev. Colin King from the original Dutch and French versions and revised and updated by Placide Tempels himself. A fourth French translation (2001), which is closer to the Dutch original, was created by Father Alfons J. Smets (1926-2015); a Belgian Tempels expert.

The first French translation differed from the original Dutch book 'Bantoe Filosofie' (Sikkel, 1946). In 'Beyond Bantu Philosophy' Professor Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia wrote: 'At this early stage the problem of language already occurs, and philosophical Bantu terms may not have transmitted the same content or meaning when expressed in other languages' (Nkemnkia 2022:28). To demonstrate this point, I will add some text fragments in Flemish Dutch and include my English translation. By reading this first French version, one can then also get an idea of the Dutch original on which it was based.

The first English version, which was published in 1959 by *Présence Africaine*, was a translation of the French version that was translated from Dutch into French by Rubbens in 1945 (Lovania, Elisabethville). The English-speaking world still uses this indirect translation via French into English, which was an unauthorised translation (however, published with the approval of Placide Tempels). The Dutch and the English versions differ greatly from one another. Some words were translated so freely that they changed meaning. Instead of 'Bantu' the English translator decided to use

the term ‘Africans’ there where he was unsure the text specifically referred to the ‘Bantu’ (Tempels 1959:12). Thereby, he created more generalizations about the Bantu than in Tempels’ original ‘Bantoe Filosofie’. To strengthen his thought that ethnology without philosophy would not help develop the study of the religion of Africans any further beyond the level of vague expressions. Tempels wrote: ‘Not the Blacks, but we should learn to think more philosophically’ (‘Niet de Zwartten, maar wij moeten filosofischer leeren denken’) (Tempels 1946:14). This was translated into English by Rev. Colin Kings as: ‘Before we set about teaching these Africans our system of philosophical thought, let us try to master theirs’ (Tempels 1959:36). Apparently, the translators Rubbens and Collins had differing views on Africa and Africans and did not hesitate to express their view via Tempels’ book. The English version of ‘Bantu Philosophy’ became the most influential, whereas this was thus an indirect translation of the Dutch original. In 1956, Joseph Peters translated this Dutch book version of 1946 into German as ‘Bantu-Philosophie’. The German translation contains an afterword by Ernst Dammann, Hermann Friedmann, Alexander Rüstow and Janheinz Jan. The German translation is very close to the Dutch book unlike the French (1946) and English (1959) translations, which are closer to one another than to the Dutch and German versions. In the introduction, for instance, in the Dutch and the German translations Tempels (rhetorically) questions whether it should be called a wonder, regarding the fact that the Bantu belief in a High God lies at the foundation of all religious views of the semi-primitives, that one can find deeper philosophical concepts (‘diepere filosofische begrippen’) and a simple but logical ontological system. In German, this notion of ‘deeper philosophical concepts’ is translated correctly as ‘einige tiefere philosophische Begriffe’, whereas in English it is translated incorrectly as ‘certain basic principles’, and in French as ‘quelques principes de base’ (meaning ‘certain basic principles’). The only difference between the Dutch original (1946) and the German translation (1956) is the word ‘heelal’ (in its non-literal meaning of ‘all-encompassing’) which is correctly translated in German with ‘Seinswelt’ (‘constellation of being’). In the English and French translations, the Dutch word ‘heelal’ is, instead, literary and hence incorrectly translated as ‘the universe’ (In French, de l’univers) (see the texts below).

Het geloof der echte primitieven in het Opperwezen ligt alle tegenwoordige bestaande religieuze opvattingen der halfschaafden (animisme, dynamisme, fetisjisme en magie) ten grondslag. Mag het dan wonder heeten, dat wie bij de Bantu en bij de primitieven in het algemeen, als basis voor hun tegenwoordige verstandelijke opvattingen over de wezens van het **heelal**, eenige diepere filosofische begrippen kunnen vinden, zelfs een tamelijk eenvoudig, primitief-menschelijk, doch logisch samenhangend ontologisch systeem? (Tempels 1946:3-4).

La foi des véritables primitifs en l'Être suprême est à la base de toutes les conceptions religieuses ayant cours parmi les semi-primitifs: animisme, dynamisme, fétichisme et magie. Faut-il dès lors s'étonner de ce que nous trouvions chez les Bantous, et plus généralement chez tous les primitifs, comme fondement de leurs conceptions intellectuelles **de l'univers**, quelques principes de base, et même un système philosophique, relativement simple et primitif, dérivé d'une ontologie logiquement cohérente? (Tempels 1945:5 sur 51).

Der Glaube der echten Primitiven an das höchste Wesen liegt noch heute allen religiösen Begriffen der Semi-Primitiven (Animismus, Dynamismus, Fetischismus und Magie) zugrunde. Ist es dazu verwundern, daß wir bei den Bantu und bei den Primitiven im Allgemeinen als Grundlage ihrer heutigen verstandesmäßigen Anschauungen über die **Seinswelt** einige tiefere philosophische Begriffe finden können, sogar ein ziemlich einfaches, primitiv-menschliches, doch logisch zusammenhängendes ontologische System? (Tempels 1956:9).

The faith of really primitive peoples in the Supreme Being lies at the root of all religious conceptions current among semi-primitives: animism, dynamism, fetishism and magic. Need we, then, be astonished that we find among the Bantu, and more generally among all primitive peoples, as the foundation upon which their intellectual conception of the universe rests, certain basic principles and even a system of philosophy - though it is relatively simple and primitive - derived from a logically coherent ontology? (Tempels 1959:20).

In the afterword, the German linguist Ernst Dammann provides philological and linguistic details about the Bantu language, because he finds it important to gain an understanding of where Tempels' Bantu ontology resonates in the Bantu language. He especially asks himself whether Tempels' opinion that the Bantu are emotionally involved in strengthening their life force has a basis in the Bantu language. Interestingly, in Dammann's view, there is no obvious, tangible expression in the Bantu language for the striving to strengthen one's life force ('In der Struktur und im Stil bietet das Bantu kaum Material, das auf solche besondere Gefühlsbetontheit schließen läßt. Das Streben nach Lebensverstärkung findet auch keinen in die Augen fallenden faßbaren Niederschlag') (Tempels 1956:131). Dammann's view is illustrative of the still tense relationship between the academic fields of the missionary study of African religion/African philosophy versus African languages and cultures. The German philosopher Hermann Friedmann believed Tempels' highest concept of the Bantu spirit, the life force (muntu) was nothing but the concept of the 'spirit from the spirit' of the Aristotelian 'entelechy' (Tempels 1956:135)⁷. Alexander Rüstow believes in the evolution of philosophical systems and speaks of Bantu philosophy as an 'embryonic, prenatal philosophy' incomparable to the German ontology and metaphysics but comparable to earlier stages of German philosophy (Tempels 1956:139).

7. Aristoteles in De anima III, v.a. in Kap. 4-5, outlined doctrine of the spirit (νοῦς).

Janheinz Jahn, finally, makes the point that renowned anthropologists, such as the American professor Melville Herskovits (September 10, 1895 - February 25, 1963), believed that the philosophy of the Bantu people exceeded the boundaries of their region. Many of the thoughts about Africans which Herskovits found in Tempels' book were similar to what he found among the people of Sudan and the Guinea coast and even Haiti, Brazil and Surinam (Tempels 1956:149).

The opinion that Tempels' philosophical ideas about the Bantu people resonate with those of other Africans is shared by some contemporary thinkers in African philosophy, such as Mosima⁸ (2023), Bujo (2001), and Shutte (2001). Other such philosophers have relegated 'Bantu Philosophy' and the idea of a vital force that unites all Africans to the field of mythology (Matolino 2022:65, 74-75). Since these academic voices are so far apart, it's high time to focus on the reception of Bantu Philosophy in African philosophical circles.

1.4 The translation history of 'Bantoe Filosofie' in various languages

Initially, Placide Tempels' chapters of 'Bantoe Filosofie' in 1945 did not reach many readers. The book version, which came out in 1946, contains an introduction by 'Baselis Tanghe' - the Apostolic Vicaris of Ubangi - who praises it as a valuable source for all those missionaries tasked with the religious education of the Bantu people. Tanghe especially comments on Tempels' enhancement of understanding of the Bantu's philosophy of life. No doubt, 'Bantoe Filosofie' was thus written for a European audience of colonial administrators, magistrates and missionaries (Tempels 1946:V-VI).

Tempels' 'La Philosophie Bantoue' came out in 1945, to introduce 'Bantoe Filosofie' to a French-speaking audience. However, this French translation and the English one of 1959, both published in Europe, did not reach a considerable audience. In Europe, the book was not received in conventional European philosophical circles, but it was relevant for those few Europeans interested in African art and culture (Kleinhempel 2019:132). In Africa, there were a handful of intellectuals (the *Évolués*) but their reaction to Tempels' book was delayed until the end of colonialism when it became an important standard work among students of African culture and philosophy in institutions of higher learning in Europe and Africa. Of course, this was not because Tempels invented African philosophy, since African sage philosophers predated Placide coming to Congo. Tempels can, however, be com-

8. Dr Pius Mosima hails from Cameroon and is a Lecturer at the University of Bamenda and Leiden University. He is currently involved in the Bantu Philosophy project at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. One of the research outputs of this project is the retranslation of Bantoe Filosofie (1946) in modern Dutch. See Tempels, P. (2023). Bantoe Filosofie: introduced by Angela Roothaan. Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Noordboek.

mended for applying European academic philosophical and religious methodology and ideas to understand the Congolese people he worked for and for sharing his findings - that Africans do have an intellectual life and heritage - with the wider world (Cornelli 2022:8-10).

With his research, Tempels did not follow in the theoretical footsteps of French scholars, such as the sociologist Emile Durkheim or the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, despite his familiarity with their contributions. Unlike them, Tempels did not write about the Bantu as people with a 'primitive mind' nor as illogical and/or black children who had to be raised by white European adults. Instead, he searched for the similarities between Christianity and the Bantu religion and found them in the Bantu people's belief in a Supreme Being. He then transferred his study of the religion of the Bantu people from missionary studies to philosophy and wrote a Bantu ontology, whereby he introduced the term 'vital force' as the essence of Bantu philosophy. He did not state that the Bantu philosophy was inferior to Western philosophy or the Christian religion although he advised his readers to use the Bantu ontology as a basis for Christian conversion and inculturation.

Despite his profession as a missionary rather than a scholar, Tempels thus did not just copy the available scholarly Western derogatory theories on Africans and published an original piece of work. Tempels wrote his book in a period in which his contemporaries such as Marcel Griaule's in 'Dieu d'eau' ('Conversations with Ogotemmêli', (Griaule [Orig. 1948] 1965) and Janheinz Jahn's 'Muntu: The New African Culture' (1961) were also involved in searching for an African philosophy, cosmology or system of thought among distinct cultural groups, such as the Dogon or the Bantu people. The acknowledgement of an African philosophy distinguished this generation from its philosophical and/or social anthropological predecessors, such as Lévy-Bruhl (1923 [1922 in French. Trans. LA Clare]). He believed that the African mind was prelogical. The German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel assumed that Africans had a natural soul but that they had not reached the necessary level for it to develop morality and consciousness (Hegel 1956 [J. Sibree, Trans.]). Meanwhile, European governments and their colonial policies had an impact on how Europeans perceived Africans. In 1958, for instance, the Belgian government organized the World Exhibition Expo 58 (which was planned in 1948) which included a village indigène.

In this native village, Congolese children and adults were exhibited like zoo animals. Instead of negative stereotyping and/or objectifying the Bantu people and treating them as non-human beings, Tempels aimed to gain a basic understanding of their philosophy. Placide was thus ahead of his time in acknowledging the humanity and rationality of Africans. This is something we should keep in mind while reading his book on Bantu philosophy.

From a contemporary point of view, Tempels' work on the Bantu seems excessively paternalistic, because he wrote it all down for a European audience out of the shared Belgium-wide conviction that the Bantu themselves were incapable of expressing their philosophy on paper. Times have changed and African Philosophy as an academic discipline is on the rise, especially in Africa. Despite all earlier criticism, African philosophers and scholars of religion have continued to cite 'Bantoe Filosofie' in various languages. They keep referring to the book as a classical piece of work. However, it remains a source for academic discussion among scholars in the Global North and also in Africa. In the next section, I will focus on the content of that discussion in African philosophical circles.

1.5 The book's reception and ongoing legacy in the field of African Philosophy

'Bantoe Filosofie' has thus survived his most harsh critics for over seventy-seven years, which include Césaire (1972), Okot p'Bitek (1975), and Hountondji (1983:142-143) among others. Still, it is interesting to gain an understanding of Tempels' scholarly African 'enemies'.

Césaire was one of the founding fathers of the Negritude philosophy and movement and a researcher of the African precolonial past, a promotor of fostering the spirit of black pride (Caute 1970:17-18) and re-Africanisation of the (former) French colonies (Rabaka 2015: 10-11). He felt that Tempels' Bantu ontology resonated with the spirit of colonialism rather than its decolonisation. Tempels' hierarchical categorisations of beings reflected the colonial order of things. According to Tempels, the Bantu believed that the white men had more vital force and hence were more powerful than the Africans; an argument which helped to legitimise the influence of the European colonisers over them (Césaire 1972:55, 58-59). Césaire thus blamed Tempels for his contributions to the *mission civilisatrice*. He felt that by exposing the Bantu worldview to missionaries, Tempels contributed to the success of their mission of enculturating African cultures into European Christian culture.

Another critique of 'Bantu Philosophy' came from the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek (1975). P'Bitek blamed Tempels for using his intuition to write down his Bantu ontology rather than using scientific methods of direct observation and a comparative analysis of data. Tempels also generalised unfairly from the ideas he had about the Bantu based on conversations with only two cultural groups of Bantu people. Besides, he made his readers believe that his Bantu ontology was an African-wide philosophy. Okot p'Bitek also wonders why Tempels wrote the Bantu ontology all by himself and did not ask a single Bantu elder to propound the metaphysical and religious ideas of his people. This is, for instance, what the blind sage philosopher Ogotomelli did in conversation with Dogon specialist Marcel Griaule. In the

1980s, Tempels' book was criticized for belonging to the field of ethnophilosophy. 'Bantu Philosophy' received much of the general criticism that has been uttered by African philosophers, such as Hountondji, about this sub-field of African philosophy (Appiah 1998). Hountondji put away Tempels' 'Bantu Philosophy' as a community or ethnophilosophy that, in his mind, was not a real philosophy, because it had its roots in ethnography. Therefore, the book was not a critical reflection of individual Bantu, such as sage philosophers, on their culture (1983:142-143).

The statesman and poet Leopold Senghor, another founding father of Négritude, was a lot more positive about 'Bantu Philosophy' than his colleague Césaire. Senghor believed in a so-called *Civilization of the Universal* based on the contributions of all distinct civilizations (Senghor 1998:440). This civilization departs from the belief that no culture is a *tabula rasa*, which is how European colonisers judged Africans (Senghor 1998). Instead, all cultures are both rooted and uprooted hence open to influences of other ones (Senghor 1970:21). To bring the positive aspects of all cultures together, African cultures should first overcome their crisis of consciousness caused by their assimilation into French European cultures, because of their colonial rule in Africa. Négritude was, therefore, philosophy and movement to raise black consciousness by emphasizing Africa's unique positive cultural characteristics, such as black being beautiful and black culture as being rooted in an intuitive reasoning understanding of the world (Senghor 1964:11). In the 1930s, Senghor already mentioned that Négritude was founded on the notion of vital force in men, animals, vegetables and minerals and that the philosophy aimed to increase one's force in the process of becoming a person within the community (Senghor 1993:19). In 1939, Senghor wrote an essay titled 'What the Black man contributes' ('Ce que l'homme noir apporte') in which he discussed the production of African art through the lens of the concept of vital force. Not surprisingly, therefore, Senghor read Tempels' 'Bantu Philosophy' with great enthusiasm. He regarded him as a kindred spirit in the study of the Bantu ontology of vital force as one of the positive characteristics of African cultures.

Alexis Kagame (1956, 1976) is an African linguist who followed in the footprints of Tempels. Kagame was enthusiastic about Tempels' idea of a Bantu philosophy but criticized him for his weak scientific methodology. He then researched the existence of a Bantu-wide philosophy based on a linguistic analysis of Bantu languages. His Bantu Rwandan philosophy of being is based on two basic assumptions. These are first Bantu ontology consists of four categories that are all created from the same root *ntu*, which refers to being and the idea of vital force. Secondly, the assumption is that all Bantu linguistic categories can be reduced to four basic concepts: *muntu* (being of intelligence), *kintu* (being without intelligence), *hantu* (expression of time and place), *kuntu* (centralization of all notions related to modifica-

tions of the quantity or quality of the being in itself). Other scholars, who were positive about Tempels' work were John S. Mbiti (1970) and to a certain extent Henry Odera Oruka (1990).

Mbiti is closest to Tempels when he clarifies the African concept of time in the context of human life. He makes a distinction between the Swahili terms *sasa* (the actual time, past and future) and *zamani* (the unlimited past). When a person is born, he moves from *zamani* into *sasa* time. When he gets older, he moves gradually from *sasa* to *zamani*. After a person has physically died, he remains in the *sasa* period as a so-called 'living dead' until the last person who knew him also dies. He then enters the *zamani* time in a state of collective immortality in which the person is welcomed in the world of the unknown spirits. Mbiti's findings of the living dead correspond with those of Tempels, who wrote that the Bantu believe that a person continues to influence the living after a person has passed away. A person is only dead ('heelemaal dood') when the human being is no longer in connection with the living. In Tempels terms: 'a person's life force is then so weak that he can no longer influence another person' (Tempels 1946:35, 212-213).

The Keynan philosopher Odera Oruka acknowledged the 'progressive' nature of Tempels' work in the sense that he turned himself against his predecessors, such as Lévy-Bruhl (1923 [1922 in French. Trans. LA Clare]). The anthropologist-philosopher Lévy-Bruhl believed in the illogical and primitive mentality of Africans. However, he also criticized Tempels and his follower Mbiti for focusing only on what he called 'Ethno' - or 'Folk philosophy'. In his view, both presumed that philosophy in Africa was a collective activity, which consisted of local customs, practices and cosmologies expressed by a folk philosopher. As an example, he mentioned the blind Dogon elder Ogotomëlli in the work of Marcel Griaule ([Orig. 1948] 1965). Oruka, inspired by the Benin philosopher Hountondji's argument that philosophy in Africa is also an individual critical expression, developed what he called 'sage philosophy'. In his view, this philosophy consists of 'the expressed thoughts of wise men and women in any given community' (Oruka 1990:28). A sage is thus someone with his or her independent critical objection to African folk beliefs; a person who has thoughts that transcend the communal folk wisdom. Unlike Hountondji a.o., Oruka believed that African philosophy exists within the oral traditions of Africa. These traditions thus do not have to be written down to count as philosophy. Africa has sage philosophers, such as Socrates, who critically reflect upon the prevailing ideas (and who was forced to live in exile, which he refused by drinking from the cup of poison). For their safety, at times sage philosophers at best demonstrate their wisdom by remaining silent. Nevertheless, Oruka aimed to find the individual sages within African communities. In dialogue with them, he aimed to seek their reflection on their community's

culture. This approach differs from that of missionaries and anthropologists, ethnologists, ethnophilosophers, and oral historians. They aim to find the community's consensus about cultural customs, beliefs and ideas.

The Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe further summarised the critique on Tempels by African philosophers. Nevertheless, he is also sympathetic towards the Belgian missionary when it comes to his personal development. Mudimbe wrote: 'While attempting to "civilize", Tempels found his moment of truth in an encounter with people of whom he thought himself to be their master. He thus became a student of those he was supposed to teach and sought to comprehend their version of the truth. During this encounter, there was a discrete moment of revelation, which radically complicated the convictions of the civilizer' (Mudimbe 1988:154).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Franciscan priest Placide Tempels wrote an influential book titled 'Bantoe Filosofie' that still holds value today. A correct interpretation of this work, which Tempels wrote after living and working for years in the Belgian Congo, is, however, complicated. This is caused by the book's intricate historical context and its subjective translations.

Tempels can best be understood as a missionary, who after living and working for years in the Belgian Congo, was no longer convinced that Christian proselytization could be effective without any investment in gaining an in-depth understanding of the philosophical and religious ideas and customs of the Africans he encountered. His interest in the Bantu people of Katanga paved the way for a more human and subjective missionary approach. Tempels empathy (*Einfühlung*) towards the Bantu people unites friend and foe in their judgment that his 'Bantoe Filosofie' was a step forward in the missionary history of Africa and the first stepping stone in the efflorescent academic field of African Philosophy.

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