

THE PITFALLS  
OF BEING DIFFERENT

*“... For it is not true  
that man’s work is finished  
that we have nothing to do in this world  
that we are parasites in this world  
that we should merely put ourselves in step with this world*

*but man’s work has just begun  
and man still must conquer  
every hindrance obstructing his fervor  
and no race holds a monopoly on beauty,  
intelligence, strength  
and there is room for all in this conquest  
and we now know  
that the sun revolves around our earth  
illuminating that area which our will alone has fixed  
and that every star falls from heaven to earth  
upon our limitless command”<sup>1</sup>*

Translated by R. Scott Walker

<sup>1</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, new ed., Présence africaine, Paris, 1971, pp. 139-41.

It is with these virile words of the Martinique poet Aimé Césaire, an expression of assurance regained, testimony to a self-confidence once stolen but then reconquered, that I would like to open my remarks.\*

Africa was present at the last great international philosophical meeting two years ago in Montreal. I would like here to illustrate the meaning behind this presence and to explain the reasons why we wanted to be present, in order to avoid facile misunderstandings which could have weighty consequences.

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We are not, or not really, looking for international approbation, for we have learned over the centuries how dangerous it can be for one man to wait for another to provide him with a certificate of humanity. Nor are we seeking a rivalry on their own territory with Europe, the Old World, and its historic outgrowth, modern America. For despite our real or imagined romanticism, despite our determination over a long period of recent history to rehabilitate, defend and illustrate our unjustly denigrated cultures, we are sufficiently lucid to know that on the precise terrain of scientific and technological performance, historic Europe, in the broad sense which we just indicated, is today, and until further notice, almost unbeatable. In particular in the specific area of philosophy, understood as a theoretical discipline taken together with other disciplines such as astronomy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology which are commonly called the social and human sciences, we are aware that for the person who might seek to establish an international awards list of significant works and authors, contemporary Africa could offer but very little, and even nothing.

“How many philosophers are there in Africa?”, I am often asked, in a tone of voice more ironic than truly interrogative. I have always invariably answered “None”, putting myself on the same level as my questioners. I think it necessary to follow through all the way with this answer and to refuse obstinately a certain type of question which would tend to place historic Europe and Africa

\* This article is the text of an address given at the closing session of the 17th International Philosophy Congress in Montreal, August 1983.

in parallel from the viewpoint of their respective achievements in a particular cultural sphere; a type of question which would, in a more general sense, enclose us in a sterile comparison of two cultural totalities, based on criteria which are proper only to one of them. No, we should not compare ourselves with Europe, and we certainly should not seek to measure ourselves up against Europe in an area which it has itself created historically. "No", said Frantz Fanon strongly, in the same sense. "No, we do not wish to catch up with anyone. But we want to walk always, night and day, in the company of man, of every man".<sup>2</sup>

Having said this, and even working with the most unfavorable hypothesis possible, admitting that we in Africa can lay claim to no great name, no decisive work in the realm of academic philosophy (which we will see to be not exactly the case) in our schools and universities today this particular discipline called philosophy is being taught alongside other disciplines. Both within and without teaching institutions, a discussion continues and research is developing, both of which derive precisely from this discipline. This is attested to by a certain number of articles, books and diverse publications. A real philosophical activity is developing in this way, headed by a mass of teachers, researchers, students or other relatively obscure intellectuals, but its theoretical fecundity cannot be measured by the ultimately hardly reliable standard of worldly renown and success.

Even if we were to say that there are no philosophers in Africa, it would only be a manner of speaking, a way of responding in some manner to such an evident provocation, that there is no "great philosopher" in our countries, to borrow a too-facile expression which no one, to my knowledge has ever been able to define. But the essence lies elsewhere. The essence is this vital discussion, this theoretical research being conducted by hundreds of minor philosophers, the philosophical literature which is resulting therefrom and which each day is enriched by new discoveries. The essence is the place of this discussion within the ensemble of our cultural life, in an Africa which is today confronted by so many diverse problems.

Now it happens that within this discussion over the last several

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, Maspero, Paris, 1961, p. 241.

decades, the very question which was the topic of the Montreal Congress had gradually assumed an important place, that is the question of the relationship between philosophy and culture, the question of knowing whether every culture bears a philosophy *sui generis*, whether philosophy should in this sense be perceived as a system of beliefs consubstantial with this collective heritage which is called culture or whether it should be thought of as a form of breaking away from the spiritual inheritance of the community.

And this is precisely the reason which determined our presence at the Congress. We went because we wanted to see how these problems which face us in our particular sphere of existence were arising in other cultures, to discover what positions had become clear in the course of discussions which had taken place elsewhere, what conclusions we might even be able to draw for ourselves. In sum we went above all in order to learn. But at the same time, and precisely for this reason, we came enriched with experiences which we were prepared to share, enriched not only by our successes but also our failures, by our knowledge and our ignorance, by our accumulated riches and our poverty, in order to inform as objectively as possible, to respond as soberly as possible, but also as precisely as possible, to the question which a certain number of inquisitive minds are necessarily asking: what is happening in Africa in the philosophical realm? And in particular, what is the relationship on that continent between philosophy and culture?

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That an African philosophy exists is a thesis which arose abruptly some forty years ago in our theoretical field and which still today occupies the principal area of this field. It is not entirely by chance that this thesis was "launched" by a little book by a Belgian missionary who was at that time totally unknown in philosophical circles and almost equally unknown to anthropologists who had heard of him only through a few non-scholarly articles. When Father Placid Tempels published *La philosophie bantoue*<sup>3</sup> in 1945 in Elisabethville, now Lubumbashi in Zaïre, the Flemish Francis-

<sup>3</sup> R.P. Placide Tempels, O.F.M., *La Philosophie bantoue*, translated from the Dutch by Antoine Rubbens, preface by E. Possoz, Lovania, Elisabethville, 1945.

can, who had lived in the colony for twelve years, had published only four brief ethnographic articles on the words for numbers, numbering gestures and cosmological representations in two Bantu tribes which he had begun to know.<sup>4</sup> There followed five polemical articles which appeared in a local newspaper, *L'essor du Congo*, which made him a veritable subversive in the eyes of the colonial government and the most conservative segment of the Belgian community residing in the Congo. Without questioning the at that time universally accepted legitimacy of the colonial situation, these articles did argue for more social justice within the system and for a softening and a humanizing of the methods of colonization.<sup>5</sup> Tempels had published nothing at that time in the philosophical realm other than the first chapters in the original Flemish of *La philosophie bantoue* itself in successive instalments in 1944 and 1945 in two local periodicals, *Aequatoria* and *Band*, published respectively in Coquilhatville (today Mbandaka) and Léopoldville (now Kinshasa).<sup>6</sup>

And this was not by chance, I say, for a professional philosopher would certainly have used the word “philosophy” with a great deal more precaution. Tempels simply meant that an African way of thinking existed, rich, complex and no doubt different from Western thinking, but no less coherent. He called this philosophy solely to denote this coherence and at the same time to indicate what seemed to him to be the fundamental aspect of this form of thinking relative to all Bantu cultural life.

It is in fact possible to maintain that, strictly speaking, the Belgian missionary had no intention of saying that a philosophy of the Bantu tribes existed, in the subjective possessive sense, as most of his disciples were to do without distinction. The Flemish

<sup>4</sup> These were four articles published in Dutch in *Kongo-Overzee*, a review published in Antwerp, in 1935, 1936 and 1938. These articles were translated by A.J. Smet in *Placide Tempels, Plaidoyer pour la philosophie bantoue et quelques autres textes*. Cours et documents 6, Catholic theology faculty of Kinshasa, 1982, mimeograph, 100 pp.

<sup>5</sup> These articles are: “La philosophie de la rébellion” (8/31/44), “Justice sociale” (2/15/45), “L’administration des indigènes” (8/17/45), “A propos des mariages indigènes” (9/1/45), “Pour la protection légale du mariage de nos indigènes” (11/3/45). They were reprinted in whole or in part in Antoine Rubbens, ed. *Dettes de guerre*, Elisabethville, 1945.

<sup>6</sup> See details in A.J. Smet, “Le père Placide Tempels et son œuvre publiée”, in *Revue africaine de théologie*, t. 1, 1977, n. 1, pp. 77-128.

title of his essay, *Bantoe-filosofie*, could just as easily be taken to mean “philosophical reflections on the Bantus”, where philosophy would no longer appear as a given reality *within* the culture being studied but as an analytic grid, a model for interpretation freely chosen by the analyst.

Tempels, true enough, was never as clear as that. The chosen model for interpretation had to be justified, and that could only be done, he thought, by presupposing the existence of philosophy within Bantu thinking itself, by projecting to the heart of this culture figures which, whether real or imaginary, could at least establish the accuracy of his own methodological options and remove from them any appearance of gratuitousness. This is the source of the equivocal impression, which really exists in the Flemish and then Dutch text. The French translation of *Bantoe-filosofie* tends to eliminate the unclarity, already in the title, by retaining only the author’s claims of objectivity and by interpreting in this sense expressions which could equally well signify something else in the original text.

Chance determined that this French translation was to be better known than the Dutch original, published in its entirety only the following year.<sup>7</sup> The mistranslation has been perpetuated ever since, also surely because Tempels, hesitant at first, must have then been quite pleased finally that his translator had made a choice for him by taking a step, or even a leap, which he himself had not dared take. African ethnophilosophy is thus not simply an inheritor of Tempels; it is equally an inheritor of the translator of *La philosophie bantoue*, a lawyer by the name of Antoine Rubbens, even less cognizant in the area of philosophy than Tempels and consequently with even less reason to be bothered by terminological scruples.

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Since that time the tendency has prevailed among Africanists to treat African modes of thinking as so many types of philosophies. As soon as *La philosophie bantoue* was published there quickly

<sup>7</sup> *Bantoe-filosofie (Oorspronkelijke tekst)*, Kongo-Overzee Bibliotheek, 4, De Sikkel, Antwerp, 1946.

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arose a reaction on the part of what could be called professional philosophers who called for more prudence and methodological rigor in the use of the word "philosophy". Many writings, due initially to Europeans but then increasingly to Africans themselves, gave birth to what today is a critique of ethnophilosophy, a critique of the works of a cultural anthropology devoted to the definition of the "philosophy" of so-called primitive peoples.

I must point out, in order to avoid any misunderstanding and to situate myself clearly, that I have myself produced writings which tend toward such a critique as have other African colleagues such as Kwasi Wiredu from Ghana, Ebeneze Njoh-Mouelle, Marcian Towa, Fabian Eboussi-Boulaga from Cameroon and many others. In these writings I have noted to what extent it would be disastrous for the African of today to refuse to think under the pretext that his ancestors had already done it for him; there is consequently a necessity for those who would be philosophers, faced with new problems which their ancestors could not have anticipated, to articulate here and now a responsible thinking which integrates and then goes beyond both the millenary inheritance of our peoples and what, in the international cultural tradition, is called philosophy. I especially attempted to demonstrate within the enormous ethnophilosophical and more generally anthropological literature the harmful effects of the unanimist presupposition, the tenacious illusion which tends to attribute to so-called primitive societies a perfect unity of belief, a flawless unanimity, as though within a society everyone is always in agreement with everyone else. Against this unanimism and its theoretical, ideological and political manifestations, against any reductive and exaggeratedly simplifying interpretation of non-Western cultures, I called attention to the virtue of pluralism and of vital contradiction as the real motive force for the spiritual history of our peoples and as a value to be preserved and promoted in our intellectual and political life of today.

At the same time and in the same effort, I felt it necessary to denounce what seemed to me to be the extraversion of theoretical thinking and, more generally, of the scientific literature of modern Africa, namely the fact that the work of our researchers is so often destined on a priority basis to a non-African audience and that consequently this work is oriented, positively or negatively, by the

expectations of this audience, even to the choice of topics and problems, trying if necessary to convince the audience that we too have a philosophy. The most urgent task, from this point of view, seemed to me to be to liberate the contradiction which exists within our peoples and, consequently, among our intellectuals and researchers, to create an inner space for free discussion, rigorous and demanding, far removed from the obligatory formalities of an imaginary dialogue with the Other.<sup>8</sup>

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As might be expected, the critique of ethnophilosophy, rather briefly summarized, was in turn to provoke a vigorous counter-critique, based in part on simple misunderstandings, in part on the real difficulties which required, after all, a readjustment or at least a clarification of certain arguments contained in the initial criticism. There is no room here to describe this new discussion, even briefly. Let us note only that essentially the alternative remains that either our philosophy is entirely behind us, buried in our historic cultures, and our sole task today then is to exhume it, reconstitute it and defend it with all our means; or else we assume here and now our responsibility to the history of today and tomorrow, and then we will be unable to escape the obligation of thinking new thoughts, responding to the immense and, in certain respects, yet unstated problems which are being posed directly or indirectly by the present drama of our societies.

In this new context, and if we leave aside the flowery rhetoric with which it loves to adorn itself, the counter-critique of the critique of ethnophilosophy functions as the necessary reminder of an age-old evident truth, namely the impossibility of something being absolutely new in the realm of thought and the necessity for every human project, even and especially if it intends to be innovative, to root itself in the solid bases of a tradition.

<sup>8</sup> On all these points see Paulin J. Hountondji, *Sur la "philosophie africaine"*, Maspero, Paris, 1977, reprinted by Clé, Yaoundé. See by the same author "Que peut la philosophie?", in *Présence africaine*, no. 119, 3e trimestre, 1981, pp. 47-71; "Occidentalisme, élitisme: réponse à deux critiques", in *Recherche, pédagogie et culture*, no. 56, Jan.-March 1982, pp. 58-67; "Langues africaines et philosophie: l'hypothèse relativiste", in *Les études philosophiques*, No 4/1982; and various articles in *Diogenes*, *Présence africaine*, *Travail et société*, *Unesco-Information*, etc.



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Aimé Césaire already said very much the same thing twenty-seven years ago at the first international congress of black writers and artists. “The shortest path to the future is the one which goes by way of a deeper understanding of the past”. Perhaps we should add simply: provided that this deeper understanding of the past does not become a simple rumination, a pleased satisfaction with or a resignation to the present, but that it be guided by an actual project, a clear vision of the present and the future.

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From this point of view, once the dangers of traditional ethnophilosophy have been understood, once the fragility of its theoretical and methodological bases have been recognized along with what I would term the pitfalls of being different, once our theoretical horizon has been liberated for new scientific tasks, then we can re-read Tempels today, and with him all the rest of the ethnophilosophical literature, looking therein for something other than what it had thought itself capable of offering us: not some sort of philosophy buried in our collective subconscious, some system of beliefs through which we should at all costs, and forever, identify ourselves, but elements for an objective determination of the constants of our cultures in view of a critical and free evaluation of this millenary heritage.

We can read with a new eye and appreciate our forefather, the late Alexis Kagame, who died December 2 1981 in Nairobi, author of, among other writings, *The Bantu-Rwanda Philosophy of Being*<sup>9</sup> and *Comparative Bantu Philosophy*.<sup>10</sup> Kagame accepted the hypothesis of an almost absolute linguistic relativity, convinced that every language bears within itself a complete philosophy, a fully articulated system of thought. He desperately sought to extract from a grammatical analysis of Bantu languages the elements of an ontology specific to these languages. But even with these very excesses, at the theoretical dead-ends to which this indefensible relativism led him, he still opened a path to fruitful research by calling attention to a now undeniable fact, the constraints imposed

<sup>9</sup> Alexis Kagame, *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être*, Académie royale des sciences coloniales, Bruxelles, 1956.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, *La philosophie bantu comparée*, Éditions Présence africaine, Paris, 1976.

on even the most ambitious discourse by the language in which it is expressed, constraints which the Rwanda priest strangely wished to transform into a philosophical system but which we today can think of simply as constraints, that is as limits which must be surpassed after careful and methodical identification.

We can re-read Kwame Nkrumah, and in particular, among the many works attributed to him, the curious text entitled *Consciencism*;<sup>11</sup> Nkrumah also believed in the existence of a “traditional African philosophy” and by integrating Islamic and Euro-Christian contributions, sought to create on this base a new philosophical and ideological synthesis which could be unanimously espoused by all the sons and daughters of revolutionary Africa. Nkrumah thereby dangerously made unanimity a value to be promoted in the political and scientific life of contemporary Africa, but, because of these very errors, he also stated in clear terms the now inevitable problem of the social function of philosophy and, more generally, of theoretical thinking, the problem of its direct or indirect relationship with politics.

We can read an author like Senghor with a new eye and, going beyond his sometimes excessive and so often contested theses, we can appreciate the important contributions of a man who, since the 1930's, has known how to define in his own manner the ever current problem of our cultural identity. Senghor, who in 1939 wrote, “Emotion is Negro just as reason is Hellenic”,<sup>12</sup> and who sought to define what seemed to him to be the Negro difference through other equally abusive simplifications of the same type, was no doubt wrong in wanting to make a theory of what could have meaning only as poetic truth, and transpose it into the everyday prose of our struggles. But he also had the courage to question the constants of our millenary civilizations, thereby opening up a field of reflection which is still topical and which he in fact continued to explore through his well-known studies and through a long process of self-correction, a patient self-criticism which is still too little recognized for having unfortunately remained too often implicit.

<sup>11</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, Heinemann, London, 1964.

<sup>12</sup> Léopold S. Senghor, “Ce que l'homme noir apporte” (1939), reprinted in *Liberté I: négritude et humanisme*, Seuil, Paris, 1964.

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Through these authors and many others as well whom we received initially with such hesitation, through these works with which we have retained the most positive of relationships, we can today re-read our very cultures, studying them patiently and methodically to discover on the one hand the fertile contradictions, the major alternatives, the historical choices which have made of them what they are today, but also their material and spiritual permanency and constancy, that entire complex which forms our common heritage and with which we must be able to maintain a critical and free relationship here and now.

At the same time we can re-read without embarrassment the history of other cultures, particularly the history of Western philosophy itself, recognizing precisely, out of a simple concern for truth, the historical debt of this culture towards a civilization of our continent, the Egypt of the Pharaohs, appreciating fully the contribution of one or another great African, Saint Augustine, for example, or Tertullian and others, the contribution more generally of African peoples and of all peoples of the earth. For no people is alone, and all work together, directly or indirectly, to give each one its particular appearance. We can re-learn to think of the successes and failures, the dramas and struggles of other cultures, as being our own dramas and struggles. In a word, through the history of our cultures, through their present greatness and misery and through our own sufferings, we can rediscover the adventure of a single and same humanity which has forever been seeking itself and which today more than ever must re-learn solidarity.

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