

SECOND EDITION

AFRICAN
PHILOSOPHY
MYTH & REALITY

PAULIN J. HOUNTONDJI

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ABIOLA IRELE

Contents

First published in French 1976
French edition copyright 1976 by François Maspero, Paris

First published in English 1983
English edition copyright 1983 by Paulin J. Hountondji
Introduction copyright 1983 by Abiola Irele
Translation copyright Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd
Preface to the second edition copyright © 1996 by Paulin J. Hountondji

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The Association of American University Presses' Resolution on Permissions constitutes the only exception to this prohibition.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hountondji, Paulin J., date
[Sur la philosophie africaine. English]
African philosophy : myth and reality / Paulin J. Hountondji ; translated by Henri Evans with the collaboration of Jonathan Rée ; introduction by Abiola Irele. — 2nd ed.
p. cm. — (African systems of thought)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-253-33229-X (cl : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-253-21096-8 (pa : alk. paper)
1. Philosophy, African. I. Title. II. Series.
B5305.H6813 1996
199.6—dc20
96-12249

2 3 4 5 01 00

Preface to the second edition

vii

Introduction, by Abiola Irele

7

Part One: Arguments

- 1 An alienated literature 33
- 2 History of a myth 47
- 3 African philosophy, myth and reality 55
- 4 Philosophy and its revolutions 71

Part Two: Analyses

- 5 An African philosopher in Germany in the eighteenth century: Anton-Wilhelm Amo 111
- 6 The end of 'Nkrumahism' and the (re)birth of Nkrumah 131
- 7 The idea of philosophy in Nkrumah's *Consciencism* 141
- 8 True and false pluralism 156

Postscript

170

Notes and references

184

Index

219

within a population now weary and indifferent to theoretical problems that are seen as pointless.

Science is generated by discussion and thrives on it.²⁷ If we want science in Africa, we must create in the continent a human environment in which and by which the most diverse problems can be freely debated and in which these discussions can be no less freely recorded and disseminated, thanks to the written word, to be submitted to the appreciation of all and transmitted to future generations. These, I am sure, will do much better than we have.

This, obviously, presupposes the existence of freedom of expression, which in varying degrees so many of our present-day political regimes are endeavouring to stifle. But this means that the responsibility of African philosophers (and of all African scientists) extends far beyond the narrow limits of their discipline and that they cannot afford the luxury of self-satisfied apoliticism or quiescent complacency about the established disorder unless they deny themselves both as philosophers and as people. In other words, the theoretical liberation of philosophical discourse presupposes political liberation. We are today at the centre of a tangle of problems. The need for a political struggle makes itself felt at all levels, on all planes. I shall simply add that this struggle will not be simple and that clarity as well as resolve are needed if we are to succeed. The future is at stake.

2 History of a myth*

African philosophical literature rests, it hardly needs saying, on a confusion: the confusion between the popular (ideological) use and the strict (theoretical) use of the word 'philosophy'. According to the first meaning, philosophy is any kind of wisdom, individual or collective, any set of principles presenting some degree of coherence and intended to govern the daily practice of a man or a people. In this vulgar sense of the word, everyone is naturally a philosopher, and so is every society. But in the stricter sense of the word, one is no more spontaneously a philosopher than one is spontaneously a chemist, a physicist or a mathematician, since philosophy, like chemistry, physics or mathematics, is a specific theoretical discipline with its own exigencies and methodological rules.

In this kinship between philosophy and the sciences we have the touchstone, the infallible criterion by which to judge the absurdity or relevance of any proposition on philosophy, however general. Indeed, whatever scope is assigned to philosophy to distinguish it from other disciplines, one thing is certain: philosophy is a theoretical discipline and therefore belongs to the same genus as algebra, geometry, mechanics, linguistics, etc. Now, if we pose that it is absurd to speak of *unconscious* algebra, geometry, linguistics, etc., and if we accept that no science can exist historically without an explicit discourse, then by the same token we must regard the very idea of an unconscious philosophy as absurd. Conversely, if we believe that it is of the essence of any science to be constituted by free discussion, by the confrontation of hypotheses and theories created by the thought of individuals (or at least assumed by them) and reaching total convergence through reciprocal amendment, then we must also find absurd the idea of a collective, immutable and definitive 'philosophy', abstracted from history and progress.

* A recast version of an article written in 1970, published in *Dahome-Express*, no. 1411 (10 May 1974), and in *Presence Africaine*, no. 91, 3rd Quarter (1974).

But this is precisely what 'African philosophy' is, as understood by our Africanists. Why such a flagrant misconception? There is every indication that our ethnophilosophers were perfectly aware of the equivocation. It is true that Tempels seems to resort most naturally to the ideological use of the word: but one can detect in certain of his colleagues and disciples something like a scruple or at least an embarrassment. Kagamé warns us, right at the beginning of his great work, that he is using the word in the sense of 'intuitive philosophy' and not in its proper sense, and in *Un Visage africain du christianisme*, Vincent Mulago contrasts 'formal' and 'material' philosophy. But in both, this distinction functions as a theoretical assumption preceding their analysis, as a preliminary justification. And this is precisely what is so surprising. The distinction between the two ideas of philosophy should lead not to the consecration of the vulgar meaning but to its destruction. It should compel a philosopher to reject as null and void the pseudo-philosophy of world-views and make him see clearly that philosophy in the strictest sense, far from being a continuation of spontaneous thought systems, is constituted by making a clean break from them; whereas here it serves our authors as a pretext for undertaking in all sincerity, a conjectural reconstruction of African wisdom, decked out for the occasion as a philosophy.

Why this failure? Why does the conceptual distinction remain without effect? Why does the promised clarification come to nothing? The failure cannot be ascribed to ignorance. It is clearly deliberate, the effect of a wish. African ethnophilosophers (like their predecessor Tempels, in spite of his apparent naïveté) knew full well that 'African philosophy', in the sense in which they understood it, belonged to a very different genus from European philosophy, taken in the usual and exact sense of the term. The two were wholly distinct and therefore incomparable, incommensurable. And yet they insisted on this comparison, setting their conceptual understanding on one side while drowning the language of science in a welter of desire.

We have already identified this desire: African intellectuals wanted at all costs to rehabilitate themselves in their own eyes and in the eyes of Europe. To do so, they were prepared to leave no stone unturned, and they were only too happy to discover, through Tempels' notorious *Bantu Philosophy*, a type of argumentation that could, despite its ambiguities (or, rather, thanks to them), serve as one way of ensuring this rehabilitation. This explains why so many

African authors, in various tones and moods, struck up the Tempelsian theme, whereas they should have been mindful of the massive and blinding fact that the Belgian missionary, by his own admission, was addressing not them but the European public.

We shall not so much insist here on this *fact* as on the way in which it determines the content of Tempels' work. Being a European's discourse addressed to other Europeans, an exhibit in a debate in which the Bantus have no part to play and appear only as an object or pretext, *Bantu Philosophy* is cut to its public's size. In a dual motion that is contradictory only in appearance, it aims on the one hand at facilitating what it calls Europe's 'mission to civilize' (by which we understand: practical mastery by the colonizer of the black man's psychological wellsprings) and, on the other hand, at warning Europe itself against the abuses of its own technocratic and ultra-materialistic civilization, by offering her, at the cost of a few rash generalizations, an image of the fine spirituality of the primitive Bantu. It is a double problematic, that of the 'mission to civilize' and the 'heightening of the soul';¹ neither can be separated from the other. The colonizers 'civilize', but only on condition that they rehumanize themselves and recover their soul. The theoretical objective of *Bantu Philosophy* is entirely contained in this double problematic, which itself finds its meaning solely in the ideological problematic of triumphant imperialism. This one has to accept: every such theoretical project, every attempt at systematizing the world-view of a dominated people is necessarily destined for a foreign public and intended to fuel an ideological debate which is centred *elsewhere* – in the ruling classes of the dominant society.

Why did the African public allow itself to be taken in? It perceived only the second aspect of the project, without linking it with the first. The problematic of the 'heightening of the soul' flattered its pride at little cost and so concealed from it the link with the first problematic (the 'civilizing mission') which was, in fact, the dominant one. The African public 'spontaneously'² inverted the priorities, making the secondary problematic primary and paying little or no attention to the dominant problematic which itself was inseparable from the fact of the non-African destination of the book.

This misunderstanding explains why so many of our fellow countrymen should have appropriated the 'heightening of the soul' problematic, the theoretical project of the reconstruction of Bantu 'philosophy', Rwandais 'philosophy', Dogon 'philosophy', Yoruba 'philosophy', Wolof 'philosophy', etc., or more generally of African

'philosophy', collective and spontaneous world-views which were being called upon to regenerate European philosophy; and why they did so without worrying about the political implications of such a project. This disastrous inconsistency has made us waste our time, for the last twenty years at least,³ in trying to define ourselves, to codify a supposedly given, ready-constituted thought, instead of wading in, throwing ourselves into the fray and thinking new thoughts on the basis of today's and tomorrow's problems. We thus remain unwittingly prisoners of Europe, trying, as ever, to force her to respect us and deriving naive pleasure from declaring for her benefit what we are naïve enough to regard as our philosophical identity. In a completely sterile withdrawal we go on vindicating our cultures, or rather, apologizing for them to the white man, instead of living fully their actual splendour and poverty, instead of *transforming* them.

We are reminded here of the Gospel truth: he who would gain his soul must lose it. By dint of trying to defend our civilizations at all costs, we have petrified, mummified them. We have betrayed our original cultures by showing them off, offering them as topics of myths for external consumption. In doing so we have unwittingly played Europe's game – the Europe against which we first claimed we were setting out to defend ourselves. And what do we find at the end of the road? The same subservience, the same display of wretchedness, the same tragic abandonment of thinking by ourselves and for ourselves: slavery.⁴

Tempels' African successors, whatever the distance – which may be important – that separates them from the Belgian missionary, have this in common with him: that they have chosen to address themselves primarily to a European public. This choice largely explains the content of their discourses. Their objective has been to describe the main features of African civilization for the benefit of their European counterparts, to secure their respect for African cultural originality – but on Europe's own terms. In the circumstances it was inevitable that they should have ended up by inventing, as a foil to European philosophy, an African 'philosophy' concocted from extra-philosophical material consisting of tales, legends, dynastic poems, etc., by aggressively interpreting these cultural data, grinding them down to extract their supposedly 'substantive marrow', turning them over, again and again, in order to derive from them what they could not, cannot and will never yield: a genuine philosophy.

As a result, the systems of thought reconstructed by our authors at the conclusion of this over-interpretation are the expression of their personal philosophical choices rather than of some collective thought of the Africans. Proof of this lies in the fact that attentive reading often reveals significant differences in the apparent monotony of these monolithic interpretations. The most important of these, as we have seen, is that which contrasts Alexis Kagamé with the author of *Bantu Philosophy*. For Tempels the main difference between European philosophy and Bantu 'philosophy' lay in their respective conceptions of being: static in the first case, dynamic in the second. For the Bantu being is supposed to be synonymous with power, so that ontology becomes a general theory of forces, of their natural hierarchy and interaction. But according to the Rwandais priest, it is artificial to contrast *being* at rest and *being* in motion, for in each case we are confronted with the same being, only considered under two different aspects: 'Operational predisposition presupposes the essence; essence is structured in terms of its finality.' This is the double axiom with which Kagamé refuted his illustrious predecessor, without naming him.

His critique, however, is not a radical one. He should have renounced Tempels' whole project instead of accepting its dogmatic naïveté and carrying it out slightly differently. Kagamé should not have been content to confute Tempels, he should have asked himself what the reasons were for his error. Then he might have noticed that Tempels' insistence on emphasizing the differences was part and parcel of the whole scheme, the reconstruction of the Bantu *Welanschauung*, inasmuch as the scheme was not inscribed in the *Welanschauung* itself but was external to it. Kagamé should have seen that this theoretical undertaking took its meaning only from a desire, the desire to differentiate African from European civilization at any cost, and that in these conditions the author of *Bantu Philosophy* would inevitably regard all as grist to his mill and would massively project on to the Bantu soul his own metaphysical reveries, reinforced for the occasion by a few delusive fragments of ethnography.

Because he failed to drive home his critique, Kagamé has remained a prisoner of the same myth. Enmeshed with him are all those authors, some remarkable, and all those African intellectuals who have taken it into their heads to define a specific African philosophy, a world-view common to all Africans, past, present and

future, a collective, immutable system of thought in eternal opposition to that of Europe.

Such is the theoretical impasse into which we have been blind enough to stumble. Since then all our philosophical thinking has been marking time. The only prospect it has offered itself has been the systematic reconstruction of the world-view of African peoples: a mad and hopeless enterprise. Each and every African philosopher now feels duty-bound to reconstruct the thought of his forefathers, the collective *Welanschauung* of his people. To do so, he feels obliged to make himself an ethnological expert on African customs. Anything he may produce in another vein, say on Plato or Marx, Confucius or Mao Tse-tung, or in any general philosophical area unconnected with Africa, he regards as a sort of parenthesis in his thought, of which he must feel almost ashamed. And if he is shameless enough not to go blue in the face (some would prefer him to blush), so much the worse for him! His critics are watching. They will soon drag him back to the straight and narrow path . . . of Africanism.

That is how two entirely different discourses come, eventually, to be confused: the ethnographic discourse (whose scientific status, incidentally, might itself bear investigation, especially in relation to sociology) and the philosophical discourse. That is how our philosophical literature has gradually managed, in the last thirty years, to get itself bogged down in the muddy paths of a dubious ethnophilosophy, a hybrid, ideological discipline without recognizable status in the world of theory. In treading these paths our authors have genuinely believed that their work is original, whereas in fact they have merely been following in the footsteps of Western ethnocentrism. For Europe has never expected anything from us, in cultural terms, except that we should offer her our civilizations as showpieces and alienate ourselves in a fictitious dialogue with her, over the heads of our own peoples. This is what we are invited to do whenever we are asked to develop African Studies and preserve our cultural authenticity. We forget too easily that African Studies were invented by Europe and that the ethnographic sciences are an integral part of the heritage of Europe, amounting to no more than a passing episode in the theoretical tradition of the Western peoples.

So what is to be done? Apart from a nationalistic withdrawal into

ourselves, a painstaking, unending inventory of our cultural values, a collective narcissism induced by colonization, we must relearn how to think. True, we must grant African ethnophilosophers the merit of having tried, with the means at their disposal, to defend their cultural identity against the avowed or cryptic assimilationist designs of imperialism. But we must add that this ethnophilosophical argument, which they have used as a means of cultural resistance, is one of the most ambiguous ever to have been invented and that, having failed to perceive its ambiguity, they have unwittingly played their opponent's game. Motivated by the genuine need for an African philosophy, they have wrongly believed that this philosophy lies in our past, needing only to be exhumed and then brandished like a miraculous weapon in the astonished face of colonialist Europe. They have not seen that African philosophy, like African science or African culture in general, is before us, not behind us, and must be created today by decisive action. Nobody would deny that this creation will not be effected *ex nihilo*, that it will necessarily embrace the heritage of the past and will therefore rather be a recreation. But this and simple withdrawal into the past are worlds apart.

Admit, then, that our philosophy is yet to come. Take the word 'philosophy' in the active, not passive, sense. We do not need a closed system to which all of us can adhere and which we can exhibit to the outside world. No, we want the restless questioning, the untriting dialectic that accidentally produces systems and then projects them towards a horizon of fresh truths. African philosophy, like any other philosophy, cannot possibly be a collective world-view. It can exist as a philosophy only in the form of a confrontation between individual thoughts, a discussion, a debate.

That is why our first task today is to organize such a debate: an autonomous debate, not a far-flung appendix to European debates but one that will bring African philosophers together, thus creating within Africa a human ambience in which it will be possible to ask the thorniest theoretical questions. The Africanness of our philosophy will not necessarily reside in its themes but will depend above all on the geographical origin of those who produce it and their intellectual coming together. The best European Africanists remain Europeans, even (and above all) if they invent a Bantu 'philosophy', whereas the African philosophers who think in terms of Plato or Marx and confidently take over the theoretical heritage of Western philosophy, assimilating and transcending it, are

producing authentic African work. And they are even more authentically African if instead of merely sharing that heritage with their European counterparts, instead of drowning their own discourse in the tumultuous streams of European debate, they decide to subject that heritage first and foremost to the appreciation and criticism of their own fellow countrymen. The real problem is not to talk about Africa but to talk among Africans. Europe is what she is today because she assumed and transformed the cultural heritage of other peoples, in the first rank of which were a people of our own continent: the ancient Egyptians. Nothing must prevent us today from taking the opposite path. We must at all costs liberate our thought from the Africanist ghetto to which it has been confined, get out of our intellectual prison, open up a breach in the closed space of our collective fantasies, so that theoretical issues may surge in, to be shared first of all with our immediate brothers.

In other words, today's African philosophers must reorient their discourse. They must write first and foremost for an African public, no longer a non-African public. That will be enough to stop them purring on about Luba ontology, Dogon metaphysics, the conception of old age among the Fulbe, etc., simply because such themes do not interest their fellow countrymen but were aimed formerly at satisfying the Western craving for exoticism. As for the African public, what it wants most is to be widely informed about what is going on elsewhere, about current scientific problems in other countries and continents, out of curiosity in the first place (a legitimate curiosity), but also in order to confront those problems with its own preoccupations, to reformulate them freely in its own terms and thus to steep them in the melting-pot of African science.

The real problem, then, is to liberate the theoretical creativity of our peoples by affording it the means of exerting itself effectively, on the basis of boundless information and through a free discussion in which the most diverse theories may be generated and refuted. In the last resort philosophy, in the active sense of the word,¹⁵ before anything else, just that: a huge public debate in which every participant's intellectual responsibility is at stake. Everything else, including science, will come afterwards, in its train.

3 African philosophy, myth and reality*

I must emphasize that my theme is African philosophy, myth and reality, whereas one might have expected the conventional formula, myth or reality? I am not asking whether it exists, whether it is a myth or a reality. I observe that it does exist, by the same right and in the same mode as all the philosophies of the world: in the form of a *literature*. I shall try to account for this misunderstood reality, deliberately ignored or suppressed even by those who produce it and who, in producing it, believe that they are merely reproducing a pre-existing thought through it: through the insubstantiality of a transparent discourse, of a fluid, compliant ether whose only function is to transmit light. My working hypothesis is that such suppression cannot be innocent: this discursive self-deception serves to conceal something else, and this apparent self-obliteration of the subject aims at camouflaging its massive omnipresence, its convulsive effort to root in reality this fiction filled with itself. Tremendous censorship of a shameful text, which presents itself as impossibly transparent and almost non-existent but which also claims for its object (African pseudo-philosophy) the privilege of having always existed, outside any explicit formulation.

I therefore invert the relation: that which exists, that which is incontrovertibly given is that literature. As for the object it claims to restore, it is at most a way of speaking, a verbal invention, a *mythos*. When I speak of African philosophy I mean that literature, and I try to understand why it has so far made such strenuous efforts to hide behind the screen, all the more opaque for being imaginary, of an implicit 'philosophy' conceived as an unthinking, spontaneous, collective system of thought, common to all Africans or at least to

* This is a rewritten and updated version of a lecture 'Stammered' at the University of Nairobi on 5 November 1973, at the invitation of the Philosophical Association of Kenya, under the title 'African philosophy, myth and reality' (cf. *Thought and Practice*, vol. 1, no. 2, Nairobi, 1974, pp. 1-16). The same lecture was delivered at Cotonou on 20 December 1973 and at Porto-Novo on 10 January 1974, under the sponsorship of the National Commission for Philosophy of Dahomey.