

# Signposts for a Theory of the Encounter Between Rationalities

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In the topic 'an encounter between rationalities' I can discern two aspects: a postulate and a problem.

The postulate concerns the existence in the history of different societies and civilizations of rationalities that experts in the various academic disciplines relating to society and humanity, as well as philosophy, will be better able to define than I can. I have preferred to focus on the problem of this encounter of ours and wish to contribute to its clarification some theoretical ideas by way of pointers, or signposts.

The notion of an encounter leads us to at least three meanings:

- a prospective meaning, where the encounter is merely a project to be realized;
- a current meaning, where the encounter is identified with the experience as it is taking place here and now, or as it is presented; and finally
- an historical meaning, where the encounter refers to past experiences.

I shall restrict myself, if I may, to this third meaning, which covers human experiences that are more numerous and rich, and academic and philosophical areas that are more firmly based, than the previous meanings for the direction of my enquiry.

In the long, fertile history of humanity we can distinguish, first, the peaceful form of encounter as illustrated by populations of traders, Phoenicians and Arabs for example. In contrast to this peaceful form there is secondly a violent form of encounter, two related modes of which are familiar to us: the war mode and the mode I characterize as imperialist; from the latter, whose various incarnations are exemplified by modern colonial occupations, I shall borrow for analysis an illustration of the inequality produced by imperialism: that of medical tradition.

As regards method, any attempt to understand and explain the process of these encounters, their successes or failures, is such that it will allow us to determine some of the properties of the rationalities at work in these encounters.

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### The peaceful form of encounter

By peaceful form I mean the totality of the processes by which human societies, without organized and fatal violence, and so in social or civil peace, whether on an individual or collective basis, carry out relatively equal exchange. At particular places and times trading populations have organized these exchanges in a quite exemplary manner.

What rationalities inspired and motivated these processes of peaceful exchange that were so egalitarian? The plural comes into play here because in each case it is not one rationality but a group of rationalities that were at work, of which the best organized and most formalized constituted a system. The equality that characterized the encounter processes is chiefly explained by economic complementarity and secondarily by ideology. We can identify two types of economic complementarity: an external complementarity when local products are exchanged, either mainly by barter or less frequently for money or tribute, for products that were of equal value in the various societies; and an internal complementarity when, in the market as both a physical space of peace and an economic space, the exchange of goods was global and reciprocal, involving all kinds of actors.

#### *The case of lineage societies*

In lineage societies like those of the pre-colonial Ivory Coast we in fact find three structures for peaceful exchange.

In the very early markets, as historical studies show, for instance in Gbalo, a northern section of the Bete region around Daloa, the spaces for exchange that the great men or strong men in the society established in order to weld them together, with long-distance trade, were spaces with three characteristics. The first was that the market was launched with a celebration: the demarcation of the space was carried out ritually, the *dodolowri*, or lord (*lowri*) of the land (*dodo*), officiated by sacrificing an ox; musicians performed, people danced, ate and feasted. The second was that exchanges were both economic (exchanges of subsistence commodities) and cultural (exchanges of promises of marriage, loans or friendship . . .). The third characteristic was that the new space for exchange was part of a week-by-week schedule of markets that operated at the level of an economic, linguistic and cultural region.

On the southern edge of the forest, between the land on the one hand and the lagoons and the Atlantic on the other, there operated and was organized predominantly, at the same time as trade based on currency (salt, gold, perle d'aigri, manilla) or tribute, barter among the fishing people (Ahizi, Alladian, Avikam, Ehotile), who supplied fish to the farmers inland (Odjukru, Atchan, Aboure . . .) in exchange for food commodities (taro, yam, rice, cassava).

On the northern edge of the forest between the grasslands on the one hand, where the Malinke and Senufo lived, and the forest on the other, the habitat of the Dan, Koueni, Baoule and Wan, exchanges were based either on tribute that the warring classes and intellectual or religious classes extorted from the peasants, or for the

most part on the south–north trade in cola seeds or the north–south trade in slaves and cotton cloths, using iron currency (*sombe* or *sompe* in Koueni and *wrugu* in Bete).

### *The case of state societies*

In medieval Sudan, what was the traders' economic rationale? Muslim merchants of Berber or Arab origin were after gold, salt, copper and slaves. To this purely economic relationship we must add those of political economy: relations connected with gold, for instance, whose production fell within the religious powers political leaders managed to negotiate with peasant producers from the Middle Ages; relations connected with routes, whose security was safeguarded by the monarchical states, routes that made these exchanges possible; finally, relations connected with the hospitality of the peoples, among whom the merchants found friendships and often wives.

We can infer that these exchanges were relatively egalitarian from the long-distance exchanges that black animist peoples carried on with Muslim, Berber and Arab groups. Indeed when the scholarly and pious Mansa, Kankou Moussa, travelled east in the early 14th century (1324–5), there were three reasons behind his pilgrimage. First and foremost he was seeking approval for his rule from the new religion of salvation: Islam. Then there was the army (8000 to 60,000 men have been mentioned) the Mansa surrounded himself with and the popular support that supplied him with the resources crucial to this religious expedition. And finally there was the politico-economic prestige from having accumulated and from handing out in friendly countries (Libya and Egypt) gold in the form of both treasure and currency.

### **The violent form of encounter**

In the violent form of encounter at least two main modes can be distinguished: the warring and the imperialist modes. What characterizes this form and these modes is the establishment of a non-egalitarian type of exchange based on non-complementary economies.

### *The war mode*

I call a mode of violence war when the military apparatus, which is a well-organized and more efficient technical apparatus, is capable of taking war to the enemy and producing the results anticipated without suffering perceptible damage. This was the case with the early slave-trading states, which were in the habit of carrying out sporadic raids and inflicting massive damage, in terms of carrying off captives, on defenceless farmers and pastoralists, who had no means of resisting. An example was the imperial Bambara state in Segou in the 18th century.

*The imperialist mode*

While the war mode of violence is chiefly technical in nature, the imperialist mode by contrast is socio-political and cultural. Indeed the colonial occupations representing imperialism embodied a long-term political project whose completion consisted of several phases: a military phase, a political phase and a cultural phase. The military phase, which ended with conquest, ushered in an unequal situation based on an obvious organizational and technical disparity; in the political phase the victorious state exercised administrative, economic and social control over the conquered peoples and state; it was in the cultural phase that the imperial power imposed its language, moral code and even its religion on the subservient peoples with the help of a minority of assimilated natives. The way this inequality was established can be illustrated using the example of medical tradition.

*An illustration of imperialist inequality: medical tradition*

A medical tradition consists of at least three rationalities: a cultural rationality that involves a cosmological and religious representation of health and sickness; a botanical rationality involving knowledge of plant history and varieties; a therapeutic rationality that assumes, in addition to the therapists' skills, knowledge of the properties of plants and the social use of these properties for healing purposes.

In the history of Africa in general, and that of the Ivory Coast in particular, three main medical traditions developed: the animist tradition, which had its roots in pre-historic times; Muslim traditions of Arab and Berber origin going back to the Middle Ages, both of which developed into folk medicines that spread among the villages and were practised by the vast mass of people; and finally modern medicine, which came from Europe with imperialism and colonialism.

Three basic actions worked together to establish the inequality that characterizes the African medical tradition in the imperialist context.

The first was military action. With the military victory that conquered all African societies, states and peoples, 19th-century industrial capitalist Europe imposed its domination even in the medical arena and subsequently made the transition to modernity possible.

This domination was effected in at least four ways: first by subordinating, then by centralizing, thirdly by marginalizing and fourthly by discriminating. Indeed it was by force that the imperialist states dragged most African societies into the money economy and, by the wholesale subjugation of those societies, compelled Africans to pay a capitation tax.

The new economy resulted in two principal effects whose consequences are still felt today; on one hand a break in the ancient connection with the cosmos, the loss of primitive astrophysical knowledge and belief by the dominated in the astrology of the dominant; and on the other, the desacralization of nature and ignorance of the plants that had treated and cured their ancestors.

Political centralization gave chiefdom, then the state they did not have, to the

lineage societies of the conquered lands, and at the same time it gave the monarchical states the same potentially republican status.

By marginalizing, imperialism established the Europeans and the assimilated natives as the main, visible population, even though they were in the minority, whereas the great mass of the indigenous population was relegated to the periphery of the space as a secondary, almost invisible people.

Finally, paternalistic discrimination meant that the whole of African medicine was set against modern European medicine. In the colonies European doctors were initially military ones attached to the conquering forces. African medical and para-medical staff (doctors, vets, pharmacists, midwives) were in an auxiliary position and were trained in a medical college.

On the African side, confronting the military doctor, there operated a figure that imperialist literature called (wrongly in my view and with the aim of discrediting him) the witch-doctor or healer. It was only shortly before the independence movements that African medical personnel obtained the right to be trained in a university faculty of medicine and receive the title MD.

After military action and political action there eventually came cultural action. In the task of promoting public health that the authorities assigned to the cultural domain, imperialism imposed its linguistic, moral, religious framework on the whole of society via the schoolchildren it attracted. This explains the preponderance of European languages, especially French and English, as well as the monotheisms that came from the home countries of the empire (Roman Catholicism, Methodism, Anglicanism . . .).

From the anthropological point of view, studies show that patients have recourse to several medical traditions and are not restricted to treatment in accordance with only one tradition, as modern practice requires. Sometimes they abandon the traditional system in order to seek an interpretation of the disease and relief, if not cure, in modern medicine, or else they take the reverse route. Sometimes, as if they subscribe simultaneously to all the sources of health in their environment, patients accept treatment, sometimes over many years, from other sources and systems while at the same time staying with one particular system and its personnel.

In both these cases the meeting of rationalities is not only a social and historical phenomenon, an activity of communities, and particularly European and African communities, but it seems to be a psychological phenomenon produced by individuals, a drama, a tragedy even, which in the case of serious illnesses like AIDS ends in death.

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And so we can gain access to rationalities either globally, through culture, or by fields, which is, in the case of African medical tradition, the botanical way and the therapeutic way.

In all these cases, at least three signposts should be followed for research and academic knowledge in this area:

- *the signpost of epistemology*: without having recourse to this critical discipline our knowledge remains empirical, practical and blind, even if it is rich and prolific;

- *the signpost of history*: there is no academic knowledge that is not knowledge *in* history, through history, historical understanding. Just as epistemological thought is also inscribed in history (the history of individuals, social classes, nations), in the same way the history of the encounter between rationalities, as experienced by groups and peoples, needs to be set within the general history of humanity.
- *the signpost of typology*: I approached the study of my topic by proceeding to examine what I see as the types of encounter (peaceful encounter, encounter in conflict or warring encounter). First the analysis of these types must be carried further and secondly this analysis can and must be enriched by the invention or discovery of other types.

Though theory is the destination of our efforts, though it is our horizon and determines our routes and strategy, it is when history, epistemology, typology, as *signposts pointing in the same direction*, have been adequately explored that theory will then have matured and research can reap the harvest from it.

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