

The Colonial Trauma in Philosophy. Can Non-Africans do African Philosophy?

.....

Timo SCHMITZ¹

Trier, Germany

schmitz-timo1@web.de

Résumé: *Après que les Africains eurent acquis leur indépendance de l'Occident et obtenu des droits égaux, ils se développèrent une fierté envers une «philosophie noire», purement africaine en réaction aux ethnophilosophes qui spéculaient sur la façon de raisonner africaine tout en y étant étrangers. Cependant, les blessures de la colonisation sont restées jusqu'à présent, bien que les Africains soient devenus toujours plus conscients d'un héritage et d'un savoir dont ils peuvent se réclamer. L'auteur de cet article défend l'opinion que l'exclusivité de la compréhension de la philosophie africaine explique pourquoi cette philosophie sort rarement d'Afrique ni ne prend pas prise dans les universités occidentales, bien qu'elle soit beaucoup plus avancée à certains égards.*

There are few universities outside of Africa, where African Philosophy can be studied, such as in Leiden, London and the University of South Maine, however, the options still remain few. And while the colonial past left massive traces in the philosophical discourses within Africa, African philosophers, such as Amo, who studied and taught in Germany, are almost forgotten in the West nowadays. The absence of African philosophy in Western academics goes together with an essential question that is nonetheless important in Africa itself: Are Non-Africans allowed to do African philosophy?

To understand the root of this question, one has to be aware that the colonial past divided the philosophical mainstream in Africa in two groups: in English academics, Panafricanism

¹ Timo Schmitz is a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at Trier University, Germany. He authored books on religion, politics, languages, as well as fictional works and has experience in journalism. He is interested in all kinds of philosophical systems and beliefs that exist around the world, as well as indigenous religions. Since 2017, he issues the *Journal of Ethnophilosophical Questions and Global Ethics* he issues the *Journal of Ethnophilosophical Questions and Global Ethics*.

became dominant, whose most important figures are mainly English-speaking, while the French-speaking academics prefer the Negritude. Both ideas have in common that they affirm the uniqueness of Africanity, which is also present in philosophy. As such Hountondji asks “how African are the so-called African Studies? By African history, for instance, we usually mean the historical discourse *on* or *about* Africa and not necessarily a historical discourse coming from Africa or produced by Africans” (Hountondji, 2009, p.2). Many scientific fields in the West are Eurocentric, and as such people from outside take the right to decide about people from inside. Western analysts researched the beliefs of ethnicities without questioning what they were doing as they understood themselves as part of the civilized world and thus superior to the object of research, or as Hountondji says: “The authors usually assumed that Africans themselves were not conscious of their own philosophy, and that only Western analysts observing them from without could give a systematic account of their wisdom” (Hountondji, 2009, p. 3). The most prominent work on African philosophy is Placide Tempels’ categorization of his Bantu philosophy and the subject of Ethnophilosophy is credited back to him, as a discipline of describing the philosophical system of an ethnicity and analyzing it from the outside. Ethnophilosophy soon became the most important discipline in African philosophy being picked up by Alexis Kagame as a way to analyze the philosophical belief of ethnicities from the inside by analyzing his own. As a scholar who studied in the West himself, he took Western methodology to analyze African thoughts and “praised the discovery of a unique and collective Bantu philosophy” (Ukwamedua, 2011, p. 252). However, Kagame as well as Tempelsians take the presumption that there is one Bantu philosophy and that it reflects the true spirit of Africa. While Tempels researched ethnicities in Democratic Republic of Congo, Kagame took his own ethnicity, the Rwandans (Banyarwanda), which leads to a strong bias, as both regions are geographically very closely related, and so are their languages, while the geographical distribution of the Bantu people is very large and their languages and traditions are very diverse. Though being harshly criticized, Tempels and Kagame saw the *muntu* in contrast to Western *body-soul dualism* (cp. Schmitz, 2017), and therefore one has to ask: Is there something like the ‘African man’?

Fabien Eboussi Boulaga even sees the *muntu* in a crisis for *muntu*’s sake, because the image of Africa is made by the one who rules, and not the one who is ruled, and thus finally “il n’y a pas de tradition africaine parce qu’il n’y a pas d’Africain” (Eboussi Boulaga, 1977, p. 148) or in other words, when African philosophy appeared as such in the form of ethnophilosophy, it was an African discipline without an African. Hountondji goes so far to declare ethnophilosophy a myth which is made for the European public (Hountondji, 1977). As a result, in 1978, the critical tendency was established in Democratic

Republic of Congo as a critique to ethnophilosophy to re-establish true African philosophy (see Essengue, 2015, p. 283). Hountondji proposed a concept in which “African philosophy allowed a distinction between Africanists and Africans in the field of philosophy. Many Western thinkers who wrote extensively on African systems of thought could no longer be viewed as belonging to African philosophy in the new sense, while the works by their African counterparts were part of the African writings in ethno-philosophy and therefore were part and parcel of the African philosophical literature” (Hountondji, 2009, p. 5). However, Hountondji makes a mistake which is fatal: While Africans might believe in European systems, why shouldn’t Europeans believe in African systems? If a philosopher from Africa uses Aristoteles’ methodology, he is still doing philosophy, while a European philosopher who believes in concepts which originate from Africa would rather be Africanist in the first place and only a philosopher in the second, but separated. While African philosophers study Western philosophy, philosophy from Africa stays rare in the West. If only Africans can do African philosophy there would even be no use to teach it in the West, since Westerners would not be able to further develop it. As a consequence, there would be an Africa-Europe border, a kind of ingrouping and outgrouping which rather separates than unifying in harmony.

As a result of the colonial experiences and the oppression conducted by Europeans, it is clearly understandable that Africans do not want to be denominated in any way anymore which also includes that they grasp their right to develop their philosophy on their own instead of being guided by foreign influences limiting them under the presumption that Africans cannot do it on their own. Indeed, Europeans dictated a lot: they set up the borders, took the resources, enslaved whole nations based on skin colour, and Europeans in turn act as if everything is naturally forgiven after the indigenous population chased them out. And as such, it is also far too understandable that Africans want to keep their science – again it is a painful moment, because Europeans proclaimed openly that Africans would be primitive and uneducated and imposed European education as superiority on them as result. It is only logical in consequence that after this denunciation and humiliation, Africans want their own education back and decide on it on their own, without Westerners giving advise how to do science properly. At the same time, insisting on a right to solely develop it on their own closes up any possibility for a share. As I pointed out in a previous article:

All students of philosophy in Africa nowadays have to study Western philosophy at first, which as a result means that they are better educated than students in Europe or America, as students in the West mainly have to deal with Western ideals, such as the soul-body-problem, religious critics and secular ethical questions, while

African students have been educated from a different aspect from childhood, and therefore are more capable to see things from more aspects. To them, an animal is not just a product for mass consum, to them ecology in forestry is not just a question of climate, but for them a tree is a soul as well. Even further, climate change is not just something you can regulate up or down, to them the whole climate has to be seen through the aspects of nature. As such, their insight on such questions is much deeper and profounder than the – on the surface more reasonable – Western views. (Schmitz, 2017).

If African systems of belief are no part of Africanology or Ethnology exclusively, but are accepted as part of philosophy in the West, school teachers as well as university academics will take African points of view into their ethics lesson and Western students can be shown in this way that Africans are no primitive people who had to take everything from Europe, but that African scholars already proposed ideas to issues, where Westerners are still in a process of development. African points of views on ethics for instance can (though not exclusively) solve issues of controversial matters, where secularism and religion have opposite basic statements. As a result, this will lead to new possibilities for Africa, they will be able to say that the Westerners ‘exported’ their ideas and they can be proud of it. So instead of making African philosophy a exclusively African matter, Africans shall be aware of their great heritage and see the treasure of their wisdom as a global good – a good that is not less worth than a Nietzsche or Kant. A good that can break eurocentrism and the myth of Europe as mother of science! Africa hopes to benefit from Western patterns of industrialization, and one has to ask, if they continue to import Western ideals, why not try to export African wisdom? In times of insecurity, consumerism, materialism, and soulless utilitarianism, it is time that Africa brings back the spirit of life that was lost long ago in the West, when money and consuming goods replaced humanity and morality in the West. Finally, many African countries are still poor, but does only money decide about wealth? African philosophy can be a good counterbalance to capitalism. Especially in ecological philosophy, Europe can learn a lot from Africa, how to treasure Mother Earth and how to care about the planet. African philosophy can, alongside East Asian philosophy², take an important place on this subject, because the young generation in Europe become aware of climate change, consumerism and wars

2 East Asian philosophy is already very popular outside of Asia, because it never had any appeal to be exclusively Asian. Especially the principles of force and natural philosophy in general were taken up to understand the nature of man in a new way, making the Daodejing one of the worldwide most translated works. Parallely, in history, Islamic philosophy had an important impact on Europeans, influencing the understanding of the Aristotle reception. If Europeans are allowed to utilize African philosophy, it can help addressing problems of the 21st century and understanding Africa as it is, giving Africans a worldwide respect for their ideas, demasking the myth of an uncivilized, unworthy continent.

and they demand for a change. If Europeans and Africans can do African philosophy together, the awareness of what Europe has done to Africans gets bigger, and at the same time, African contributions will be taken up by the young generation in Europe and respected by them. Because if African philosophy stays a solely African matter, many good voices from Africa will never reach other publics on a large scale.

LITERATURE:

- ◆ EBOUSSI BOULAGA Fabien: *La crise du Muntu*, Paris : Présence africaine, 1977.
- ◆ ESSENGUE Yannick: « Hermeneutique dialectique et discursivité postcoloniale pour une paremiologie historico-definitionnelle », *Revista Labirinto*, Porto Velho-RO, Ano XV, Vol. 22, 2015, pp. 274-299.
- ◆ HOUNTONDJI, Paulin : *Sur la « philosophie africaine » - Critique de l'ethnophilosophie*, Paris : F. Maspero, 1977.
- ◆ HOUNTONDJI Paulin: "Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans – Two Perspectives on African Studies", *RCCS Annual Review* (1), 2009.
- ◆ SCHMITZ Timo: "A very short introduction into African Philosophy and their main streams" (27 September 2017). In: Timo Schmitz: *A Divinely Way to Philosophy*, Vol. 1. Vachendorf: Graf Berthold Verlag, 2022.", self-published online article, 27 September 2017.
- ◆ UKWAMEDUA Nelson Udoka: "A Critical Review of Alexis Kagame's Four Categories of African Philosophy", *Ogirisi - a new journal of African studies* Vol. 8, 2011, pp. 248-265.



Empreintes de mains réalisées par des chasseurs-cueilleurs voici 9 000 ans dans la « Grotte aux mains », en Argentine. Ces mains mortes de longue date donnent l'impression de sortir du rocher et d'être tendues vers nous. C'est une des reliques les plus émouvantes du monde des anciens fourrageurs... mais personne ne sait ce qu'elle signifie.

Empreinte de main humaine réalisée il y a environ 30 000 ans sur la paroi de la grotte Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc dans le sud de la France. Quelqu'un a essayé de dire : « J'étais ici ! »

Écoute plus souvent
Les choses que les êtres,
La voix du feu s'entend,
Entends la voix de l'eau.
Écoute dans le vent
Le buisson en sanglot :
C'est le souffle des ancêtres.
Le souffle des ancêtres morts
Qui ne sont pas partis,
Qui ne sont pas sous terre,
Qui ne sont pas morts.
Ceux qui sont morts ne sont jamais partis,
Ils sont dans le sein de la femme,
Ils sont dans l'enfant qui vagit.

Birago Diop, *Les contes d'Amadou-Koumba*

