



# **From the hermeneutics of traditions to the history of ideas in the context of orality<sup>1</sup>**

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This article will be less a matter of tracing an intellectual itinerary than an effort to bring to light the implications of an intuition that has developed in a circular way in the context of philosophy in Africa. This will include an analysis of the philosophy of culture and development, theory and praxis, tradition and modernity, the hermeneutics of traditions and the history of ideas in the context of orality.

My early research had endeavored to understand the hermeneutical philosophy as it was read by Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Interpretation, in theory and practice, seemed to me to be strongly connected with the idea of tradition. Tradition, this space of transmission, is not only the place where interpretation is deployed, but it is also and above all the subject and object of interpretation. The “I” who reads and the text that I read not only belong to tradition, but we constitute and continue

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1 Translated from French into English by Dr. Dia Mbwangi Diafwila.

tradition. Tradition is neither behind the text nor behind me, it is in me and in the text. Tradition is what determines the question and the answer within the framework of interpretation. It follows from this that the idea of tradition and that of destiny are not separate from one another. Fate, understood as the tension between the past and the future, the given and the task, the already-there and the not-yet, remains the horizon of all the interpretation of tradition and draws the outlines of a vision of the world, in so far as this is the condition of possibility of any reading of the past and of any construction of a new world<sup>2</sup>.

This specific problem of the reading of the past in connection with the construction of the world, within the framework of Africa, is the subject of my book entitled "For a philosophy of culture and development"<sup>3</sup>. I attempted to put together two opposing theses that divide contemporary African philosophy. On the one hand we have a philosophy of culture as hermeneutics of the symbols of tradition. This philosophy would allow the African to root his present life in the soil and the soil of his identity. On the other hand, a philosophy of praxis, rationalist and rationalizing, presents itself as the path of obligatory possibility for Africans who want to take part in modern life. It seems to me that an authentic philosophy of culture goes hand in hand with an effective philosophy of revolutionary praxis. Without revolutionary praxis, the philosophy of culture seems pure subjectivism and useless. Without a cultural identity, revolutionary action is without efficiency or direction.

Revolutionary action in Africa today is not defined in terms of class struggle or civil war, but in terms of combating underdevelop-

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2 OKOLO, B. O (1979). Tradition et destin. Essai sur la philosophie herméneutique de Paul Ricoeur, Martin Heidegger et Hans-Georg Gadamer, Thèse, Université de Lubumbashi.

3 OKOLO, B. O. (1986). Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement. Recherches d'herméneutique et de praxis africaines, Kinshasa, Presses Universitaires du Zaïre.

ment. What is development? In my opinion an exact answer is only possible when we consider not only the problem of development in relation to a problem related to a given time and a geographically located space. Development is rooted in the universal and eternal deep aspirations of man. Development, as a temporal and geographically located phenomenon, loses its acuteness. It receives its full significance from the space defined by modernity.

In Africa today, modernity implies development and vice versa. Development seems to be the current face of modernity in Africa. Often, here as elsewhere, modernity is opposed to tradition. To opt for modernity is to turn away from tradition. To take advantage of tradition is to refuse the benefits of modernity. This opposition is based on a naive conception of tradition and modernity. It is ignorant of their essential being and their profound meaning.

What is tradition? What is modernity? I think that the definition of a concept does not go without the definition of the other. I would like to show that modernity is a projection of a finality resulting from tradition and that tradition is only a continuation of the enunciation of modernity. Modernity springs from tradition and tradition ends with modernity. This assertion can be demonstrated in two steps. The first stage presents the modernity of tradition. The second stage examines the tradition of modernity.

### **1. The modernity of tradition**

The modernity of tradition means first of all that the question of tradition remains topical and that the quest for modernity goes hand in hand with the questioning of tradition. It also means that from the historical point of view, the horizon of modernity and topicality has always been central to the questioning of tradition. The concept of the modern, as we have just seen, originates in the bourgeois world. The reality it represents is rooted in the dawn of time. In clas-

sical antiquity, modernism was synonymous with civilization, as opposed to barbarism. In the Middle Ages, it meant Christianity as opposed to paganism. Today, it means progress, development against underdevelopment. It is in this context that the problem of tradition has arisen in turn.

In ancient Greece, we find these terms *paradosis* and *paradidomi*. Plato uses them in *The Laws* when he deals with different stages of the formation of the young citizen. Tradition means transmission of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> For Aristotle too, tradition also means the transmission of knowledge coming from the ancients in the form of a myth; the task of philosophy consists in giving them their first truth.<sup>5</sup> In Plato, as in Aristotle, *paradosis* and *paradidomi* are used in a pedagogical sense. It was not the return to the past that interested them, but rather the constitution of an ideal for society.

It is wrong to call the Middle Ages traditionalist. In fact, the Christian Middle Age was built in its beginnings against the tradition considered essentially pagan. Christianity appeared at the beginning as a novelty. It had first to protect itself against the great Greco-Roman culture before attempting a conciliation which in fact succeeded only in the early Middle Ages. Under the inspiration of St. Augustin, that great humanist, the Middle Ages developed an education system based on ancient values but oriented essentially towards the erection of something new: Christianity. The idea of authority which, in the Middle Ages, accompanied the idea of tradition in the scientific, political and religious spheres, referred initially to the idea of excellence and to reason before being connected with the idea of power, which will lead to abuse. The discredit of tradition by the Moderns seems to me to be only a misunderstanding and a pretext. It was thought that tradition and authority in the Middle Ages had no relation to reason and, without regard to the dictatorship of rea-

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4 PLATON, Définitions, 416.

5 ARISTOTE, Métaphysique, 8, 1074 b.

son, it was believed that reason was the guarantee of freedom and progress. Catholics and Protestants did not agree on the meaning to be given to the word tradition: Luther gave it the meaning of the customs and customs of a people, simple human creations in front of the faith and the Holy Scriptures. The Catholic Counter-Reformation, on the other hand, traditionally understood the words and actions of Christ and the Apostles transmitted orally and by the liturgy. It wanted to mark the difference between the apostolic tradition, the singular, and the traditions of the peoples, in the plural. Discrediting tradition is rather an expression of the subjectivity and victory of the bourgeoisie over feudal power.<sup>6</sup> The Renaissance humanists and the Enlightenment seem to me more traditionalist than is believed. They claim to take their knowledge from classical antiquity. Their idea of tradition seems fixed, without dynamism because it also corresponds to an idea of modernity.

The concern for modernity is at the center of the discussion of tradition in the romantic period. The German romantics wanted to build the future with the help of the past. They did not, however, agree either on the idea of modernity or on the idea of tradition. Modernity was sometimes cosmopolitan, sometimes nationalist. Tradition was sometimes medieval Christianity, Greco-Roman antiquity, or simply the culture of the people. Nevertheless, modernity is what, in the case of the Romantics, determines the decision about tradition. And tradition offered the model, the ideal for the construction of the future. When great thinkers like Heidegger, Adorno and Gadamer write about tradition, it is because they want to secure the future of a world threatened by an over-reliance on technology and the leveling of individuals. Heidegger discovers that an authentic tradition is necessarily oriented towards the future. The Gadamerian concept of "the history of efficiency" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) reflects the ontological content of tradition and the relationship between

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<sup>6</sup> BÜRGER, Christa (1980). *Tradition und Subjektivität*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

past and present, tradition and current events<sup>7</sup>. Reinhart Koselleck's significant work, *Vergangene Zukunft* (The Past Future) deploys the historical consciousness between the horizon of expectations and the experiments carried out<sup>8</sup>. Tradition is sought because, in the end, modernity is always seeking itself.

## 2. The tradition of modernity

The concept of tradition has a long history. However, it is the object of a theoretical reflection only with the post-romantic ones like Heidegger, Adorno and Gadamer. The concept of Modern has a long theoretical tradition since its birth. This is the name given to the seventeenth-century thinkers to mark the new turning point in the conception and realization of life. Here, beyond the darkness of the Middle Ages, we wanted to reconnect with Greco-Roman classicism and to reconstruct a new world by taking advantage of the scientific, cultural and political perspectives that were opening up to the values considered fundamental: reason, freedom, tolerance, progress, etc.

In one of his latest works, *Der philosophische diskurs der Moderne* (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity), Habermas lists the philosophical theories that have emerged since the beginning of the concept. He cites Hegel, Nietzsche, Horkheimer, Adorno, Heidegger, Derrida, Bataille, Foucault, not to mention Max Weber, who served as his point of departure. On our part, we can share theories on the

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7 HEIDEGGER, M. (1977). Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 2, Sein und Zeit, Frankfurt, Klostermann (Tradition), p. 27-44, 291; (überlieferung), p. 506-512, 515-518; (Wiederholung): p. 3-5, 408, 448-449, 454-456, 508-512, 516- 518. GADAMER, H.G. (1965). *Wahrheit und Methode*, 2. Auflage, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr. ADORNO, Th. W.(1967). "Thesen über Tradition", in *Ohne Leitbild*. Parva Aesthetica, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 29-41.

8 KOSELLECK, R. (1979). *Vergangene Zukunft*. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten, Francfort, Suhrkamp.

modern in three groups: rationalistic theories, non-rationalist theories, and dialectical theories<sup>9</sup>.

Rationalist theories ground modernity on reason and on scientific progress. One believes in the progress of humanity, in historical continuity, step by step. Modernity here is opposed to tradition, considered as non-rational. The latter is either totally evacuated or simply reduced to its aesthetic appearance. If there is a tradition, it is indeed the universalist tradition that finds its standard in current progress. Underdevelopment and development are thought to be linear. In the context of rationalistic theories, modernity and development are seen as a victory over tradition. In fact, these theories seemed optimistic and idealist. They turn a blind eye to the negative aspects of modernity, especially domination, leveling, and so on. They do not want to take into account the subversive aspects of tradition as a whole. As Adorno remarked, tradition is continually renewed, it survives its own destruction. The non-rationalist theories of modernity are not based on a universal ratio, but on the deep field of individuality. Here, modernity is essentially liberation from internal forces. These forces are nourished by the traditions of the people.

The finality is imprecise. We move from one novelty to another. One considers the modernity coming from the moderns as the source of the "thing-ification" and the "manipulation" of man. True modernity must go beyond modernity and not settle. Here, the desire for the new, constitutive of modernity, leads irresistibly to anarchism. And then there are no longer any standards. Tradition conceived as a force is idealized, even substantive.

The dialectical theories come from hermeneutics and pragmatics. These two lines of thought attempt to reconcile the positive and the negative aspects of modernity. They put together tradition and

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<sup>9</sup> HABERMAS, J.(1985). *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. Zwölf Vorlesungen*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.

modernity and seek to establish their normative content, valid yesterday, today and tomorrow. According to Jürgen Habermas, the Hegelian and Marxian dialectics are still rationalistic. It conceives modernity and development in a linear evolution and does not go beyond the framework of a philosophy of totality. One must try to unite the philosophy of praxis and the philosophy of reflection. Society is not to be seen in the abstract as a product of labor or as a stage of the development of the Spirit, but as a world of life. The world of life is not only physical but also symbolic and communication. It is reproduced through communication, which ensures the continuity of tradition and social integration.

The question that arises is how a society assumes and directs the world of life. Beyond the divergence of political, ethical and cognitive systems, the emancipation of man seems to be the only path to modernity for Habermas, and tradition remains one of the conditions for the possibility of intersubjective understanding. This agreement allows the formation of an identity and the orientation of the society by itself. Development is not here conceived as linear progress but as an improvement of intersubjective understanding and self-management of society.

The development and modernity thus understood can take several different directions. It is less a problem of economic growth than a social responsibility of mankind. Tradition is precisely there to strengthen the awareness of our identity and to forge appropriate and clean solutions for our modernity.

On the side of hermeneutics, we can cite the names already mentioned: Heidegger, Gadamer, Koselleck, but also Ricoeur: the common denominator is that in their theories they do not separate past and future, tradition and modernity. For example, it is sufficient to know that, for Heidegger, tradition is essentially transmission and that a genuine tradition is conceived only as a repetition of the past with a view to the construction of the future, to assert that tradition is essentially the "future" that one generation leaves to another.

Paul Ricoeur, already in the *Symbolic of Evil*, emphasizes the place of modernity in its efforts to interpret the mythological and symbolic tradition of the sacred. Modernity is the starting point of his investigation. According to him, this modernity, on the one hand, is concerned with nourishing people, satisfying needs by controlling nature by a planetary technique, dismembering the language and the discourse of men by philosophy, exegesis, phenomenology and psychoanalysis, and this modernity has forgotten that man belongs to the sacred<sup>10</sup>, and on the other hand, this same modernity, especially today's, is rediscovering, with the fullness of the language of myth, this reference to the sacred. "It is not, then, the regret of the collapsed Atlantis that animates us, but the hope of a recreation of language; beyond the desert of criticism, we want to be challenged again"<sup>11</sup>. Modernity is therefore going back and forth towards and from tradition. She espouses the same obscurities and ambiguities.

In short, we are bathing in modernity as well as in tradition and it is probably impossible for us to have an overview and of tradition and modernity. If modernity seems to us to be "the will to emancipate," tradition seems to be "the will to identity and to the future." Jürgen Habermas has once said: "The modern is an unfinished project", and Paul Ricoeur replied: "... because the past is not yet completed."

### 3. The future in the past

Have we succeeded in drawing the circle of tradition and modernity? We have perhaps only projected a sketch with multiple lines and hesitating without us being able to say so much better it could be done<sup>12</sup>. To return several times to the work, looking at it, looking

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10 RICOEUR, P. (1960) *La Symbolique du mal*, Paris, Aubier, pp.324-325.

11 Ibidem, p.325.

12 Nous reprenons ici les grandes lignes des conclusions de notre ouvrage inédit *Volonté d'avenir. Essai sur la tradition et la modernité*.

at it, scratching, scratching, adding sometimes, making the smiles of happiness follow the eyebrows of dissatisfaction, we decide, in fact, to put a point final to what could have continued to unfold, daring, modestly as a bride, to go out and confront the critical public, would it be boldness or temerity?

Our investigation is both theoretical and applied, historical and hermeneutic. It aims to reveal, by successive touches, the image of modernity at the heart of tradition, and to affirm progressively that tradition is of modern essence. Through theoretical and general considerations, nevertheless rooted culturally and historically attested, it turns out that modernity shines at the edge of the tradition that it limits and accomplishes; and that modernity answers the questions that tradition raises.

There is no better point of departure than the very culture of the author. The meaning of the word "tradition" appears threefold: first a material heritage to be preserved, nevertheless to cultivate and recreate; secondly, the fact of being transmitted and succeeded from father to son, from son to grandson; finally, the interpretation which is given of this tradition and which makes it concretely exist. The judgment that this tradition gives itself is both positive and negative, and points, in fact, towards modernity. The very practice of tradition among the people, yesterday and today, marks continuities and ruptures that allow new restructuring of forms and cultural contents.

Tradition is not simply artificial or cultural. It has existential and natural roots. Man participates in nature and, consequently, feels the need for the permanence and renewal of the species. The generation which, first of all, is a biological and ecological concept, becomes existential in man, when the series of generations defines the measure of human history and finitude as well as their transcendence. Tradition being the fabric of generations, its being determines the very being of man. It joins its historicity. Nothing better than tradition translates man as past, present and future. I have brought to light the link and the circularity of temporal ecstasies at

the very heart of tradition. Tradition as a revised and corrected past, is a beach encumbered by the present, to use the words of V.Y. Mudimbe. It is the place of our desire to be and our effort to exist as Ricoeur would say. It is above all a desire for the future, as we have endeavored to show it. It is what the previous generation devises, creates and leaves to the other generation so that the latter live better and more easily. It is not merely the object of admiration. It is a call to creation and recreation. It exists in the operation which exhausts and renews it. The new generation assumes it in their own way. It is according to their present and their future that the new generations make their traditions current. As much as the future is in the tradition, so the past is a function of the future. Two notions come to fulfill the circularity of tradition and of modernity: the "consciousness of the work of history" of Gadamer and the "horizon of expectation" of Koselleck. Tradition brings together the consciousness of the past and the expectation of the future.

The circle between tradition and modernity applied to Africa appears first on board as the expression of a contradiction. The ethnological view that serves as a grid of reading to the African tradition responds to a colonial praxis and projects a modernity rooted in a cultural and historical elsewhere. This has the unfortunate consequence of fixing, mummifying, and killing the African tradition, placed in lazy waiting for a resuscitation coming from the West, savior and civilizer. It is necessary to free oneself from the ethnological gaze if one wants an authentic circularity. It is a view driven by the total emancipation of Africa, which restores the African language and historical initiative, which will tell us tradition and modernity in their dynamic essence, responding to each other for a happier future. History and hermeneutics will take the place of ethnology and ethnophilosophy, and African philosophy will have to undergo metamorphosis.

#### **4. The question of identity and development**

It is within the invincible circle of tradition and development that the question of African cultural identity must be resolved without which genuinely African development can not be envisaged. According to a new philosophical view, the cultural identity of a community is not defined as an indelible mark or a stubborn atavism which directs it as a fatality in a determined direction. The identity defined in these terms is often the result of tenacious prejudices, expressions of complexes in which domination and subordination slip. Such identities, I call them dogmatic: they arise from a certain ethnological gaze. The ethnological gaze is not only that imposed by the colonizer, but also that which we encamp when, by a play of stereotypes, we mark our superiority or our inferiority and thus give justification to the exploitation which results from it. Dogmatic identities are almost always expressed in metaphysical terms "essence", "soul", "blood", "spirit", attributed to peoples. These concepts refer to principles which, applied to an individual, serve as a basis for continual and dynamic change, but which, predicated on groups of individuals, stop all progress and development. The change is only artificial, superficial. The groups are rather labeled, substantiated, naturalized and thus petrified, mummified. Metaphysics demonizes or idealizes cultural identities. It makes us "angels" or "beasts": that which amounts to the same thing, since it places us outside the simple human struggles by bringing us back to the rank of malleable objects or ideas.

The value of renewing the thinking of Africa's identity lies in the fact that Africa can conceive and start its own development. Development is not a ready-to-wear product of rationalist modernity, but it is a possibility anchored in our desire to be and in our effort to exist, that is to say in our internal creativity without that development loses its novelty and its strangeness. Globalization and new technologies, well tempered, will make development a common

development and a global adventure where responsibility and freedom will take the place of a certain inevitability or diktat.

Beyond logical possibilities, let us continue our examination of the effectiveness of development projects in Africa, and establish the relations of necessity between identity and development. Philosophies and ethics always accompany development theories in such a way that we can say that the failures of development are probably also the failures of theories, philosophies and ethics of development. But probably these philosophies are philosophies of knowledge and visions, while we must add philosophies of concrete action, effectively transforming the African world. In the eighties, there was talk of the polemical part which must be added to the epistemological part for a real development. Concretely, this philosophy must fundamentally be an economic and political reflection as a place of having and holding power. Beyond this reflection, an ethics is developed upstream and downstream since the problem of development is essentially ethical. But it would also be necessary to rethink the question of the identities of peoples in the face of the problem of development so much that we must be convinced that identity is the engine of development.

In short, the identity of sustainable development is ecological and ethical. It reconciles the being of man and his action to the totality of being. It is narrative and participatory: it has a historical dimension and a social dimension. It is retrospective and prospective: it assumes a past and projects a future. Identity, in all its dimensions, is the driving force and ramp for sustainable development. It reveals the ethical requirement without which the future of humanity is compromised.

What about Africa in concrete terms? Africa, on the level of identities, seems plural and often discordant: diversified environment, history and multiple influences; politics does not always embrace the cultural; history fights against geography; by the treachery of some and the stupidity of others, peoples have been led to mutual

rejection under the amused eye of slavers, colonizers and neo-colonizers; a cacophony of identity has engendered chaotic paths of development. Nevertheless, beyond the differences, the same great history runs through us, that of slavery, colonization and decolonization, and now that of democratization. The same constraints and the same destiny trace the outlines of the same identity and force us to unite in front of the great economic and political groups that are forming around us: in order to survive, Africa will be one or not. It gradually forges a narrative identity, participative and natural to the dimension of the continent, condition of the true sustainable development of Africa. This identity not only assumes the various internal identities of Africa but harmonizes them around the common values and ideals of freedom, well-being and progress. At the end of this research, both theoretical and historical, we can say that well-understood cultural identity and well-thought-out development, starting from identity towards development or from development towards identity, can not than to authenticate and enrich one another. Their articulation goes beyond the simple logical possibility to fit into the order of historical necessity. The development of tomorrow will be ours or will not be.

### **An implication: the history of ideas**

The reader of *For a Philosophy of Culture and Development*<sup>13</sup> notes from the introduction that in the quest for a culture and development which must be fertilized, the problem is precisely the philosophy that takes them both in charge. While affirming its universality and rationality, the true being of philosophy is defined only within a tradition, within the particular game between the forms and the contents of this tradition. Here philosophy is fundamentally a history

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13 OKOLO, B.O.(1986). Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement, Kinshasa, PUZ, p. 10.

and not a system of unanimous and impersonal thought. It expresses the dialectic and the polemic that constitutes a given social formation. We see that it is fundamentally hermeneutic and participates in praxis.

One wonders if the book could exhaust the research program thus traced. Many concepts would only be seen here. However, it is clear that it is asserted that philosophy, in the African context, yesterday and today, can only be authenticated as history. What history is it? Certainly the history of philosophy. Yet how can this be conceived in the African past?

The first chapter of the book attempts to arbitrate the debate between two African philosophers E. Njoh-Mouelle and F. Nkombe Oleko around the relationship between proverb and philosophy<sup>14</sup>. For Njoh-Mouelle the proverb has nothing to do with philosophy, nor with science, it belongs to a proverb suggests thinking; for Nkombe Oleko the proverb suggests. Yet when one would like to think from the proverb, in the line of Nkombe Oleko, one invents a new thought, according to the philosophical hermeneutics, downstream of the proverb. And if one thinks from the proverb, according to Njoh-Mouelle, it is about a thought to be discovered. Thus, to think from the proverb, upstream of the proverb, is the work of a science of history, applied to ideas. The research path open to our investigations is mainly scientific and historical for a quest for conscious ideas struggling in our traditional social formations and whose proverbs bear the marks. Can we reconcile the scientific and the hermeneutical path with the African proverb and cultural facts? The question remains. But the history of the ideas of traditional Africa emerges without yet determining its necessity or its possibility, still less its actuality.

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14 Ibidem, p. 13-23 ; NJOH-MOUELLE, « Sagesse des proverbes et développement », dans *Zaire-Afrique*, 15<sup>e</sup> année (1975), p. 107-116 ; OIEKO, NKOMBE (1979). *Métaphore et métonymie dans les symboles parémiologiques. L'intersubjectivité dans les Proverbes Tetela*, Kinshasa, F.T.C.K..

The next chapter traces a better outline and projects epistemological advances opening to a new scientific discipline<sup>15</sup>. It is a question of the eternal question of the existence of a philosophy in ancient and traditional Africa and of all the problems arising from the Bantu Philosophy of Tempels and similar works gathered under the name of ethnophilosophy. The author proposes to identify three essential ways of overcoming ethnophilosophy in which the problem of the tradition to discover and invent, the tradition of yesterday, today and tomorrow, is involved. The author draws three terms for his exposition: praxis, text and history.

African praxis, that is to say, the ideological context of the African called to free himself from historical material and spiritual constraints, leads us to question the relevance of the ethnophilosophical discourse. We can not assume our past without a critical and revolutionary perspective, and we can not denounce, as Aimé Césaire did, the neo-colonialist recovery of ethnophilosophy and the inauthenticity, culture and science of African ideologies who knew only how to take part in the liberation and not really emancipate Africa from others and from itself. The conditions of another emancipatory discourse should be laid down.

Ethnophilosophy poses another problem: that of text, at the risk of being taken for a discourse imagined by their authors without any textual support: customs and linguistic categories are not texts. Is it not possible to find texts capable of giving us to read African philosophy? First, the phenomenon of orality should be included in our definition of the text, and the philosophical character of some of the so-called African texts and the way in which they are determined of a particular company.

Ethnophilosophy gives the impression of affirming thought, while denying a history to this thought. Ethnophilosophy presents a

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15 OKOLO, B. O. (1986). Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement, p. 25-29.

system of thought, unanimously shared by all, everywhere and forever. It cares little for the fundamentally dialectical and polemical nature of thought. Wanting to oppose the positivity of facts to the ideality of the becoming of the Spirit to the Hegelian, ethnology has drawn attention to a distant world and imposed the Other in the eyes of Westerners. Ethnophilosophy, in its turn, describes the visions of the world, is part of the great criticism of the existence of a single universal ratio, imposing itself on all and judging the world. But philosophy without a philosopher, ethnophilosophy could not satisfy the critical eye. The theories of *weltanschauungen* from the romantics, developed by Dilthey, end with Max Scheler in the constitution of the sociology of knowledge. It establishes links between knowledge, even philosophical knowledge, and society as well as the social groups that develop it, thus breaking down ethnophilosophical unanimism and paving the way for the history of ideas.

A poor parent of the rapidly developing African historiography, which integrates oral documents into his methodology, the history of Africa's ideas would give historical depth to the facts of thought concealing art, religion and science and the philosophies on which they are founded. This is possible only when one asserts the complexity of African societies as of any other society, the conflicting nature of relationships, the assumption of these conflicts at the level of thought. Tradition should certainly be recognized as dynamic, perpetuating and renewing itself through an internal play between cultural contents and the forms of content in which philosophy is intertwined and distinguished.

Praxis, text and history, the three terms illuminate the same object: the history of ideas applied to traditional Africa. The praxis projecting the framework of struggles for the emancipation of Africa will open us to the dialectical and polemical dimension of our societies, from which emerge the thoughts and the philosophies, the object of

the history of ideas. And the text, well defined, will provide the means of access to these ideas.

In regard to the text, it is at the center of ideas and their expression: it is in him that we must find the ideas to be read in the intertwining of hermeneutics and praxis, orality, writing. The following chapters prepare us for this reading without which the history of ideas is impossible.

The definition of the text, beyond textuality and orality, as a work first and as a node of tradition, allows us to grasp the tradition in its dynamism. Tradition offers to our theoretical practices not only their African-ness, but also the matter to be treated and the theoretical modalities of approaching them which authenticate our readings and reprints. It is necessary to restore not only the monuments of tradition, but also the philosophies and scientific approaches that have taken place in our traditional past. The history of philosophical ideas appears as one of the conditions of an African philosophical hermeneutics. Our readings and our African repressions of tradition, left to themselves, can only lead to an interpretative "drunkenness" if they are not supported by a science of history applied to ideas, which science will give it a material, a specific problem and an approach. The history of ideas appears here as a necessity for cultural and identity consciousness. The concern for restoration must go hand in hand with the concern for appropriation. The two worries mark relations "back and forth" and define from the inside the process of tradition and interpretation<sup>16</sup>.

From chapter V, entitled "Hermeneutics and ethnophilosophy" we retain the criticism made of ethnophilosophy as a specific reading of African cultural facts. The ethnophilosophers did not question the nature of the text that had to be read in order to find a philosophy. What can we hope to obtain from non-explicit philosophical

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16 Ibidem, p. 33-46.

elements? They prefer ethnology and linguistics instead of history. Where are the places of philosophical expression in traditional Africa?<sup>17</sup>

"A lesson in history", chapter VIII of the book, constitutes what may be called the official manifesto of the history of ideas in traditional Africa<sup>18</sup>. The inaugural text of the manifesto deserves to be quoted: "The time has come to reflect on a discipline to which the previous studies irresistibly lead us: the history of ideas in traditional Africa. It was not easy to talk about history in the case of Africa. African history has conquered its right to exist, shapes and adjusts its research methods and techniques. Rather, it advances the sciences of history by bringing to light theories and methods that take into account the documents which up to that time were outside of historiography oral tradition"<sup>19</sup>. And further on: "However, while African history in general has come a long way, especially in its political aspects, deepening to a depth that goes back to the Middle Ages, the particular history of traditional African ideas is in its infancy"<sup>20</sup>. The philosopher is much more interested in the systems given to him by the sciences such as ethnology, sociology and linguistics than to the arduous, often ungrateful, research of the historian. The history of ideas is today the poor relation of both history and philosophy.

Yet the history of ideas in traditional Africa is a discipline that can inscribe Africa and its tradition in a dynamic that ensures both its material survival and the survival of its culture and its tradition. The history of ideas would express the theoretical struggles which accompanied the struggles for a betterment; it would provide the theoretical framework of pre-comprehension, reading and resumption capable of telling a cultural identity, identities necessary for our

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17 Ibidem, p. 47-52.

18 Ibidem, p. 65-72.

19 Ibidem, p. 65

20 Ibidem

struggles for development. Nothing is more lacking in our polemics and our dialectics than a space of tradition in which polemics and dialectics are inserted. The history of ideas is able to create a new look at our culture and our past, which can best prepare solutions for our development.

The look of the history of ideas is true, without idealization or underestimation. He wants to set himself on the ashes of ethnophilosophy, one of the forgetful systems of the historical dimension of traditional Africa. Ethnophilosophy carries with it a colonialist reluctance and reinforces the muzzling imposed by our policies on our populations in love with palaver. The path of our liberation and our development depends on the effective taking of the word, which presupposes the recognition of this exercise of speech in our traditional past. Hegel has denied the history of Africa, more the thought of history where the mind just runs. It is therefore a contradiction for ethnophilosophy to assert thought without history in Africa. The refusal of history is evident in Placide Tempels as in Alexis Kagame. The first, in the name of ethnological positivity; the second, in the name of the eternity and immutability of philosophy<sup>21</sup>. Ethnophilosophy denies history, blocks history and sometimes the opposite.

By the history of ideas, we mean the history of philosophy. But we would like to go beyond the Western conception of philosophy in order to reach true universality. In the African context, philosophy could include philosophical, religious, artistic, legal or political ideas as long as they were thought and discussed at a certain level of depth. The method is that of the historian, who "allows to be the philosophy of others, the other of his philosophy", according to the word of Paul Ricoeur<sup>22</sup>.

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21 TEMPELS, P. (1965). *Philosophie bantoue*, 3e éd., Paris, Présence africaine ; KAGAME, A. (1956) *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être*, Bruxelles, ARSC.

22 RICOEUR, P. (1964). *Histoire et vérité*, 2e édition, Paris, Seuil, p. 61.

The ultimate goal of the historian of ideas is to establish a lively dialogue with the author or the presumed authors of the texts: this presupposes respect for the other and the text of the other. The historical reading of texts must go beyond the ethnophilosophical and sociological reading which takes the text as a fact of culture or society. The texts of the African traditions have been read as one book. It is, however, a question of starting from the contradictory assertions to give to the ideas either a historical depth, a school or current belonging or even an belonging of an individual. Ideas bear traces of social and political struggles and are part of them. They are not the only story. They have a close relationship with the global life of peoples and men. The circle of facts and ideas is an instrument of restoration and authentication of ideas as well as facts. The history of ideas, to be accomplished, must seek the meaning of the text thus restored and examine the internal order of argument. The “manifesto” ends with the projection of an important study on the orality and the interview of the relations between ideas, philosophies, science and technology as well as the arts, religion and law.

The study of orality and writing begins with the denunciation of the ideology that governs the theses held up to that time<sup>23</sup>: writing, especially alphabetic, would be the promoter of the concept of philosophy, science and progress technology; it would be the foundation of a naturally dominating civilization of the others, while orality would trample in immediacy without history, culture or civilization. Affirmations that have no theoretical or historical basis, except when the shortcuts are paid. It is more than six thousand years before Jesus Christ that Greek writing appears, Greek philosophy appears five thousand years later and science still more eight thousand years later and technology has various sources: algebra is

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23 Pour cette étude cfr OKOLO, B. O. Les langages en fête. Critique de la raison orale et écrite, Kinshasa, inédit; voir également NGANGALA, J. B.T. (2014). Proverbe et philosophie en Afrique. De l'ethnophilosophie à l'histoire des idées, Saarbrücken, Ed. Universitaires Européennes.

Arabic, the compass and powder are Chinese. What has been said about writing and orality is in the context of the ideology of domination that privileges writing. The course of certain disciplines of knowledge shows this well, but at the same time, the reconsideration of the relations between oral and written is the condition for the development of these disciplines. The sciences of language, inspired by writing and grammar, have acquired their truly scientific status only when Saussure affirms that writing is an instrument whose sole *raison d'être* is to represent language<sup>24</sup>. Michel Dufrenne writes "the written language is a pseudo-language for the language that is the oral language"<sup>25</sup>.

Literary studies have only really taken off when the boundaries between oral and written are outdated, for example, by the analyzes of Russian tales made by Propp in his famous *Morphology of the tale*<sup>26</sup>. These same frontiers are outdated when Nkombe Oleko, starting from the elements proper to the poetic function distilled by Jakobson who, through metaphor and metonymy, analyzes the teems of the Tetela culture in the Congo by exposing their structure before appreciating its content<sup>27</sup>.

The overcoming, following American, French and Marxist criticisms of ethnology, must be at the same time ideological, methodological and theoretical. Ideologically, there must be a positive commitment of the researcher to the cause of the peoples studied. Methodologically, we must add or substitute anthropology, sociology and history and theoretically, we need a reconstruction of the object: from the amorphous object we pass to a dynamic and responsible

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24 De SAUSSURE, F. (1968). *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot, 1968.

25 DUFRENNE, M. (1963). *Le poétique*, Paris, P.U.F., 1963, p. 10.

26 PROPP, V. (1970). *Morphologie du conte*, Paris, Seuil, 1970.

27 NKOMBE, O. (1979). *Métaphore et métonymie dans les symboles parémiologiques. L'intersubjectivité dans les proverbes Tetela*, Kinshasa, FTC., 1979.

object<sup>28</sup>. Oral traditions are precisely the reflection of this dynamism and this responsibility. It is on the basis of this conviction that Vansina uses traditions as a means of access to African history and that Verhaegen, V.Y. Mudimbe and Kabongo elaborate the immediate history and under the direction of Jewsiewicki, a group of researchers will work on the history of the lives<sup>29</sup>. It is on the same track that we are projecting a new discipline: the history of the ideas of traditional Africa.

Hermeneutics, in turn, originated and developed in the context of writing. It is defined as the art of interpreting written texts, first in philology, then in biblical exegesis. The debate between Catholic and Protestant raises the question of the primacy between orality and writing in biblical interpretation. The Protestants absolutize the writing and judge inauthentic the principle of tradition as the basis of the interpretation of the sacred texts. Catholics define tradition not as us and custom but as the set of words and actions of Jesus relayed by the words and actions of the apostles, transmitted to us orally, in writing and in the liturgy. Tradition is broader than written and serves as a basis for any biblical interpretation. Gadamer will judge the Catholic principle of tradition as an important and essential element in any interpretation of any text<sup>30</sup>.

Gadamer, despite his high opinion of the written text, takes oral dialogue as a model of interpretation. While Paul Ricoeur, while affirming textuality as an event putting hermeneutics in a non-dialogical situation, redefines the text beyond the written and the

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28 COPANS, J.(1975). *Anthropologie et impérialisme*, Paris, Maspero ; IDEM, *Critiques et politiques de l'anthropologie*, Paris, Maspero, 1976

29 J. VANSINA, J. (1961). *Tradition orale. Essai de méthode historique*, Tervuren, M.R.A.C. ; VERHAEGEN, B. (1974). *Introduction à l'histoire immédiate. Essai de méthodologie qualitative*, Gembloux, Duculot ; V.Y. MUDIMBE, V.Y. (1973). *L'Autre face du royaume. Une introduction à la critique des langages en folie*, Genève, L'âge,d'homme.

30 GADAMER, H.G. (1996). *Vérité et méthode*, Paris, Gallimard.

oral, as a work, involving closure, gender and the style<sup>31</sup>. For us, the ideality of meaning, that is, the fact that the text is independent of the context, and which appears more clearly in the text, is not bound either to the text as written, text as a work, but to the text as a fact of tradition. It is becoming-tradition that makes a text, an autonomous work in relation to its author, its context and its first recipients.

The earliest philosophers, such as Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, the prophets, the Druids, etc., who were not ignorant of writing, gave the main part of their doctrine and teaching in an oral and unwritten manner. Their thoughts continue to move the masses and nurture the spiritual and intellectual traditions of the world<sup>32</sup>. The beginning of the philosophical exercise does not seem to consider the distinction between the oral and the written. It is from the 16th century that writing seems to take the upper hand in public opinion. And Hegel will draw all the consequences. Writing for him is the condition of history and thought. The fact of writing especially in prose marks the consciousness of history at the basis of great states, and philosophers and historians are the expression of this consciousness<sup>33</sup>. But one question arises: are there people without literature in prose? Is not the consciousness of continuity, the will of the future, already the lot of all tradition as a tradition even oral? Here Hegel and his emulators are defeated<sup>34</sup>.

In short, language sciences, literary studies, cultural anthropology, hermeneutics and philosophy can only really take off when

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31 RICOEUR, P. (1986). *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, Paris, Seuil, 1986

32 JASPERS, K. (1989). *Les grands philosophes*, 3 t, Paris, Plon, 1989.

33 HEGEL, G.W.F. (1945). *Leçons sur la philosophie de l'histoire*, Trad. J. Gibelin, Paris, Vrin ; IDEM, *La Raison dans l'histoire, Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire*, Paris, Plon, 1965 (trad. française de Kostas Pappaïnnou, à partir du texte original *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, I. Teilband- Einleitung: *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, 5e éd., Hamburg, Félix Meiner, 1955, texte établi par Johannes Hoffmeister).

34 OKOLO, B. O. (2010). *Hegel et l'Afrique. Thèses, critiques et dépassements*, Argenteuil, Le cercle herméneutique.

they go beyond the demarcation between writing and speaking. Writing has often been a pretext for domination that not only enslaved peoples but also blocked knowledge. Knowledge of writing itself has been subject to manifest untruths. In an episode of his famous work *Tristes Tropiques*, Levi-Strauss realizes that the link between writing and civilization lies elsewhere than where it has always been claimed to be able to find it, namely that by the cumulative progress of knowledge, writing is at the origin of great civilizations<sup>35</sup>. In reality, writing has only exasperated the human instinct of domination and thereby nourished the ideology of the difference between the so-called civilization of writing and civilization of the oral.

Another counter-truth to be destroyed revolves around the abstraction linked to writing and the power of knowing to which it seems to open. It is true, one can not speak of writing without a certain abstraction, that is to say a certain distance which the sign takes in relation to the representation of the thing signified, a certain presence-absence which supposes an initiation if one wants to recognize the thing or the idea and a certain independence of the signifier with respect to the signified. To believe that there is only one way for this graphical abstraction, the way of the phonetic alphabet, is to yield to the temptation of Western supremacy. The meticulous study of the systems of writing shows that abstraction can take the most varied paths without one yielding to the other by its rigor and complexity. The Scriptures borrow various logics of abstraction without any logic prevailing over others. They are all based on the primary abstraction internal to any linguistic system resulting in the double articulation dear to Martinet.

As for the epistemological power linked to the so-called alphabetical writing, it is not known that more than six thousand years separate its creation and the appearance of science and the techno-

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35 LEVI-STRAUSS, C. (1955). *Tristes tropiques*, Paris, Plon, p. 337-349.

logical boom that ensued from the 17th century. Meanwhile, China, which did not have an alphabetic script, had already reached a higher and appreciable level of civilization.

Let us ask ourselves the question: if we can speak of oral traditions or written traditions, bearing in mind the main support of transmission, can we speak with confidence of the peoples with oral civilizations or written civilizations? More detailed considerations prompt us to reconsider the geographical extent of the writing phenomenon. The phenomenon does not appear to be universal and more widespread than is thought. In Africa, for example, the Luba and the Woyo in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Dogons in Mali, the Vai in Liberia, the Efik in Nigeria and the Bamoun kingdom in Cameroon. It must be said that neither oral nor written defines peoples, but situations that combine both the facts of cultures created orally or in writing and the particular modes of transmission. These situations can alternate or momentarily prevail without being excluded. Tradition and transmission are at the heart of orality and writing.

An in-depth look shows that there is homology of form and content between oral and written. The differences are not determinative. Tradition is the environment in which texts are created and their interpretations are made. The text, written or oral, is part of the tradition and it has meaning only because it belongs to tradition. The ideality of meaning, that is, the fact that the meaning of the text is torn from the context of its production, and which appears more clearly in the text as written, is not linked to the text as it is written, as Gadamer asserts, neither to the text as a work as advocated by Ricoeur, but rather to the text as belonging to tradition. Tradition has its roots in man, in mankind, which is called to perpetuate itself by renewing itself, and by reproducing the mimic and rhythmic ges-

ture of the world through which knowledge is constituted and transmitted<sup>36</sup>.

Tradition as a hermeneutic chain and the texts and facts of culture as the nodes of this chain allow us to better understand the ideality of the meaning derived from the becoming-tradition of the works of the mind, that is, from selection and the collective sorting of works which, by making them classical, offer them to future generations for their well-being. The great problem is the permanence and the renewal of the facts of culture and tradition. How are traditions transformed by remaining themselves? And, one can go further, does the passage from oral to written or vice versa constitute a specific modality of the transformation of traditions?

In order to solve our problem, we have borrowed from the glossematics of Louis Hjelmslev the distinctions established within any linguistic statement between content and expression, both having form and substance, to four components of the statement: substance of expression, substance of content, form of expression and form of content<sup>37</sup>. We do not dwell on the aims of these components in the linguistic study. But let us know that, as with any linguistic statement, works of tradition contain content and expression; and the content and expression in turn possess one or more shapes (figures) and one or more substances. Thus, we can distinguish the form of the content, the form of expression, the substance of the content, the substance of the expression.

If we apply this to the cultural fact of language, the substance of the expression will be the materiality of the linguistic expression, which may be oral or written or carried on other media of expression. example, or recording medium; the substance of the content

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36 MOUSSE, M. (1974). *L'Anthropologie du geste*, Paris, Gallimard.

37 HJELMESLEV, L. (1971). *Prolégomènes à une théorie du langage*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit.

will be the materiality of the object treated: everything that is and all that can be thought; the form of the content will be the way to treat the object, here we want to talk about points of view by which we can approach the object in the context of a discourse; the form of expression will be the way of saying or writing, we have to do to the different literary genres of a culture or a tradition.

Let us take the cultural thing called in the West "philosophy": the substance of the expression was oral and writing, with a predominance of writing; the substance of the content has been varied: nature, being, man and his works, God, substance, idea, society, language...The form of content is the way of treating these objects, aimed at the foundation, the totality and a subsequent way of life called wisdom. The form of expression, are the different genres of which philosophy has assumed: poetry, proverbs, aphorisms, dialogue, treatise, sums, novels, stories, theater, essay. The determining element of recognition of what is culturally and permanently called "philosophy" is not the substance of the expression, nor the substance of the content, let alone the form of expression, but rather the form of content.

The result is, in addition to the permanence and the fate of the facts of culture called philosophy, its identification becomes clearer whatever the variety of expression and content. The history of ideas has already its object: the forms of philosophical content. It remains for us to study the relations between the forms of content and the forms of expression, that is to say, the genera which bear the philosophical expression.

We are pleased to note that Cossutta appealed to the same terminology of Hjelmslev, already mentioned<sup>38</sup>. While we have used it to analyze cultural facts in order to perceive places of permanence and change, Cossutta uses them to mark the link between philo-

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38 COSSUTTA, F. (2005). *Le dialogue: introduction à un genre philosophique*, Presses Univ. Septentrion.

sophical expression and its content. In the field of philosophy, we called the substance of the content: the matter or the object treated and the "form of the content": the type of question and answer given, the "substance of the expression", the material used for expression, orality, writing, tam-tam or other matter such as drawings ... and the "form of expression", this being the genre itself. We asserted that places of permanence and change were essentially the form of content and form of expression. By substance of the content of a philosophy Cossutta hears the doctrinal content.

The form of content, for him, is the way the content is structured. The substance of the expression refers to the aspects of orality or writing in a particular occurrence. And the form of expression concerns the rules of expression, modes of address, genres, tropes, rhetorical figures and stylistic features. Our understanding and application of the Hyelomanian categories are practically the same. Those of Cossutta nevertheless appear more dynamic and seize the links between content and expression in an indissoluble and reciprocally constitutive way. The form of the content and the form of expression are intimately linked and mutually responsive.

Philosophy as a form of content does not seem to separate itself from the genre, the form of expression as a constitution and fulfillment of this philosophy, but at the same time as a way of socialization and cultural belonging. Philosophy in its enunciation does not respond only to internal laws of logic, of argument. But by gender, it is anchored in the global and specific society that produces and receives it. The question of gender makes the relationship between philosophy and proverb a general problem of philosophical expression here and elsewhere. There is no philosophical genre that hovers over the history of philosophy and the philosophies of the world. Philosophies borrow its genres from other cultural expressions, choose them and determine them in the context of socio-political and religious contexts and other instances of expressions of truth.

Cossutta's study of the relationship between dialogue and philosophy has shown a certain homology between the form of the philosophical content and the form of expression, namely the dialogue which, through its replies, expresses the essentially dialectic of philosophy.

Nevertheless, the same form of content may take two or more genera or forms of expression. The dialogues of Plato and his courses at the Academy unfortunately disappeared, and the treatises and courses of Aristotle at the Lyceum and its dialogues not preserved. On the one hand the dialectical aspect was underlined, on the other the systematic and pedagogical aspect was highlighted. The forms of the content transcend somewhat the forms of expression and thus, within a culture, found the recognition of the exercise that is called philosophy. Nevertheless, philosophy, in its contents and expressions, is profoundly dependent on the social group of production. The forms of content and forms of expression are not chosen at random. It is because of their functionality within communities and schools that shapes are determined and shaped. The choices made show us some aspects of the being of philosophy.

According to Cossutta, the proverb is the statement of wisdom that tends to concentrate the truth in a minimal aphoristic nucleus. The proverb, as Heraclitus says, by their symbolism and their sibylline dimension shows to what extent truth is not within everyone's grasp and necessitates a certain initiation<sup>39</sup> (1513). The homology between the form of content, here the truth, and the form of expression, here the proverb, reside in brevity and depth, the expression of the authority of the wise and the dogmatism of truth which serve here social inking.

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39 F. COSSUTTA, F. (1998) « Les genres en philosophie », dans Jean-François MATTEL, J-F.(s dir. de), Encyclopédie philosophique universelle. T.IV. Le discours philosophique, Paris, PUF.

Proverb and philosophy in Africa. From the ethnophilosophy to the history of ideas<sup>40</sup> of my disciple Jacques Ngangal<sup>40a</sup>, drafted under my direction, not only shows us in all aspects of the problem but goes further and develops a theory and a methodology which, beyond ethnology, takes over the proverb or any other philosophical expression of which the traditions of Africa abound. The main lines of this theory and methodology will be presented in a book which we publish in two: *Introduction to the History of Ideas in the Context of Orality*<sup>41</sup>. With an application at the end of the book, we can say that the history of the ideas of traditional Africa was born. We can only expect growth and development to meet expectations.

In short, hermeneutics is not separated from the praxis that arouses and directs it. Reading the facts of culture and tradition is fundamentally dependent on the problems raised by our concerns of being and wellness. Hence the dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity: tradition understood as a will for the future and modernity as a concern for emancipation and rationality. Modernity completes the discourse of tradition, and tradition prepares modernity by giving it the means of its accomplishment. The essential presupposition: the dynamism that animates the two projects: that of tradition and that of modernity, marked by a responsible voice and action. The history of ideas would like to witness this dynamism for yesterday, as our hermeneutics and our philosophies would like to be for today and tomorrow. In the end, we have only turned and turned over the evidences which, to be better perceived, could only pass through the detours of the deconstructions of complexes and prejudices.

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40 NGANGALA, J. B. T. (2014). *Proverbe et philosophie en Afrique. De l'ethnophilosophie à l'histoire des idées*, Saarbrücken, Editions Universitaires Européennes, 412 p.

41 Texte sous presses aux Editions Academia, Louvain-La-Neuve.