



The Hermeneutical Paradigm in African Philosophy

Genesis, Evolution and Issues

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The aim of this reflection is a diachronic analysis and an appreciation of the hermeneutical paradigm in African philosophy. This paradigm raises the problem of the relationship between culture and philosophy and subsequently, the problem of the relationship between universality and particularity. In fact, it seems evident that if philosophy is not a cultural product, it is nevertheless a critical reflection which always manifests in its contents a specific cultural and historical experience. Thus, African philosophy necessarily evolves within African cultures. Therefore, universality and particularity are necessarily connected in the sense that culture manifests human potentialities. If African cultures must be the starting point of African philosophy, African philosophers must not forget to engage critically with culture; and that, definitely, it is our historical context that determines the appreciation of both our culture and others'.

The Hermeneutical Paradigm is one of the most important trends in modern and contemporary African Philosophy.

This is due to the fact that philosophy is inherently interpretative. It is the product of language, context, and history, and hence inextricably linked to culture. Culture is the expression of human thought or creativity, as wherever human beings exist, they express their thought in language and culture. It thus becomes absurd to

affirm that some human beings or human societies, who have their own cultures and languages, do not think. Therefore, one can understand the important development that the Hermeneutical Paradigm in African philosophy has taken. Indeed, Hermeneutics, according to Gadamer, being essentially a concept based on comprehension and interpretation is broadly construed as culture. Making it easy for African intellectuals and philosophers to refute allegations about the non-existence of an African philosophy through an examination of the philosophical elements inherent in African cultures. Through the exploration of meaning and symbols relying on African languages and cultures - myths, proverbs, rituals, etc. -, it was quite simple to demonstrate that African people reason and therefore philosophize. So, African Hermeneutics and generally speaking Hermeneutics, raise the ineluctable question of the relationship between philosophy and culture. If philosophy always exists in a specific cultural and historical context or framework, does it imply that philosophy is simply reducible to culture? On the other hand, if philosophical thought is conceptual and universal, can one conclude that African philosophy exists without an African cultural background? Therefore, what is the genuine relationship between philosophy and culture and more specifically African philosophy and African cultures?

The aim of this reflection is to present approaches and answers given by eminent representatives of the hermeneutical trend in African philosophy, and to discuss the question of the relationship between African philosophy and African cultures. Thus, our task consists of a diachronic, or historical analysis of the hermeneutical paradigm, from ethnophilosophy to a systematized hermeneutics and, subsequently, in a discussion of the challenges and issues inherent to this effort of creating a realistic African philosophy.

Ethnophilosophy or the Genesis of African Hermeneutics

Ethnophilosophy is the concept used to characterize the deduction of a collective African philosophy from a specific African culture¹. Father Placid Tempels is known as the pioneer of this African philosophical tendency. In his *Bantu Philosophy*, he attempts with an analysis of the Baluba culture, to explore Bantu philosophy. He reduces this to the key concept of vital force. According to him, the Bantu people, represented by the Baluba, consider force as the primary “being”. If for western people “being” refers to “what is”, for the Bantu, it means the “force that is”. When western people think of being, the Bantu think of force (Tempels, 1949:36). Thus, the Baluba culture is reducible to a hierarchy and an interaction of forces with God at the highest level, as the supreme force; followed by founders of clans or “arch patriarchs”; then come dead people shadowed in their turn by the alive generation. Below the alive generation, we have lower forces - animals, minerals and vegetable. Tempels then explores the laws of interaction between forces: upper forces directly influence lower ones; man can thus use a lower force - animal, mineral or vegetal - to destroy another man or force (Tempels, 1949:46). This concept of force as the genuine being is put forward by Tempels as the core belief of Bantu philosophy. This philosophy, as he has highlighted, remains unquestioned, unconscious, unanimously accepted and shared by all Bantu people (Tempels, 1948:24). One can therefore conclude that, according to Tempels, African philosophy is a collective weltanschauung, a whole of the collective representations inherent to African cultures and specifically the Baluba culture. Tempels efforts to draw a connection between African philosophy

¹ See Marcien Towa, *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l’Afrique actuelle*, Yaoundé, Clé, 1971, pp.23-33 ; Paulin Hountondji, *Sur la « philosophie africaine »*, Paris, François Maspero, 1976, pp.14-50 ; Fabien EboussiBoulaga, *La crise du Muntu*, Paris, Présence africaine, 1977, pp.25-41 et *L’Affaire de la philosophie africaine*, Paris, Editions Terroirs et Karthala, 2011, pp.15-45.

emerging from African culture, has been taken up by various scholars including Alexis Kagame.

Although he has rejected Tempels' Bantu philosophy because, according to him, force is not an ideal only pursued by the Bantu people, Alexis Kagame shares Tempels' approach of African philosophy as a collective *weltanschauung* shared by all those who belong to the same culture. In this vein, he privileges the study of African languages, especially Kinyarwanda. For him, every language contains philosophical principles that determine the thoughts of the people who speak it. He considers Aristotle's project of exposing universal categories of thought as an unrealized one, these categories themselves being encapsulated in the Greek language. Furthermore, when analyzing the Kinyarwanda, he highlighted its main category notably "Ntu". All the great categories of Kinyarwanda consist of the radical "Ntu". For instance, Mu+ntu=*Muntu* or man; Ki+ntu =*Kintu* or thing; Ha+ntu = *Hantu* or location-time; Ku+ntu = *Kuntu* or modality (Kagame, 1976:120-123). These categories ascribe. The analysis of Kinyarwanda's categories leads Kagame to a determination of Bantu ontology. To him, "Ntu" is the equivalent of being in Bantu languages because "Ntu" is the main radical which enables the formation of all the other categories of Bantu languages. In his discussion on the linguistic context of Kinyarwanda, Kagame posits that, according to the Bantu people, man is indivisible; he is not, as in the western tradition, a mixture of a body and a soul. In addition, man is not, according to the Bantu, a reasonable animal. He is a unique species and things are radically opposed to man. Kagame also mentions that the name of every person ascribes his personal fate. These principles contained in the Kinyarwanda language are what Kagame defines as the Bantu philosophy. One can therefore see that African philosophy is, according to Tempels and Kagame, a collective process intrinsic to African cultures or languages.

The *weltanschauung* inherent to African cultures is not the starting point of an African philosophy, a "philosophème" or theory

of philosophy; but rather is African philosophy itself. Besides Tempels and Kagame, many other African thinkers are also convinced that African philosophy and African cultures mean the same thing. Such is the case with John Mbiti, who emphasizes an African conception of time², indifferent to the future and which justifies African religions. Similarly, Basile Fouda, with his Negro-African philosophy of existence³, expands on Senghor's theses about the intuitive or non analytic-instrumental rationality of Africans. ; Jean Calvin Bahoken, with his African Metaphysical Glade⁴, highlights the Christian background of African cultures. These different perspectives naturally create confusion not only between philosophy and culture, but also with regards to the essence of philosophy itself. Thus, ethnophilosophy presents a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, ethnophilosophers underscore the undeniable link between philosophy and culture; but, on the other, they fail to define philosophy as a personal reflection or interpretation of culture. They speak of philosophy as a common idea. But if ethnophilosophers have failed in their attempt in drawing a connection between African philosophy emerging from African cultures, does that mean their project is meaningless? Can we not reconsider this relationship between African philosophy and African cultures?

African Hermeneutics

The ethnophilosophical approach precedes African hermeneutical paradigm. Here, hermeneutics is understood as the attempt by African philosophers to articulate a genuine African philosophy within African cultures, without eschewing philosophical tradition

2 John Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, New York: Doubleday, 1970.

3 Basile JuléatFouda, *La Philosophie négro-africaine de l'existence*, Thèse de doctorat, Lille, 1967.

4 Jean-Calvin Bahoken, *Clairières métaphysiques africaines*, Paris, *Présence africaine*, 1967.

or exigencies. This concern is present in the works of Theophilus Okere, Nkombe Oleko, Benoît Okolo Okonda and Tsenay Se-requeberhan. These works also distinguish themselves by the fact that they are rooted in the western hermeneutical tradition, notably the German and the French traditions.

Theophilus Okere

Okere begins his reflection by rejecting the ethnophilosophical approach to the question of the existence of an African philosophy. He does this, for the simple reason that "philosophy is not a general world-view". Criticizing Kagame, he affirms that "language and thought are not so related that a philosophy can be directly deduced from a language" (Okere, 1983: i). Contrary to ethnophilosophers, Okere asserts that philosophy is "essentially an individual enterprise and is often a *mise-en-cause*, and a radical questioning of the collective image" (Okere, 1983:7). At the same time, he contends that philosophy is always determined by culture. There is therefore a need for mediation between philosophy and culture. For Okere, hermeneutics is this necessary mediation.

According to Okere, hermeneutics is not just a philosophical trend or rather one of many African philosophical trends; it is the necessary condition of its existence because philosophy is essentially hermeneutics. Philosophy always grows out of a cultural background and depends on it. Without this background, there cannot be a foreground. Although philosophy is not to be confused with myths, *weltanschauung* and religion, it is always rooted in a specific culture. Culture provides the horizon of interpretation. To demonstrate this thesis, Okere analyzes the German and French hermeneutical traditions represented by Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricœur. Considering the fact that all comprehension is expressed in language, Ricœur seeks to unite the entire field of hermeneutics under the banner of semantics, or, the question of meaning.

We know from Freud that cultural expressions such as art, religion and morality develop mechanisms that reveal meaning indirectly by hiding it. So, every symbol can be called a double-meaning or a multi-vocal meaning. Ricœur thus defines interpretation as an intellectual exercise which consists of deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning. This intellectual work which moves from a symbol to its reflective interpretation is philosophy: "Reflection is the appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be across the works which bear witness to this effort and desire⁵. It is the incorporating of our new understanding of our culture into our own self-understanding" (Okere, 1983:17). Ricœur has proposed three stages or levels of interpretation in order to move from a symbol to the reflexive thought or philosophy: the phenomenological stage, which consists of an impartial description relating one symbol to another; the hermeneutical stage which is reached when one becomes engaged, concerned and spoken to by the symbol; and the reflexive stage where one thinks from the explicated symbol and organizes it into discourse. Thus, we can conclude with Ricœur that one can philosophize from his culture: "Le symbole donne à penser" (Ricœur, 1965:48). Symbols are pregnant of meaning. In them, all has already been said. Nevertheless, to philosophize, we have to interpret them at the level of reflection (Ricœur, 1969:284). So hermeneutics, that is, interpretation, becomes "the mediated factor between the two poles - culture and philosophy (Okere, 1983:18).

But to Heidegger, hermeneutics is more than a method, it is philosophy itself. Philosophy is ontology or the investigation of the meaning of being. Ontology is also related to phenomenology because the being has to show itself. Phenomenology will then be the best method for ontology. Talking about phenomenology, we must remember that Husserl has rejected objectivism; that is, the polarity subject/object through his theory of intentionality. His research on

⁵ See Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, Paris, Seuil, 1965, p.56.

"intentionality" shows clearly that there is an a priori correlation between "subject" and "object" (Okere, 1983:26). The concept of "horizon", which means everything that is unthematically perceived or anticipated or rather, a pre-knowledge, is of great hermeneutical importance. This pre-knowledge implied in the concept of "horizon" means, according to Coreth, that "there is no pure subjectivity that can be conceived as wordless or historyless in the modern sense, any more than there is a pure objectivity, that is, an objectivity conceived as subject free, the grasping of which would be the ideal and goal of modern science" (Coreth quoted by Okere, 1983:27).

In his analysis of the question of being, Heidegger contends that this centers around the notion of *Dasein*, the existence of being which confronts humans. Thus, for Heidegger, the investigation of being requires a prior investigation of *Dasein*, the being preoccupied by the question of being: « Cet étant que nous sommes chaque fois nous-mêmes et qui a, entre autres possibilités d'être, celle de questionner, nous lui faisons place dans notre terminologie sous le nom de *Dasein* » (Heidegger, 1986 :31). According to Heidegger, our experience of the world is essentially interpretation and understanding. So, our existence is hermeneutical. Philosophy becomes hermeneutics in the sense that "all philosophy is an interpretation of Being from the point of view of *Dasein*" (Okere, 1983:37). These considerations lead Heidegger to the fundamental ontology or "*Daseinanalytik*". The fundamental characteristics of *Dasein* are finitude, limitation, historicity and "situation". *Dasein* is finite, time-bounded or historical, rather "historical"; and he lends these characteristics to his understanding of being. The investigation of being will consequently be historical, that is, it will depend on a specific socio-historical context. It requires "the positive appropriation of [the] past" (Okere, 1983:40). Heidegger himself expresses this idea when he claims:

Le *Dasein* est chaque fois, en son être factice, comme il a été et "ce" qu'il a déjà été. Qu'il l'exprime ou non, il est son passé (...) Le passé qui est le sien - et cela veut toujours dire celui de sa « génération » - ne marche pas à la

suite du Dasein, au contraire, il lui ouvre chaque fois déjà la voie.
(Heidegger, 1986:45-46) 6

Dasein is also characterized by the fact of "being-thrown-in-the world". One finds himself somewhere in the world without having been consulted. He has not chosen his language, his culture, etc. World does not designate only the environment, but also the world of interpersonal and social relations made by opinions and ideas which form a common knowledge; the historical world of the individual by which he is determined through his relations to the past; the language through which the individual belongs to the society; the *weltanschauung* by which is meant the totality of understanding; the religious conceptions, etc. So, the concept of world in Heideggerian thought is eminently anthropological. It refers to the world of meanings. All these elements connected form a referential complex generative of meaning and refer to culture. They are inherently limited to a specific culture and determine our understanding and self-interpretation of the world.

Dasein is also affectivity or "being in the mood". Affections or humors are structured around the "concern" (Heidegger, 1986:91). The mood appeals understanding. The development of understanding is interpretation; and interpretation consists of making explicit what is already understood. It needs a prior acquisition, a prior view or a pre-conception: « Du moment qu'il cherche, le questionnement a besoin d'une direction qui précède et guide sa démarche à partir de ce qu'il recherche. Le sens de être doit donc être d'une certaine manière à notre disposition » (Heidegger, 1986 :29). So, philosophy is hermeneutics, that is, an interpretation of symbols of a given culture. It is therefore obvious for Okere that there cannot be philosophy

6 This being that we are each time ourselves, and which has among other possibilities to be, that of questioning, we give it a place in our terminology under the name of Dasein.

without culture and especially, there cannot be an African philosophy without the interpretation of African cultures:

The very basis of interpretation shows that it works only with presuppositions - in our context, within the framework of a certain culture. The Vorhabe - the *acquispréalable* - the prior acquisition - represents the entire cultural heritage and tradition of the interpreter, a heritage which not only furnishes the material to be interpreted but the background of all interpretation. The *vorsicht*, the pre-view is the prior orientation which, generally in the form of a *weltanschauung* or ideology, orients all our interpretation. (Okere, 1983:53)

Having demonstrated with Ricœur and Heidegger that philosophy is essentially interpretation of culture, Okere can now posit and evaluate the possibility of the existence of an African philosophy. He thinks Gadamer was right in condemning Enlightenment's rejection of tradition and prejudgments:

Ce n'est qu'en reconnaissant ainsi que toute compréhension relève essentiellement du préjugé, que l'on prend toute la mesure du problème herméneutique (...) En effet il existe aussi un préjugé des Lumières, qui porte et détermine leur essence. Ce préjugé fondamental des Lumières est le préjugé contre les préjugés en général, qui enlève ainsi tout pouvoir à la tradition. (Gadamer, 1996:291)⁷

If philosophy is essentially interpretation of culture, one cannot philosophize without myths, traditions and prejudgments. The hermeneutical circle means, according to Heidegger, that we understand what we already know (Okere, 1983:60). We know from Gadamer that even in mathematics, prejudgments are necessary and axioms function precisely like prejudgments. Pure thought does not exist. We always need a point of departure. This does not mean that philosophy excludes creativity; it rather means that we have to "use the

⁷ It is only by thus recognizing that all understanding is essentially a matter of prejudice that one takes the full measure of the hermeneutic problem ... Indeed, there is also a prejudice of the Enlightenment, which carries and determines their essence. This fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice in general, which thus removes all power from tradition

material of all our hermeneutical experience to create a new meaning for our existence (Okere, 1983:73-74). Thus, Okere cannot totally accept Towa's claim (Towa, 1971:35-59, 1979:7-11) about the basic opposition between philosophy and myth: "(...) it will be just as absurd to presume to recommend to the whole continent as a precondition to having a philosophy, first of all, to demythologize" (Okere, 1983:119). Okere will also disagree with Towa that there are philosophical traditions - Ancient Egypt and Black Africa -, and anti-philosophical traditions - Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions - (Towa, 1979:19-43). According to Okere, each tradition provides a horizon for thought. Okere will also certainly disagree with Hountondji that, the *africanity* of a philosopher is just a matter of his geographical membership. In his *Sur la "philosophie africaine"*, Hountondji thinks that Amo, although trained in the western philosophical tradition, remains an African philosopher (1976:67, 168-170). This cannot be totally true for Okere because, to be an African philosopher means for him to reflect within the horizons sketched by African cultures: "African cultures have their own symbols pregnant with meaning. A reflection on these symbols, with a meaning view to making the implicit meanings explicit will constitute African philosophy" (Okere, 1983:115). Thus African philosophers, trained in the western philosophical tradition, may lack something and can not be really considered as African philosophers since their philosophy ignores African traditions. As philosophy is relative to a given culture and a historical context, Okere will certainly attenuate Towa's condemnation of the "cult of difference" (Towa, 1979:65-67). Differences of cultural contexts determine differences of philosophical content. Different backgrounds provide diversity of thought. So, differences are unavoidable. Absolute truths do not exist because Dasein is finite.

But Okere agrees with Towa that liberation or decolonization is the major concern of modern African philosophy. To sum up, we can say that, according to Okere and unlike ethnophilosophers, cul-

ture is not philosophy itself. But we cannot philosophize without culture. Hermeneutics is the necessary mediation between philosophy and culture. Does Nkombe Oleko share this perspective?

Nkombe Oleko

He has reconsidered the unrealized project of ethnophilosophers and has tried, in accordance with Ricœur's thought and the German hermeneutical tradition, to show that culture is like a raw material, a "donné à penser" as Ricœur has said. Following the German hermeneutical tradition as it appears in the works of Cassirer⁸, Heidegger and Gadamer, he gives privilege to language as the place where tradition is alive and deposited. Symbols are expressed through language among other things and are pregnant of concepts. As Ladrière asserts in his preface to Nkombe Oleko's book, certainly referencing Ricœur, "the concept always lives secretly in the symbol" (see Nkombe Oleko, 1979:21).

Studying figures of style, he reduced them to metaphor and metonymy and used the logic of classes as a method of analysis. Metaphor and metonymy present in African languages and, specifically, in the Tetela culture⁹, represent an accumulation of experience and knowledge. They acquire a great interest for oral traditions. Indeed, metaphor and metonymy imply different types of relations among classes of propositions such as inclusion, exclusion, reverse inclusion, equality, etc. (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:60-63). Metaphors and metonymies are manifested in "parémies" or short locutions like proverbs. Nkombe Oleko shares Okere's claim, drawn from Heidegger's thought and German hermeneutical tradition in general, that philosophy is always rooted in a pre-philosophic or a culture

⁸ He agrees with Cassirer that the symbol is the necessary mediation used by thought in order to become objective (NkombeOleko, 1979:138). See also the three volumes of Cassirer on *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.

⁹ The Tetela are an ethnic group of the actual Democratic Republic of Congo.

which represents a raw material for conceptual thought (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:27).

The privilege given to language is justified by the fact that language not only supports traditions, but is also an abstraction and a creation of intelligence. We know from linguists that every language has a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic axis (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:34-35). Metonymy and metaphor are abstractions because in a metonymy for instance, we express the whole with the part and vice versa; while in the metaphor, we establish a relation of identity between two things belonging to two different classes: "The metaphor is placed at the precise point where meaning occurs in nonsense" (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:38). For instance, in the metaphor "the chief is a leopard", we have three stages: the exclusion - the chief and the leopard are different beings -, the analogy - the chief and the leopard look alike - and the identification of what has been negated in the first stage - the chief is a leopard. Metonymy, on its part, functions essentially with similitude (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:87-97). If negation is the basic structure of the metaphor, similitude, on the contrary, is the basic structure of metonymy. This is an abstract process. But language is also a creation of sense through words and sentences. By interpreting African cultural symbols, one can really philosophize. Nkombe Oleko tries to show this possibility through the analysis of some Tetela proverbs.

Tetela proverbs express intersubjectivity. This intersubjectivity represents man as a web of interrelations. In Tetela culture both positive and negative or complex relations manifest in human nature¹⁰. Intersubjectivity present in Tetela proverbs considers Muntu or man

¹⁰ We can here think of Pascal claiming that man is neither an angel nor an animal.

both as intentionality and “sedentarity”. Muntu is intentionality¹¹ because he is directed, oriented and opened to another Muntu and to the world. So, intentionality expresses a centrifugal movement, the need of appropriation and consumption of objects or of another Muntu. The centrifugal movement is contradicted by the centripetal movement, that is, sedentarity or the worry about the risks waiting for us in this adventure of appropriation of the world. It can also signify egoism (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:163-165). Positive intersubjectivity is expressed by relations of solidarity, love, preeminence of common interest, community of goods, common participation to work and reciprocity. For example: 1. When your brother is trapping animals, bring him the materials. 2. When your brother carves up a game, your heart is full of joy.

Some Tetela proverbs also express the relationship between man and Ntu - the real Being, God or the Sacred symbolized by the Sun. According to Nkombe Oleko, the relation between Muntu, Kintu - thing - and Ntu implies that the world does not only belong to him, but also to other Bantu and to itself¹². This means that Muntu cannot be the owner of the world, but rather his usufructuror. This relationship attenuates Muntu’s tendency to appropriate for himself all the cosmic wealth (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:187). It also expresses the brotherhood of all Human beings as creatures of Ntu, the genuine Being. Negative intersubjectivity is manifested by “negative dis-

¹¹See Husserl: “The word intentionality signifies nothing other than this fundamental and general peculiarity of the consciousness of being conscious of something, of bearing, in its quality of cogito, its cogitatum in itself”, (*Méditations cartésiennes*, 1953, p.28).

¹² Nkombe Oleko takes back Alexis Kagame’s thought on the Bantu philosophy. But there is a difficulty that Kagame has not himself clarified. He has shown that “Ntu” is the Bantu equivalent of Being, that is, what is really. But Bantu, according to him, do not designate God by Ntu. The issue appears here. If Ntu is what really is, how can it not designate God? Isn’t God the real Being according to Jewish and Christian religions? So the leap from Ntu to God is not evident. This ambiguity also appears in NkombeOleko’s thought when he assimilates, without hesitation, Ntu and the Sun to God. Why do the Tetela use the word “Sun” to designate God and not “Ntu” if Ntu is the real Being and if it means God?

tance"; that is discrimination, lack of fidelity in love, lack of confidence among individuals, betrayal, hostility, indifference, antipathy, abandonment and ingratitude. Example: "A game killed by an orphan (everybody would like to take advantage of it)". This proverb reveals, in order to condemn it, economic exploitation (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:205-206). The analysis of Tetela proverbs raises the problem of sense.

On the basis of the above analysis, it becomes obvious that the world experience of Muntu can be organized into couples of opposition expressing the tension inherent to the ontological structure of the Muntu and the ambiguity of Being itself. Muntu is a tension between vacuity and plenitude. Vacuity means finitude, fragility and facticity while plenitude means the search of eternity - through procreation. Muntu is also intentionality and "centripetality"¹³. The two characters highlight the ambiguity of Being (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:217). In addition, Muntu belongs to the world; the world is what is always "already-there"; so that there is an ontological similarity between Muntu and Kintu. Nevertheless, Muntu also transforms the world and this transformation becomes a process of appropriation of the world generative of economic relations. The "late-comer" appropriates for him the "already-there". However, this appropriation cannot be absolute because Muntu is "historial"; he is born and must die. He passes while Ntu remains: "[A] foreigner cannot own what he finds, but usufruct ... the absolute owner is what we call *Ntu*" (Nkombe Oleko, 1979:219).

The appropriation of the world by the Muntu also raises the problem of collective appropriation. Appropriation is egocentric; it transforms the "world-in-itself" into the "world-for-me" and refuses to consider it as the world-for-the-other". Egoism is the refusal to see others participating in the process of appropriation of the world. It

13 We have translated the word "centripétité", used by Nkombe Oleko, by "centripetality".

can take the form of economic exploitation like the act of taking the game of the orphan. Muntu in this case refuses to share profit drawing from collective work. Thus, the Tetela proverbs provide an ethical vision of the world. Nkombe Oleko can therefore conclude that the study of African traditions, especially proverbs, can help us to elaborate a speculative or reflexive thought on contemporary African issues such as economic development and political power. The starting point of African philosophy must be African culture. African symbols provide raw materials for philosophical reflection. Is this not the reason why Okolo Okonda appeals for a reflection on African understandings of destiny and tradition?

Benoît Okolo Okonda

Okolo Okonda assumes Okere's assertion, also approved by Nkombe Oleko, of the necessary and inherent link between philosophy and culture (Okolo Okonda, 1991:201)¹⁴. He also shares German and French hermeneutical traditions respectively represented by Heidegger and Gadamer, on the one hand and Ricœur on the other. He is convinced that African cultures provide different meanings and horizons. In order to illustrate this thesis, he proposes the reexamination of two important notions in many African cultures: tradition and destiny. He thinks that these two notions are generally evaluated by Africans in accordance with a western background or horizon, but which often lead them to false conclusions and considerations. The Western background portrays a culture based on tradition as conservative, devoid of change and development, and lacking reflective thinking. Beliefs and practices inherited from ancestors are said to be preserved unchanged. They are handed down from one generation to the next without any modification. Knowledge therefore remains

14 Part of our analysis of Okolo Okonda's thought draws from Barry Hallen's *Short History of African Philosophy*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002.

unchanged and innovation is condemned and criminalized (see Hallen, 2002:63). For its part, the belief in destiny is portrayed as encouraging abandonment to determinism and fatalism according to which "what will be, will be". The two combined conceptions of tradition and destiny are supposed to inhibit development and individual initiatives.

Considering African cultures or horizons in relation with the views of Hermeneutists evoked above, Okolo Okonda disagrees with the idea that tradition is based on unchanged beliefs and practices. According to him, tradition in African contexts does not simply mean transmission and reception without change. Unlike the western perspective, tradition for Africans means interpretation and reinterpretation by many people. So, traditions are always changed by different individuals and in different historical contexts. Because new interpretations are always made, it is therefore an error to think that tradition is opposed to change and invention. Tradition is then fatally condemned either to be eliminated or to be amended as time passes:

The tradition, essentially defined as transmission, constitutes a hermeneutic concatenation of interpretations and reinterpretations. To read our tradition is nothing like climbing the whole chain of interpretations all the way back to its originative starting point; rather, it is to properly recreate the chain in actualizing it. (Okolo Okonda quoted by Hallen, 2002:64)

In the same vein, Okolo Okonda asserts that destiny, as far as African cultures are concerned, has nothing to do with the determinism and fatalism present in Hegel's thought. According to Hegel (1965), History is realized by the World Spirit through human passions and interests. So, the willingness of the subject is not important and History has to be achieved regardless: « Chez Hegel, le destin étire le sujet entre le passé et le futur, dans une fatalité où la raison fait bon ménage avec les instincts et où la ruse de l'Esprit triomphe sur nos décisions conscientes. » (Okolo Okonda, 2010:108). Unlike Hegel's perspective, destiny for Africans involves their vision of the world

and represents their history and culture. It refers to a “narrative identity”, not a “distributed identity”. “Distributed identity” refers to the fixed identity, the one assimilated to an eternal and immutable substance, while “narrative identity” refers to historical and self-conscious identity. “Narrative identity” implies historical responsibility (Okolo Okonda, 2010:105). The analysis of the concept of destiny in the Yoruba culture, made by Segun Gbadegesin, seems to confirm Okolo Okonda’s view. Gbadegesin affirms that, according to the Yoruba people, “destiny expresses only a potentiality which may fail to be realized (...). If a person has a good destiny but is not dynamic, the destiny may not come to fruition. So individual destinies express the potentialities of becoming something, of accomplishing a task” (Gbadegesin, 2002:226-227).

After analyzing Kagame’s *Compared Bantu Philosophy*, Hountondji expresses a worry: Kagame gives the impression that, if for all our theoretical issues we were using categories of our languages, we may think otherwise (Hountondji, 1976:25). Following the preceding analysis of tradition and destiny, we can say that Okolo Okonda may agree with Kagame that our cultures provide different theoretical horizons. Okolo Okonda also faces the problem of universality and difference. Unlike certain African hermeneutists who only insist on difference, he thinks that the difference cannot ignore universality. It is in the articulation of both that one can have the real meaning of difference. He then seems to share Towa’s worry about “the cult of difference”:

But be careful that the affirmation of self does not contain and fossilize Africa. Difference has meaning only on the basis of the universal, which will bring freedom in oneself and outside oneself (...) [I]t is necessary to go beyond the paradox of difference: it risks to singularize me absolutely, to be substantial. The wrong difference is that which is closed to the other. The one that has solidified and crystallized, the one that has lost all dynamism, all evolution. (Okolo Okonda, 2010:75)

So, although he insists on difference or on the necessity for African philosophy to become a hermeneutics, Okolo Okonda is not calling for Africans to remain enclosed in their cultures. He believes in universality which is only possible through "interculturality". This necessary opening of African cultures is emphasized by Tsenay Serequeberhan.

Tsenay Serequeberhan

Serequeberhan shares with all the hermeneutists the idea of the necessary "situatedness" of each philosophy. So, African philosophy cannot avoid African cultural and historical experience. This "situatedness" serves as philosophical horizon. Philosophical contents are always situated and consequently particular (Serequeberhan, 1994:7-8). We must not forget that the proverbial spider always spins the thread of its web out of itself. But it seems evident that, according to Serequeberhan, the "situatedness" does not refer only to culture, but also to historical and political context. It is not legitimate to separate culture and history. In modern and contemporary Africa, this historical and political context corresponds to colonialism or neocolonialism. Philosophy will thus necessarily have a political dimension. It is naïve to think that philosophy is politically neutral. So, the struggle for liberation becomes the main challenge of every African philosophy which pretends to be hermeneutics. It has to be the hermeneutics of this particular historical situation in Africa - colonialism and neocolonialism: "(...) unlike Heidegger, for us, the question of our existence, of our "to be", is an inherently political question" (Serequeberhan, 1994:21). Philosophy for Serequeberhan is a critically aware explorative appropriation of our cultural, political, and historical existence.

This primacy of political and historical experience modifies our relationship to culture. Unlike Okere, it is not the interpretation of culture which is essential in the philosophical enterprise; it is our

historical situation which determines our attitude vis-à-vis our culture. That leads Serequeberhan to advocate for a critical relationship to our traditions and an adaptation of the hermeneutical method: "Here, we affirm the methodological preeminence of praxis on hermeneutics, praxis understood in the sense of an action tending toward the transformation of life" (Serequeberhan, 1994:27). Serequeberhan is close to the African revolutionary tradition, especially that of Fanon, Cabral and Towa which he evokes. These three authors insist on the idea that it is our present situation that must orient and guide our relation to the past. Our tradition must be appreciated and subordinated to our main goal: the eradication of colonialism and neocolonialism. The "return to the source" of Cabral¹⁵ must be well understood: it is not a return to the lost paradise, but rather a return to historicity, to freedom; a return to the possibility of making ourselves our history; the possibility of being in our own service. Serequeberhan cannot share the racist theory of Senghor that he considers as an axiological inversion of western racism. Senghor's africanity is the celebration of savagery. It consists in the transformation and erection of all negative stereotypes applied on Africans by western people into positive qualities and essentialist characters (Serequeberhan, 1994:47-52).

African hermeneutics, according to Serequeberhan, must face the problem of violence. Violence in modern and contemporary Africa is in relation to colonization as demonstrated by Fanon (2002:37-103) and Cabral (1975:300-307). Africa is condemned to fight for its liberation synonymous to breaking free from exploitation, barbarism and regression. The struggle for liberation is aimed at the reappropriation of historic initiative. In this struggle, violence

15 See Cabral, *Unité et lutte 1: L'arme de la théorie*, Paris : François Maspero, 1975, pp. 343-344.

is unavoidable as highlighted by Fanon and Cabral¹⁶. Non-violence as a means of resistance is a self-contradiction. Revolution becomes the only alternative to domination. It expresses the reclamation of historicity. It is this comeback to historicity which will shape our difference. By making free our history, we will affirm our cultural difference: "The happening of history, understood in this manner, is the unreplicable process through which radically novel historical formations are self-invented and concretely self-instituted" (Serequeberhan, 1994:96).

In these conditions, revolution can never leave culture unchanged. Serequeberhan denounces "cultural mummification" and its consequence, the "mummification of individual thinking" which leads to apathy. Cultural transformation will create histories instead of the unique European history. Revolution is the way of creating diversity and a multivalent conception of history. African revolutionary enterprise cannot also avoid western experience because colonization has led us to be in contact with western cultural values. We must not forget that these western values are also human values and that, "ultimately the antidote is always located in the poison" (Serequeberhan, 1994:11). We have to freely appreciate western values, just as we have to freely appreciate African traditions and adopt only those which can enable us to reach our objective: liberation from neocolonialism and resumption of historic initiative. To conclude, we can agree with Barry Hallen that the African hermeneutics articulated by Serequeberhan "represents [the] most radical, even revolutionary (...) posture with reference to the status and role of

16 Wecansum up Fanon's position on violence in relation with the struggle for liberation by his claim: « Pour le colonisé, cette violence représente la praxis absolue. » (Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, Paris, La Découverte et Syros, édition de 2002, p.82). On its part, Cabral's position can be summed up by this assertion: "In our concrete case, we have exhausted all the peaceful means within our reach to lead the Portuguese colonialists to a radical change of their policy, and in the direction of the liberation and progress of our people. We have had only repression and crimes. We then decided to take up arms to fight against the attempted genocide of our people, determined to be free and master of its own destiny"(Cabral, op.cit., p.307).

African philosophy" (Hallen, 2002:67). This presentation of African hermeneutics raises some problems that deserve to be discussed.

Critical remarks on issues of African hermeneutics

The first issue discussed by African hermeneutists is the relationship between philosophy and culture. All African hermeneutists refute ethnophilosophy and agree that philosophy is a critical reflection on culture. But if they reject ethnophilosophy, they also reject the formalist universalistic trend which ignores the necessary "situatedness" of every philosophy with regard to its contents. This debate leads us to another issue, the struggle between the Analytic tradition - Universalists - and Relativists. For us, Serequeberhan's and Okolo Okonda's position seems to be closer to the most appropriate philosophical approach. Universality cannot ignore difference and particularity cannot be really appreciated without taking into consideration universality. Universality and difference always go together; they cannot be separated. Culture is the best example of this unity between universality and difference: culture manifests universality because it expresses human potentialities. Every human society has a culture and every cultural element, once created, can be understood and assimilated by any other person. So culture is the expression of what is universal among human beings. But culture is also always the expression of difference and particularity because every society has its culture. A culture or a cultural element is always created by a specific society or people. Then, culture shows both universality and difference or particularity.

Hallen claims: "Cultures can and do differ from one another, but on a more fundamental level, as expressions of a common humanity, they manifest and share important common principles" (Hallen, 2002:26). Wiredu (1996:27) was right to consider that principles of reason are universal. Scientific rationality cannot be considered as the exclusive specificity of western people. Negating

universality makes comprehension impossible among human beings - belonging to different cultures. For instance, Hallen shows how Sogolo, trying to contradict Wiredu, is obliged to recognize the universality of some principles present in all human cultures: "there are certain universals which cut across all human cultures. Indeed, to say that man is a rational being is to imply that mankind as a whole shares in common certain features" (Sogolo quoted by Hallen, 2002:40). Even Ricœur (1965:62-63) thinks that hermeneutics leads to a form of transcendental philosophy because preconceptions are supposed to be an a priori that no interpretation can avoid.

Our opinion is that we can examine the problem of the dialectics between universality and difference at two levels. At the level of human thought, we must agree that principles of reason are the same, that is, universal. But at the level of culture, these principles are manifested differently so that no cultural practice can pretend to universality. Universality in this case appears as an ideal which requires interculturality, dialogue and exchanges amongst cultures. But we cannot include science in these relative cultural forms, as some used to do, because for us, science obeys to a different relativity.

Another issue in relation with African hermeneutics is the risk of the reduction of interpretation in the explanation of culture. This risk is evoked by Ladrière in his preface to Nkombe's book. We must not forget that interpretation is creation; it is not a simple report on cultures. The hermeneutist must not simply explain common beliefs. Conceptualization shall go beyond common beliefs: "And the hermeneutic effort, enlivened by the aim of concept, by its nature is called, to take its distance in comparison with present, with experience, with what is directly significant" (Ladrière, see Nkombe Oleko, 1979 :15). In conclusion, we should mention that there is another issue concerning the primacy between culture and historical and political experience. African hermeneutists must not forget that, among other things, culture represents answers found by people in order to solve problems they are facing. So, what precedes is political

and historical experiences, practical issues, and culture, then, is a means by which to solve them. Serequeberhan seems to be accurate in recognizing that it is our historical situation which determines our relation to culture. It is important not to only reflect on the basis of our cultures, but also to confront the goals of our cultures, and to test them. As demonstrated above, we must also remember that culture has a universal dimension. That is why, it is important to consider our traditions as the starting point of the reflection on our historical experience, but we must not exclude other cultures because they show our common humanity. We can adapt other cultural experiences to our situation, and to this extent, Appiah is right to say, in line with Wiredu: "We will only solve our problems if we see them as human problems arising out of a special situation, and we shall not solve them if we see them as African problems, generated by our being somehow unlike others." (Appiah, 1992:136).

Conclusion

Our theoretical intention was a diachronic presentation of African hermeneutics and the discussion of some issues in relation with this philosophical trend in Africa. It seems evident that we cannot philosophize in Africa in complete ignorance of our cultures. If every philosophy is rooted in a specific culture, African philosophy cannot be the exception to this rule. However, by eschewing African cultures, we neglect the meaning they bear and which can contribute to an African speculative effort and praxis. Yet African hermeneutics is not synonymous with ethnophilosophy; it is a reflective and critical analysis of the African historico-political experience. African philosophy cannot also be universal as far as its contents are concerned. Every idea reflects the cultural and historical experience of the philosopher. To that extent, no philosophy can pretend to be universal. Hermeneutics has raised the problem of the dialectics between universality and difference or particularity. We have shown that every

consideration of only one aspect of the problem leads to abstraction because universality and particularity are intimately linked. Culture is the manifestation of this intimate connection. We have also explained why, although it is important to reflect on our cultures, we must integrate other cultural experiences which remain human and can potentially help in our enterprise of auto-affirmation. Finally, we realize that the African hermeneutical trend has enabled us to discuss fundamental issues in relation with African philosophy and the African historical experience. It therefore appears as a paradigm of great importance for African philosophy.

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