'Qu'est-ce que la philosophie africaine?'

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Abstract

This thesis traces the evolution of the concept of African philosophy through three phases: the cultural essentialism of Léopold Senghor, founder of Négritude, the universalist critical reaction of Paulin Hountondji and the professional philosophers, and the sophisticated particularism of Valentin Mudimbé. The three stages are contextualized with discussion of the socio-political positioning of each writer, his motives, and his particular understanding of what is *at stake* in the definition of African philosophy.

   The initial need to bring about a revalorization of African culture and a recognition of African philosophical capabilities is met by a flamboyant and highly vocal cultural movement, Négritude, which is, however, intrinsically limited in scope and lifespan, and sets up a number of persistent, dogmatic suppositions about the 'essentially African reason'. A demonstration of the Western origins of this essentialism debunks but does not dispel its influence, since it is firmly anchored to the themes of authenticity, colonial influence, and postcolonial independence. This leads to a dilemma where any move to separate African philosophy from the notion of a distinctly African reason is perceived as a Eurocentric attempt at acculturation, or a capitulation to the false universalism of 'Enlightenment philosophy', and on the other hand, the view that African thought is essentially different from European thought is also criticized as deriving from the Western colonial discourse.

   There is no definitive answer to this problem, and even the search for such an answer is itself part of the problem, a further twist in the *ruse* that Mudimbé believes is inherent to the colonial discourse. The practical solution Mudimbé proposes is to introduce an *écart* between African scientific practice and the West, to create a new space within which Africans might investigate the field of their experience in an Afrocentric way which will preserve their cultural specificity.

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Acknowledgements

THEL'S MOTTO

Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?
Or wilt thou go ask the Mole?
Can Wisdom be put in a silver rod?
Or Love in a golden bowl?[1]

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Problems of African Philosophy

One of the first questions that one is apt to pose with respect to any academic subject is, of course, *why should we study this area?* Apart from personal interest and topical peculiarities (such as the fact that the area is usually neglected by Western philosophy), possible responses may be found by considering the specific problems that come up within the context of African philosophy, how they may be solved, or at least approached, and what relevance all this may bear to other subjects of interest and to philosophy in general.

As we remarked above, African philosophy is an area generally neglected by the Western academy, which tends to engage with it on two fronts: first, insofar as African philosophers deal with subjects of direct relevance to Western philosophy, especially the texts of Western philosophers or the themes which dominate the Western philosophical environment; and secondly, as an object of study, through disciplines like anthropology and ethnology, which assume an essential difference between African societies and the West.[2]

But the common interests of African and Western philosophy may be more numerous than is realized. In the next few paragraphs we shall outline some of these interests, which will be further developed in the body of the thesis.

1.1.1 Philosophy, Africa and Reason

Post-colonial African philosophical texts typically depart from some sort of rumination about the nature of philosophy itself.[3] This is unsurprising, for the continent has a singular relationship with this particular discipline, initially

because Africa was theorized as the 'dark' continent, lost to the light of reason, a land imagined to be dominated by savagery and (with the advent of ethnology) by the 'pre-logical mentality'.[4] In Western scientific and cultural traditions, Africa has by turns been glorified, as the home of primordial (i.e. 'natural') freedom, untouched by the decadence of culture and civilization;[5] vilified, as a mire of intellectual and moral perversion or retardation;[6] and nullified, as a chaos utterly devoid of artistic and scientific talent.[7] Throughout European history, and despite the immediate evidence of real African philosophers within the very heart of European countries and traditions,[8] Africans were repeatedly represented as creatures incapable of any considerable degree of reflection, and *a fortiori* incapable of philosophy.[9] If Africans are at all mentioned in the works of the great philosophers, it is rarely with a sentiment other than complete indifference or the most scathing contempt. Thus, in his momentous work on the unfolding of history, Hegel reserved no place for Africa in the universal realization of the World Spirit and denied it even the modest achievement of having a history.[10]

The denial of African reason and creativity is closely linked to the dual nature of colonial exploitation itself — the symbiotic fusion of cynical opportunism and idealized, delusory paternalism inspired complicity in the most surprising quarters. Liberal and progressive philosophers, though deploring the violence and destruction of colonization and slavery, admitted that Africa was a land suffering from gross underdevelopment and requiring the sting of the colonial goad in order to attempt to construct an authentic civilization, or to be elevated to the level of autonomous rule.[11] Even Marx, the arch-critic of social oppression, saw colonialism as little more than a necessary stage of development along a linear route.[12]

Consequently, African writers have to a great extent been preoccupied with, among others, the following issues: (i) the revalorizing of individual subjectivities; (ii) the question of the existence or possibility of an African philosophy; and, (iii) African independence.

The first two issues are very closely connected, for one of the ways in which writers have tried to revalorize African identities has been to show that Africans, too, are rational and engage in philosophical reasoning, either in their traditional or modern cultures, or both.

But it is not merely a case of persuading the European colonizer that Africans are civilized and sophisticated beings. As we have just noted, portrayals of Africans within Western societies was quite often highly unfavourable, and not only because 'le Noir paraît naturellement comme l'autre lointain, curieux, marqué face à l'un qu'est l'Européen, norme et modèle'.[13] Europe's destiny being linked to Africa through the design, implementation and long-lasting effects of colonialism, the revaluation of African identities has not only been a matter of correcting misrepresentation, but also of dealing with alienation as it is experienced by colonized individuals. Colonization, as the occupation of another people's physical space, includes material dispossession, displacement, and coercion. But the greater part of the system's power, like an iceberg, lies hidden below the surface. In *Studies In a Dying Colonialism*, Frantz Fanon comments on the French occupation of Algeria that

> it is not the soil that is occupied. It is not the ports or the aerodromes. French colonialism has settled itself in the very centre of the Algerian individual and has undertaken a sustained work of clean-up, of expulsion of self, of rationally pursued mutilation.[14]

Fanon is known for his analytical accounts, often highly subjective, of the neuroses that are developed and internalized by the colonized individual and the

colonized society as a whole, and the corresponding pathologies that develop within the colonizer and the colonial society.[15] Indeed, both he and Memmi emphasize that colonialism is equally debilitating and degrading for colonizer and colonized alike (though the former clearly has material advantages over the latter). In his *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Césaire also argues that a true emancipation from colonialism is imperative for the colonizing society, and that without such a liberation the future of the whole globe is in peril.[16]

Many believe that for such an emancipation to be authentic there must be a serious and in-depth assessment of the second issue mentioned above, the question of the existence or possibility of an African philosophy. This question is deemed to be so important that in this area it is virtually omnipresent, and is often posed quite forcefully; Towa, for example, states that:

> On peut admettre aisément que l'Afrique moderne n'atteindra pas vraiment sa maturité culturelle aussi longtemps qu'elle ne s'élèvera pas résolument à la pensée profonde de ses problèmes essentiels, c'est-à-dire, à la réflexion philosophique.[17]

Amidst concerns about the authenticity of participating in what, at first glance, looks like a paradigmatically European mode of reflection, a substantial part of the issue of philosophy in Africa lies within the compass of a general concern about universals and particulars. In other words, whether philosophy is single or multiple, and hence whether African philosophy is unique in content or merely a particular instance of universal philosophy. The former view may be termed *particularism* (and is often linked to a form of *cultural essentialism*), while the latter is a type of *universalism*.

Associated with this, and almost impossible to detach from the debate, is the anxiety that the techniques of philosophy have not been elaborated universally, but within a specific culture and so are inevitably infused with the particularities

of that culture. This explains why many observers, when looking into African culture for signs of 'philosophical thought', have been prepared to accept as philosophy, texts which bear very little resemblance to those of the Western academy. At the very least, one is tempted to agree with Kwame Anthony Appiah that

> if [...] African philosophy shares neither the problems nor the methods of Western philosophy, one is bound to wonder what the point is of calling the activity 'philosophy' at all.[18]

On the other hand, attempts to restrict accounts of 'sage philosophy', world-views, traditional cosmologies and theosophies to the domain of ethnology have provoked outrage in certain circles, on the grounds that such attempts betray the intention to confine Africans within the role that was previously allotted to them, that of non-rational 'savages'.

The conventional counter-argument is that to believe that the only philosophy African culture is capable of producing is something that bears not the slightest resemblance to what we refer to when we say 'Anglo-Saxon philosophy', or 'nineteenth century philosophy', is to perpetuate the racist myth that Africans are essentially non-thinking beings, that their existence is defined through a depraved sensuality and not through reason. As we shall see, it is particularly difficult to bring such arguments to conclusion, as the interests at stake do not disappear, and philosophers' attitudes are slow to change.[19]

We have already touched on the third element in the list above: African independence. Amongst the texts we shall examine there are several which were written before the era of physical colonization had come to an end in many African countries.[20] As such it is natural that they should be concerned with immediate physical decolonization. Nevertheless, many of these texts also posit as

an immediate necessity what Valentin Mudimbé has called 'la réadaptation de notre psychisme après les violences subies' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 13). This is a matter of investigating colonial pathologies, as described by Fanon above, and tracing their roots in order to eradicate them once and for all.

The way in which one imagines the future of African philosophy is, of course, to a large extent a product of what exactly one believes it to be and how one envisions the road to African independence. It is remarkable that amongst the writers on African philosophy that we consider, not one believes that the future of the discipline is already guaranteed by the end of direct colonization: all of them posit some further stage, whether the recovery of some authentic African essence, or the restructuring of African epistemology. Some believe that in order to guarantee African independence, even after decolonization, Africans must effect a kind of rupture with, or distancing from, canonical Western thought.[21]

1.2 Synoptical Orientation of the Thesis

1.2.1 Context

Each author will be considered in his historical and critical contexts, and emphasis will be given to understanding exactly why the ideas in play develop as they do and what purpose they serve, as well as the overall cogency and viability of the author's thought. In this way it will also be shown how there is a general theoretical and historical development from one writer to the next.

The principal authors whose work provides the basis for this thesis are: Léopold Sédar Senghor, of Senegal, Paulin Hountondji, of Benin, and Valentin Yves Mudimbé, of the Democratic Republic of Congo (specific discussions of whom may be found in chapters 2, 3, and 5 & 6, respectively).

The decision to begin with Senghor may well need no comment. His importance stems from the founding role he played in the Négritude movement and his position as the first president of independent post-colonial Senegal. In a thesis which tries to understand the development of ideas within historical context, Senghor's various incarnations as African poet, philosopher, and man of state are clearly of a key interest. His collaboration with the leading French philosopher, writer, and political activist of the day, Jean-Paul Sartre, is just one of the ways in which he tried to create links between French and African cultures, societies, and thinkers.[22] Senghor is also remarkable for being the first (and to date, the only) black member of the Académie Française, which is perhaps a mark of the significant extent to which he was able to effect the cultural assimilation which he proclaimed would carry the future of African civilization.[23] Finally, by virtue of the dynamism and dramatic exultation of a prose which strains to express the full measure of his convictions, Léopold Senghor, perhaps more than any other figure in this history, has by turns incited great esteem and great disdain. Whether his texts are invoked to be repudiated and disclaimed, or to be exculpated and reclaimed, his presence and the importance of his contribution are unmistakable.[24]

Senghor's Négritude sets itself the considerable task of revalorizing African identities, a matter of demonstrating to the world the greatness of African culture, and showing 'the colonizer' that the African is not the 'prelogical' creature of ethnological textbooks. Africans were previously scorned and reviled on account of their 'alienness' and their difference from European culture, which sets itself up as the 'norm' of humanity. Senghor tries to prove that it is because of this difference that African culture is valuable, and a necessary counterweight to the overly abstract, mechanized Western reason. Leaning on the works of ethnologists

such as Leo Frobenius, who had initiated a revision of the predominant theories of Africans as irrational, uncivilized savages, Senghor intends to reveal to his audience the richness of African culture and the 'genius' of African civilization.[25]

The first analytical chapter begins with an exegesis and then a philosophical analysis of Senghor's key texts, examining the foundations, premises, and major arguments that comprised the critical element of the Négritude movement. Through a combination of critical reading and juxtaposition of other texts, exterior and anterior to Négritude, it may be seen that originally the movement sprang from a Western context and deployed supremely Western ideas. Given that Senghor claimed to reveal the essence of black thought and culture, and that he was writing in order to emancipate all aspects of blackness from positions of inferiority, isn't this provenance problematic?

This leads us to question the authenticity of Négritude as either a subjective or an objective expression of blackness, i.e. it did not objectively describe blackness because it was not scientifically well-founded, nor was it a subjectively valid account because it was not in fact grounded in black experience. Thus, the major problem raised by this chapter is that the discourse set up to reveal authentic African thought appears to do nothing of the sort. So what exactly (if anything) is African philosophy?

The work of Paulin Hountondji also attempts to answer this question, and his text is pertinent at once for the strident attack which he launches against the tradition of Africanist discourse, and for the impassioned manner in which he clamours for urgent reparation of the weaknesses of African cultures and scientific practices. His first major text, *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, is strongly polemical and, though he later excused the force of his attacks by claiming they

were to a degree rhetorical, to correct the excesses of ethnophilosophy, his position has in fact suffered little subsequent modification.[26]

On the positive side, his writing is clear and methodical: in this first book he moves from the initial debunking of 'ethnophilosophy', which he describes as 'l'ethnologie à prétention philosophique' (p. 14), on to a tentative redescription of philosophy, basing his analysis on the actual history of ideas, hence it is explicitly descriptive and avoids the *a priorism* of Senghor's account. (This is followed by a discussion of Guillaume Amo, and a commentary on the philosophy of Ghana's Nkrumah: two subjects lying outside the present area of study.) Hountondji continues with a discussion of the difference between 'true' and 'false' pluralism, in relation to culture, politics and the academy, before coming to his own prescriptive conclusions about the future of African philosophy.

One of Hountondji's main concerns is to encourage the participation in what has come to be called 'professional philosophy' in order to focus on the writing of philosophy in the 'strict' sense of the word.[27] By contrast with Africanists, ethnologists and ethnophilosophers, Hountondji writes in the tradition of what he considers to be a culturally neutral philosophy, devoid of any essentially African characteristics. According to the empirically based definition that we are given, African philosophy is simply regular philosophy produced by Africans. On a similar note, he attacks the very notion of an African essence, or any other cultural essence, and argues against the unity and uniformity of *any* culture, including 'the' Western culture. (Culture is here seen as an inherently heterogeneous mass of minor and major conflicts and opposing tendencies.) On the other hand, he dismisses the possibility of philosophy existing in pre-colonial

Africa since the African peoples were not literate, and writing, he argues, is an indispensable pre-condition for philosophy.

Hountondji's critics claim that, by limiting the possible evolutions of a genuine African philosophy to a mere instantiation of an archetype which only appears to be neutral, Hountondji capitulates to a purely Western notion of what philosophical thought should be. In so doing, he is said to betray African traditions by representing them to be incapable of philosophical reflection, and in particular by stipulating literacy as a necessary condition for philosophy.

It is also possible to make the converse criticism of Hountondji: by insisting that it keep to 'traditional' forms, Hountondji imposes limits on philosophy itself and thus refuses a new, and potentially valuable transformation of the discipline. Is this what Senghor meant when he talked of the Civilisation of the Universal, an amalgam of traditionally Western and traditionally African thought?[28]

1.2.2 Violence

A further criticism to be made, of both Senghor and Hountondji, is that neither writer truly comes to grips with the problem of colonial violence. It may be argued that Senghor, through a simplified and naïve exaltation of African qualities (which are themselves taken from Western portrayals of Africa), neglects the brute facts of racial inequality and traps himself in a discourse which becomes politically inert. On the other hand, Hountondji's determination to see philosophy as nothing more or less than a 'forme particulière de littérature scientifique' (p. 72) means that he does not pay attention to 'the honorific way in which philosophy has come to be seen'.[29] Simultaneously, his refusal to countenance the notion of a specifically African reason leads him to gloss over the fact that 'd'habiles contempteurs mettent [notre humanité ou intelligence] encore

savamment et régulièrement en miettes au nom d'une raison et d'une science parfaitement au service des projets politiques' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 13). These two lacunae mean that there is no serious attempt to bring into question the predominance of Western discourse and the violence with which the latter represses other discourses.

In order to cast a new light upon the problems we have raised, in chapter 4 we take a brief look at the ways in which certain minority discourse theorists try to criticize the structures of dominant social groups.[30] Like Hountondji, these theorists take issue with the portrayal of ethnic minorities as the mere set of instantiations of some type or essence, arguing that this is quite simply a strategy for domination, or, as Nancy Hartsock says, 'a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the centre and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities'.[31] The roots of this quest for domination are traced right to the source of modern humanism and egalitarianism, the European Enlightenment, and it is argued that, far from being a betrayal of Enlightenment ideals, colonial violence is in fact perfectly consistent with them.

But the problem with these minority discourse texts is that, in directing a critique against the violence perpetrated against minorities and marginalized groups, they implicitly rely on a strong notion of terms like 'the West'. It follows that the critique is founded on precisely the same basis as the object of criticism, Western discourse, and that it leads to a reinstatement of implausible essentialisms and binary oppositions.

So the next step is to consider whether it is possible to articulate a strong critique of colonial discourse without reconstructing the categories which uphold it. To this end we take a look at a slightly tangential, but quite pertinent topic:

racial violence. The essential premise is that the critique of racism seems to perpetuate the structures of understanding which facilitate it. But, if true, this would lead to a paradox: either we critique racism, and thereby continue to make it possible, or we stop attacking racism, and thereby founder in political impotence. In fact, the paradox does not have to persist — it is dispelled by creating a new sort of text, which can recognize both the objective irreality of race and the subjective reality of racism. Our discourse then comes to occupy a strange kind of space, intermediate and ephemeral. The application of these comments to the case in point is deferred until chapter 6.

Chapter 5 introduces the texts of Valentin Mudimbé, who works through the ideas of neo-colonial influence, African emancipation, and the problem of the 'ruse', i.e. the anxiety described above that, in criticizing the Western discourse, one finds that one has inadvertently replicated its deeper structures. These are all discursive traps which can prevent authenticity and autonomy.

We approach an initial reading of Mudimbé's work through the image of *l'odeur du Père*. Using this metaphor, much can be understood about enduring colonial influence, its consequences and the reactions it provokes among theorists. But we also consider that there is something in the idea of colonial *presence* in Africa which is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's 'beetle in a box'. Wittgenstein's own response provokes us to wonder whether there is anything that could finally constitute a revealing of colonial influence. There is a tendency to view Western influence as something intrinsically harmful, to be excised like a tumour. We argue that colonial influence is not only highly diffuse and vague, but also indeterminate, that is, there are many possible candidates for the position, some of which lead us back into the problems dealt with in chapter 4.

These are not just abstract problems, but constitute a culturally-positioned, thoroughly contextualized dilemma: how is it possible to come to terms with the potency and ubiquity of Western science, and simultaneously to address the need for African speakers to assume their own 'parole'. This, according to Mudimbé, requires a step into 'folie', for it entails a rejection of what is Western, not because it is false, but because it is Western. At first sight, this viewpoint might seem to be another recurrence of the old essentialist prejudices, that Africa should concern itself with Africanness and not try to mimic the West. In fact it is a matter of rupturing the history which has given rise to the contemporary scientific practice that exists in Africa today.

Chapter 6 takes the study of Mudimbé further, looking at his strategy 'en folie'. We discuss the myths surrounding discourse itself, Africa, and the West in Western discourses. Scientific and quasi-scientific discourses in general, and philosophy in particular, are surrounded by many idealistic notions such as *neutrality*, *universality*, *rationality*, *objective truth*, and *modernity*. We consider whether it is necessary, or indeed even possible, to fulfil or incarnate these ideals, and try to suggest alternative perspectives. Following Mudimbé, it is argued that true and attainable universality and neutrality are not achieved through an emptying of all particular details (and it is the combination of the actual impossibility and yet the apparent realization of such an emptying that constitute the ethnocentrism of much philosophy), but rather through an all-inclusive universal: 'un universel riche de tout le particulier, riche de tous les particuliers'.[32] In a world of politics, an apolitical discourse is neither possible nor desirable; in a world of difference and inequality, a blank empty neutrality inevitably becomes an elision of difference, a silencing of marginal voices. It is a privileged

perspective which suggests that privilege is immaterial. The idealized discourse that philosophy is often represented to be belongs and is appropriate only to an apolitical utopia (i.e. 'no place').

  The two most striking characteristics of Mudimbé's texts are their inclusivity and their diversity. The two elements are inter-related, consisting in the fact that Mudimbé resists fragmenting his loyalties in order to accept easy conclusions about either side ('side', broadly speaking) of the debate in African philosophy. His discourse is inclusive yet critical, contextualized and contextualizing. It is no small measure of his worth that writers on both sides of the divide recognize the value of this open, synthetic, yet highly original approach.[33] Mudimbé uses texts from within the Western canon in order to fuel his critique of colonial discourse, but ultimately he posits the need for a radical rupture with Western theoretical tradition, and he sees this as the only way for Africa to orient itself along an 'authentic' axis.

1.3 A Word on Method

The title appears to make the subject of this thesis a matter of arriving at a definition. That appearance is misleading, for although the question seems to require some sort of substantive answer (e.g. African philosophy is the philosophy of traditional Africa, African philosophy is a variety of 'folk' philosophy or collective 'world-view', etc.), in fact it is more of a springboard, a point of departure for a more complex series of conceptual evolutions. Having said that, for the first two analytical chapters (on Senghor and Hountondji), this initial characterization fits fairly well. It is only when we find that using such a schema leads us up against some irresolvable and quite unhelpful problems, that it becomes obvious that we must adopt a different approach (which is what happens

in chapter 4). This will lead us to confront a series of difficult questions, about concepts like authenticity, autonomy, neutrality and objectivity, which may eventually shed light on the matter.

I have not, for this thesis, adopted any specific critical framework or methodology, except, of course, the general background, dispositions and prejudices that I have indicated above. This pointed absence of method (or perhaps a multiplicity of methods) may well have a destabilizing, fragmenting effect on the text; on the other hand, I hope that what it has lost in elegance it may have gained in suppleness and manoeuvrability. Thus, we are able to juxtapose the most heterogeneous of texts, in terms of content as well as style and background, in order to bring into evidence tensions and correspondences which would otherwise remain unspoken. Another advantage is that it has occasionally been possible to appeal to the rich imagery of texts, rather than referring to step-by-step argument (consider section 5.4, which takes Wittgenstein's beetle-in-the-box metaphor as a point of departure). Where it seemed appropriate, I have indicated correspondences between the ideas that are developed in this thesis and the texts that are proper to my own academic background, Western analytical philosophy.

Wherever possible I have tried to dismantle barriers rather than erect them. So, for example, in discussing what might be termed the hermeneutic shortcomings of modern analytical philosophy, i.e. the tendency to keep the focus away from the origins of one's ideas at all costs, my critique is not based on the assumption that this particular strain of the discipline is doomed to bad faith (by denying its historicity) and therefore is inferior to more political approaches. Rather, the point

is that analytical philosophy has much to gain by opening itself up to new avenues of thought, new ways of considering the world and one's place within it.

Chapter 2: Senghor: 'L'Esthétique Négro-africaine'

2.1. Introduction

The first part of this chapter is intended briefly to introduce the reader to the historical, political and ideological circumstances surrounding, or giving rise to, the Négritude movement. Following this there will be a philosophical exegesis of some of the texts of one of the founders of the movement, Léopold Senghor. The object of this exegesis is to examine the (often implicit) philosophical bases for the claims made in the texts, and this will lead on to a critique of the various positions assumed by Senghor. Consideration will be given to the charge that even though Négritude was a movement for the emancipation of Africans, the roots of it were mainly European and it was principally addressed to Europeans. It will then be suggested that the movement was nevertheless a key ideological moment in the history of Africa, both in its construction of its own self-image(s) and in its relations with the West.

The founders of the Négritude movement were Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas and Léopold Senghor, three poets with African roots (Césaire came from Martinique, Damas from Guyana, and Senghor from Senegal), all studying and writing in 1930's Paris, where they started to write poetry and prose which was intended at once to express and to exalt the values of Négritude.

Senghor describes Négritude as '*the whole complex of civilised values — cultural, economic, social and political — which characterise the black peoples*, or, more precisely, the Negro-African world', and also 'l'ensemble des valeurs de civilisation du monde noir'.[34] And, in *Orphée noir*, Jean-Paul Sartre explains the

content of the movement as 'une certaine qualité commune aux pensées et aux conduites des Nègres et que l'on nomme la *Négritude*'.[35]

2.2 Exegesis of Senghor's Text

'L'Esthétique négro-africaine' first appeared in *Diogène* in October 1956, and was later included in Senghor's first collection of essays, *Liberté 1: Négritude et Humanisme*.[36] Arriving almost a decade after Sartre's (very nearly definitive) contribution to the discussion,[37] this essay is one of the clearest statements of Senghor's thoughts on Négritude, and is a particularly good instance of the metaphysical approach that he adopts.

This, then, is the main text we shall be looking at. There are also others which help us to fill in the backdrop to the Négritude movement and to understand why Senghor and his fellows wrote as they did. In a 1961 paper delivered to an audience at St. Anthony's College, Oxford, he said: 'the French forced us to seek the essence of Négritude when they enforced their policy of assimilation and thus deepened our despair,' and also 'assimilation was a failure; we could assimilate mathematics or the French language, but we could never strip off our black skins or root out our black souls' (*The African Philosophy Reader*, p. 439).

So it was partly in response to French colonial policy that Négritude evolved, but there were other reasons as well. For centuries Europe had prided itself on being the paragon of civilization, and it was a common enough belief that the European civilization had reached such heights principally because of two things: its advanced technology and its unique grasp on reason. When Europeans came face-to-face with cultures radically different from their own they made the obvious inference that these cultures must not be so technologically advanced, nor

so perfectly rational. These supposed differences were then accounted to the subjects' coming from inferior racial stock. David Hume put it thus:

> There never was civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturer amongst them, no arts, no sciences […] Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.[38]

So for the Négritude writers there was the added pressure to explain the perceived difference of blacks from the white 'paradigm', in order to enable African societies and cultures to be extolled instead of deplored. It is to this that Mudimbé refers when he describes the movement as 'a young ideology devoting itself to the needs of a self-rediscovery' (*The Invention of Africa*, p. 84). Sartre also argued that blacks, since their oppression was founded on their blackness, would have to fight for emancipation *through* their blackness; he said:

> Le noir est la victime [de l'oppresssion], *en tant que noir*, à titre d'indigène colonisé ou d'Africain déporté. Et puisqu'on l'opprime dans sa race et à cause d'elle, c'est d'abord de sa race qu'il lui faut prendre conscience. (*Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre*, p. xiii)

A word on terminology: throughout this text, and indeed in all of his texts, Senghor repeatedly uses the term 'Nègre'. That this term is regarded by Senghor to be equivalent to 'africain' will, I think, become clear. So for the sake of fluidity I shall generally avoid using the original French term, instead translating the term as 'African' in the majority of cases, or 'black' where the idea of race is particularly prevalent. Where terms such as 'black' do occur in what follows, let it be understood that I intend thereby to refer to those people who would identify themselves and would generally be identified by others as 'black'. In other words, I am leaning on the actual use of the term, without presuming to provide a theoretical answer to the problems it raises. All that I am taking blackness to be, therefore, is a social phenomenon, and not an objective matter of racial type. The

latter idea, discussed towards the end of the critique of Senghor's texts is, as we will see, neither scientifically nor philosophically sound.

Senghor begins the essay with a rather controversial statement: 'Le XXe siécle restera celui de la découverte de la Civilisation négro-africaine' (p. 202). From the rest of this opening paragraph we learn that it is such practices as sculpture, story-telling, poetry, music, painting, and philosophy that, for Senghor, constitute a civilization, which is defined as the 'ensemble des oeuvres techniques et culturelles' (ibid.). Yet it does not seem to occur to him that the 'discovery' of this African civilization was a discovery only for the Western ethnologists and anthropologists who were involved: obviously the African peoples in question already knew these facts about themselves. As will become clear, this oversight is evidence in support of the claim that Senghor, like his European ethnologist predecessors, is engaged in a Eurocentric discourse, perhaps not in terms of subject matter, but certainly in terms of the paradigms and conceptual structures he uses.

He continues: 'il s'agit maintenant, par-delà le premier choc, de définir l'*esprit de la civilisation*' (p. 202), and he equates this 'spirit of civilisation' with what he calls 'la Culture négro-africaine' (also defined as the 'ensemble de valeurs' of Africans, i.e. Négritude: see the introduction to this chapter). One of the professed aims of the essay is to guide the attention of 'certains intellectuels d'Europe' in order to ensure that their admiration of black African art and literature will proceed without misunderstandings or misinterpretations. What follows will be '[une] réflexion philosophique sur l'Art', or, in other words, the 'Esthétique' of the title.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the essay is the way in which Senghor approaches an elaboration of this aesthetic using a method that is metaphysical, and not empirical. That is, although the scope of the notion 'African art' that he is using may well be informed by actual instances of African art (for example, later on he talks of drums and masks as elements of African art) it is not by way of an empirical analysis or some sort of generalization of such instances that we are led to define this artistic culture. Instead, we are given an account of the *essence* of African art. This in itself is not unusual: compare the motto 'art for art's sake', which is also a statement of doctrine, derived conceptually and not through scientific survey. But criteria for arthood are usually considered defeasible, that is to say, open to refutation or revision in the light of something we *know* to be art, but which does not satisfy the (hypothetical) criteria. Whereas, in the case of Senghor's definition, a piece which does not conform to the criteria will simply be excluded from the category (see *Liberté 1*, p. 217). This is because he is not primarily interested in art in its widest sense (of which there may be Western or African instances), but rather a specifically *African* art, because he is concerned with Africanness or blackness (Négritude) in general. In other words, it is a matter of an African, or 'black', essence, not an artistic essence.

Now although Senghor may consider the *content* of African art empirically he considers the *form* metaphysically. So it is not the specific content of the category 'African art' (perhaps masks, drums, strongly rhythmic poetry, and so on), nor the traditions and rationale behind it that he is interested in, but rather the pervasive, underlying metaphysic. This approach is anticipated in the schema that Senghor lays out towards the end of the first section: he announces that he will proceed first by sketching out what he calls 'une *psychophysiologie* du Nègre'; then he

will discuss 'l'*Homme noir*' and the 'culture originale' that the latter produces; finally, he will 'essayer de dégager les lois fondamentales de l'art négro-africain'.

To take the first part, the word 'psychophysiologie' is derived from the Greek words $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ and $\varphi\upsilon\sigma\iota o\lambda o\gamma\iota\alpha$. $\Psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ is translated sometimes as 'soul' and sometimes as 'mind'; in general, the term connotes both mental and emotional properties. $\Phi\upsilon\sigma\iota o\lambda o\gamma\iota\alpha$ denotes the science of how a thing, the body for instance, works (literally 'the logic of its nature'). Although this rather dry etymology may seem far removed from a twentieth century essay on African art, a close reading of Senghor's text clearly shows that he retains the scholastic effects of a classical (Western) education: his prose is littered with scraps of philological, or rather etymological, data.[39]

So Senghor intends to show the workings of the mind/soul, not the mind/soul in general, but specifically that of the African. Senghor assumes that the African 'psychophysiology' *determines* 'the' African culture, which in turn determines the fundamental laws of African art and life in general. Starting at the beginning of this list (psychophysiology) and working through the intermediate idea of culture, Senghor reaches the end of his discourse: art.

For us, one of the benefits of this approach is that it lays bare the roots of some of the ideas that Senghor has about 'Africanity' and 'blackness': we are looking at an important moment in the ideological history of Senghor's Négritude.

In sketching out his conception of African 'psychophysiologie' Senghor makes several puzzling claims, among which: 'le Nègre est l'homme de la nature. Il vit, traditionnellement, de la terre et avec la terre, dans et par le *cosmos*.' At first it is hard to know quite what to make of this. Is Senghor simply reproducing the familiar stereotype of the African as the savage, the 'man of nature', as opposed

to the European paradigms of civilization? But the comparison is surely misleading, for are we not all *originally* 'de la nature'? And is it not true of every people that traditionally, i.e. prior to industrialization, they are 'de la terre et avec la terre'? Perhaps what he intends is a Rousseau-esque split between the realms of Nature and Civilization, where the 'savage' peoples are seen to be different from the 'civilized' because they are closer to, indeed part of, nature.[40] But this need not be because they were black, it could simply be because they were 'savage'. Even if this distinction between the 'savage' and the 'civilized' being were acceptable, it would still be far from obvious that the distinction mapped on to something integral to blackness as a particular racial type, rather than being a mark of any non-industrial society. We may also wonder whether Senghor is talking specifically about black peoples prior to industrialization; if he is not, then the assumption is that to be black is to be pre-industrial.

However, it turns out that the distinction Senghor means to establish is once again a metaphysical one: 'homme de la nature' is supposed to refer not to the African's biological origins, nor to her/his actual state of existence (i.e. civilized or savage), but to her/his *ontological role* in the cosmos. At first this may appear to be a rather innocuous statement, if it is understood along these lines: 'L'homme, nous apprend Marx […] est, au premier examen, un animal supérieur qui se fait dans et par la nature' (*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*, p. 24). Yet this is clearly not all that Senghor intends, as will become apparent.

The phrase also serves to reinforce the ideas inherited by Senghor from the Belgian ethnologist missionary, Placide Tempels, whose book (by turns celebrated and reviled), *La Philosophie bantoue*, attempts to explain the African's *Weltanschauung* or world-view.[41] According to this interpretation of African

cultures (based, incidentally, on Tempels' observations of a single African people, the Bantu), the domains of body and mind, flesh and spirit, nature and civilization, are united. So, for the African, being civilized is supposed to be something which consists in being at one with her/his natural surroundings, whereas the European civilization defines itself through antagonistic contrast with its environment, a striving against nature.

Rather misleadingly, the qualification 'traditionnellement' suggests that Senghor is tracing the empirical, historical existence of Africans, their traditions rather than their essence, when in fact he believes that it is the African *soul* that determines the traditions of African society. 'Traditionnellement' functions in this instance, therefore, as a synonym for 'authentique'. As a result, when Senghor focuses his attention on African traditions, he claims to see in them the cultural expression of the black soul: 'c'est cette psychophysiologie du Nègre qui explique sa métaphysique, partant, sa vie sociale …' (p. 203). Similarly, the claim that the African lives 'dans et par le *cosmos*' is not just a token statement of the truism that we all live in the universe. It is an assertion about a people's beliefs about their role in the universe, again reinforcing the view that African peoples live, and believe themselves essentially to belong, in harmony with nature.

It is when the focus moves onto the epistemological aspect of the black 'psychophysiologie' that we start to understand the reasons behind Senghor's claims so far. For the African is here characterized as 'un *sensuel*, un être aux sens ouverts, sans intermédiaire entre le sujet et l'objet, sujet et objet à la fois'. The black's sensuality ('il est sons, odeurs, rythmes, formes et couleurs') is contrasted with the rationality of the white European; elsewhere Senghor says: 'l'émotion est nègre, comme la raison hellène' (p. 24), and informs us that 'black'

qualities include '*mépris de la raison et des spéculations morales*' (Liberté 1, pp. 53-4). Even the senses are segregated and ascribed a racial significance, and self-consciousness is, in the case of the African, reconstrued sensually: '[l'Africain est] *tact* avant que d'être œil, comme le Blanc européen. Il *sent* plus qu'il ne voit: il se sent' (p. 202).[42] To critics who had accused him of reproducing the familiar stereotype of the African as a non-rational being, driven by his passions, Senghor replies:

> Le Nègre n'est pas dénué de *raison*, comme on a voulu me le faire dire. Mais sa raison n'est pas discursive; elle est synthétique. Elle n'est pas antagoniste: elle est sympathique. (p. 203)

In fact, he does not give merely an affirmation, but a super-affirmation of 'la raison Nègre', claiming that it allows the perceiver to be aware of the world's underlying reality, which he calls rather confusingly 'la *surréalité*', and not just its mere appearance.[43] Incidentally, this seems to amount to an endorsement of one of Western philosophy's most enduring dichotomies, that of apparent, or *phenomenal*, reality as opposed to the deeper, *noumenal*, reality. It may be argued that this dichotomy could be part of an African thought-system as well, and indeed this may be so. But, as a matter of principle, Senghor does not think so: 'le Négro-Africain nous a, toujours et partout, présenté une conception du monde à l'opposé de la philosophie classique.'[44] What Senghor takes to be the source of the African's sort of knowledge (intuition, rather than ratiocination) leads him to call it 'l'émotion mystique', which is explained thus:

> la raison Nègre n'appauvrit pas les choses, elle ne les moule pas en des schèmes rigides, éliminant les sucs et les sèves; elle se coule dans les artères des choses, elle en éprouve tous les contours pour se loger au cœur vivant du réel. (p. 202)

Again, we are reminded of the supposed contrast between black and white, although the latter is here called 'European': 'la raison européenne est analytique par utilisation, la raison Nègre, intuitive par participation' (p. 203). There are several things to say about this binary opposition. First let us consider the dichotomy which gives it form: Senghor opposes 'européen' with 'Nègre', taking it for granted that one could not be black and European at once. This idea is based on certain racializing preconceptions about human beings, and in this case the tacit premise is that the authentic European, which is to say, the *essential* European, is white. Furthermore, the (white) European has one epistemic (knowledge-gaining) procedure, and the (black) African has another, quite different, procedure.

So how are we to interpret the proposition that there are two ways of knowing the world, one 'white' and the other 'black'? I shall outline two possible explanations.

1. It has so happened that reason has developed into two, culture specific, forms.

Let us take the word 'Nègre' to refer to an empirical concept which denotes the peoples who live, or who have traditionally lived, on the continent of Africa.[45] These peoples elaborate a particular kind of culture, in which one uses 'sympathetic' or 'intuitive' reason rather than 'analytical' or 'discursive' reason. By association, then, this may be called 'la raison Nègre', such that the following proposition is *likely* to be true: if one is 'Nègre' then one uses 'la raison Nègre'.

2. There are, fundamentally, two forms of reason.

This interpretation can only consist in claims about the nature of reason itself; in the case of Senghor's argument, it is the prior metaphysical essence which determines the type of reason one utilizes. Thus, either it is analytically true that the peoples of Africa are African with African souls, or the possession of an African soul is a necessary condition for being truly African. In the first case, it is logically impossible for the African, *qua* African, to use anything but African reason; in the second, if such individuals were to forsake their African reason, e.g. through over-assimilation, then they would no longer be authentically African, i.e. they would lose their essence.

So if we take 'Nègre' to refer to an eternal and immutable 'racial' essence then it is because of this particular racial essence that 'l'homme noir' elaborates a particular 'culture Nègre', of which a central part is the use of 'sympathetic' or 'intuitive' reason, such that the proposition: if one is 'Nègre' then one uses 'la raison Nègre', must be true. An African must use 'la raison Nègre', insofar as s/he is 'Nègre' (the argument proceeds analytically after the first step).

If the first interpretation is correct, then one can be 'Nègre' (in the empirical sense, referring to African ethnic origin) and European (in the empirical sense, referring to one's nationality), and more importantly one can participate in and belong to a European cultural environment. In which case it does not follow that if one is 'Nègre' then one necessarily uses 'la raison Nègre'. (The additional premise that *all* ethnic Africans take part in a 'culture Nègre' is needed, and *that* is falsified by contingent circumstances.)

If the second interpretation is correct, then if one is 'Nègre' (in the metaphysical sense of having a 'black' soul) then although one can also be European (empirically, i.e. by nationality), one is *essentially* black, such that one cannot be

culturally European because one 'belongs' to 'la culture Nègre'. Therefore, one will use 'la raison Nègre', as distinguished from 'la raison européenne'.

On a closer reading of the text it can be seen that Senghor implies too strong a link between being 'Nègre' and using 'la raison Nègre' for the first reading to be correct. For he is not using an empirical but an essentialist concept of 'race':

> c'est cette psychophysiologie du Nègre qui explique sa métaphysique, partant sa vie sociale, dont la littérature et l'art ne sont qu'un aspect. (p. 203)

He posits a single psychophysiology for all 'blacks', no matter what their upbringing or environment. This psychophysiology explains *the* black metaphysic because it is that which gives the metaphysic form, i.e. it is a *causal* explanation.

Having examined some of the issues raised by a reading of the text, now let us move on to a critique of Senghor's positions.

2.3 Critique of Senghor's Text

The first thing to note is that Senghor's texts are not, and were not intended to be, rigorous philosophical works. The language of the texts is poetic rather than precise, evocative rather than analytical, as if they sought not to demonstrate but to persuade. This in itself does not make the texts un-philosophical (we might compare the Bhagavad Gita, Confucius, Pamenides, Plato's mythological accounts, or Nietzsche's aphoristic style), but on the other hand it means that there is rarely any clearly stated argument for the positions occupied by Senghor.[46]

Yet the texts do import a certain amount of recognizably philosophical concepts (e.g. aesthetics, metaphysics, essentialist concepts of soul, etc.) and my purpose in examining them is not at all to subject them to a rigorous philosophical critique and thereby refute their arguments. Indeed, given Senghor's ambiguous standing

as a philosopher there would be little point in this. But what is useful in a philosophical treatment of his texts is that by using certain conventional methods of critical analysis we are able to investigate the way in which the concepts and arguments are constructed, and the philosophical premises they rely upon. This, in turn, allows us to trace the philosophical origins of these premises, to show how the ideas fitted in with other elements of contemporary thought, and how they may have influenced subsequent writers. As Mudimbé says, 'while a literary language, Négritude's content reveals an ideological system and even, according to Sartre, "a revolutionary project"' (*The Invention of Africa*, p. 87).

Let us start with the opening phrase of *L'Esthétique*: 'le XXe siécle restera celui de la découverte de la Civilisation négro-africaine'. As has already been discussed, this statement is not qualified to the effect, 'the discovery *by Europeans*', and so it is implied that all discoveries are basically European discoveries, or that the only discoveries worth talking about are those made by Europeans; as if Africans had not always known that they existed as cultural beings, that they made sculpture, poetry and music, told stories, and painted.[47] Moreover, it is such 'discoveries', made by a few, which are taken to be objective and historical, rather than the comparatively small-scale revelations that in fact they are. To assume that European discoveries are the ones which matter, and that when Europe discovers something, that thing is 'revealed' to the world or 'passes into' 'history' is to be guilty of 'eurocentrism': mistaking Europe for the world and mistaking European history for world history.[48]   Senghor's remark is true, but misleading because it is incomplete. In addition he should have noted, first, that the discovery of 'la Civilisation négro-africaine' was made by and was *seen as* a discovery by European field workers and academics; secondly, that

African cultures were in themselves complete and part of the objective history of the world (that is, they were already real happenings and did not need 'authentication'), irrespective of any 'discovery' or recording by Europe; and thirdly, that if the twentieth century will be known for having seen this 'discovery' then it will be because the history of the twentieth century will be documented largely by Western academics, to the exclusion of many other points of view. Yet if an African perspective were more prominent we might read: 'the twentieth century was the century in which Europeans, after a long period of ignorance of African civilizations and cultures, finally came to recognize their reality.'

So, these textual weaknesses originate in Senghor's failure to carry through the oft-avowed project of criticizing Europe, both for its bloody history and for its arrogant self-promotion to the role of universal standard. At first he seems to be carrying out a radical critique of Eurocentric practices, by setting up Négritude as an equal and opposite pole for discourse, but on taking a closer look it can be seen that he is actually, perhaps unwittingly, replicating the traditionally European way of thinking about Africa and Africans.

I have already mentioned the way in which Senghor sets up an opposition between the terms 'négro-africain' and 'européen' and their respective cognates, to the exclusion of any idea that it might be possible to be 'négro-européen' or 'blanc-africain'. This is not to say that Senghor would argue that an African cannot acquire citizenship in a European country, or *vice versa*, for that is obviously false. What it means is that it is impossible for Africans to become 'truly', 'fundamentally', or *authentically* European; and vice versa. This is

because Senghor is not discussing *nationality*, which is contingent, but *race*, which he takes to be part of the essence of one's being.

   We can see that this is the correct way to read the text if we take a closer look at the section occurring towards the end, where it is stated that the 'spirit' of Negro-African civilization is at work in the finest black artists and writers of the day, whether or not they realize this, and 'qu'il soient d'Afrique ou d'Amérique' (p. 217). It is significant that the emphasis is placed on the 'race' of these writers, while simultaneously downgrading their nationality, and their national culture, to nothing more than a fact of geographical location. These 'artistes et écrivains Nègres' are not known as Americans or Africans but are *from* America or Africa; they are all essentially black, and they all, whether they know it or not, produce black art.

   Here we return to one of the recurring concepts of *L'Esthetique négro-africaine*, outlined earlier in the second reading of the proposition: 'la raison européenne est analytique par utilisation, la raison Nègre, intuitive par participation' (p. 203). This is that each 'race' is supposed to have a 'racial essence', which secures for the individual a particular ontological role in the cosmos and endows her/him with particular attributes and capabilities. This role is eternal, not defined by historical context, but by the nature of the being in question. To be more specific, one's essence determines the type of reason one employs ('psychophysiologie'), the type of culture one produces ('culture originale'), and the works of art that this culture brings into being. The nature of 'l'art négro-africain' will be determined by the nature of its producers: the African produces African art, and this is not to do with the particularities of the environment, of everyday life, or the problems faced by the community in which the artist is raised. So this is another of

Senghor's assumptions, viz. the black soul produces black art: 'c'est cette psychophysiologie du Nègre qui explique sa métaphysique, partant sa vie sociale, dont la littérature et l'art ne sont qu'un aspect' (p. 203). Since there are strong causal links between all of these things, it is possible to trace the 'fundamental laws' of a culture by starting from a knowledge of its racial essence.

But this reliance on the concept of race goes too far. For example, it is claimed by Senghor that *all* black-African languages have rich vocabularies, which may be a *contingent* truth, but certainly does not gain any force of necessity from the racial origins of the speakers. We also find this:

> tout langage qui n'est pas fabulation ennuie. Bien mieux, le Négro-africain ne comprend pas pareil langage. L'étonnement des premiers Blancs en découvrant que les indigènes ne comprenaient pas leurs tableaux, pas même la logique de leurs discours! (p. 210)

Can this supposed inability to understand really be taken as proof of the existence of a fundamentally different sort of reason, rather than just a difference in linguistic, cultural and semiotic backgrounds? Senghor clearly thinks it can, but there is in the text no explanation of the link he supposes to exist between one's race and one's metaphysical beliefs. We are given no way of understanding why the link between race and reason should be so strong, why, if one is black, one has a black soul and so uses black reason. As for the contention that black reason works through intuition, how can a person understand, for instance, a philosophical argument by intuition? Are we to suppose that all Africans are incapable of reasoning discursively? Senghor himself is a real-life counterexample of this claim, for he, like all the founders of Négritude, was a man of African ethnic origins, who rose through the ranks of French academia, studying Western literature, philosophy, anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, and

more. Yet he is an African, and by his own avowal incapable of understanding Western logical discourse!

There is no attempt to justify the claims made in the text; moreover, it is extremely difficult to see how the position could be defended, for the notion of race that Senghor is working with is inherently flawed. Speaking of the three principal ethnic groups ('whites', 'negroes' and 'Indians') in the mid-nineteenth-century United states, Michael Banton notes the broad cultural differences and comments:

> they could […] be distinguished by their outward appearance, but the relation between culture and appearance was accidental. Though the white group was characterised by a higher level of literacy than the others, there was no necessary relationship between whiteness and literacy. *Outward appearance was not a sign of an inward difference* that explained why more whites were literate, as if the word 'race' explained why they were more advanced; therefore it was not a good name to use for the difference.[49]

Racializing terms are misleading and inefficient, and they tend to reinforce spurious conceptual divisions.

Misleading, because when we use terms such as 'black', ' white', 'Nègre', or 'Blanc', it sounds as if we are claiming that there is some single, objective principle which unites all the members of a putative race (i.e. that there is a racial essence: some thing that makes all blacks black, all whites white) when we know that this is scientifically and philosophically an unsound concept. Yet if there were no such essence, how could we group people together in that way? As Banton puts it: 'to identify the groups as 'races' [is] to imply that the biological differences [are] the key ones' (ibid.). Moreover there is always the temptation to put the perceived differences of other people down to their having a different physical make-up, different genes, for example. So the use of racializing terms encourages the use of concepts such as that of racial essences, when in fact all

human groups have diverse genetic origins, and differences in outward appearance may often more plausibly be ascribed to factors of the environment, particularly in the case of ethnic groups which are both geographically stable and, by accident or tradition, mostly endogamous.

The inefficiency of racializing terms stems from the fact that the most useful feature of general terms is the way they allow us to condense description and information exchange by denoting a group of things or a type of thing, which may then be predicated uniformly. Racial terms do this to excess, for they encourage over-hasty and inaccurate judgements about groups of people who often have little in common but the fact of being categorized together. Racial groupings are little more than generalizations over certain characteristics *seen* as salient and important. But we may wonder what is to be gained from classing all Africans as 'black', for what, objectively speaking, are their common features? Is there any *conceptual* profit in making such strong assertions about peoples who may traditionally live on different sides of the continent? If race is treated as an archetypal essence, it becomes possible once again to talk of perfect and imperfect examples of a race, and so of 'authentic' or 'inauthentic' Africans, forgetting that our idea of 'race' comes in the first place from an over-generalization which is scientifically unfounded and susceptible to abuse.

Such terms also remove the need to examine the historical circumstances in order to discover why a certain group of people consistently exhibit a particular form of behaviour. So, for example, we might attempt to explain the Afro-American culture of protest in the 1960's as being a natural expression of the black race's urge to protest and complain: the implication is that black people did

what they did *because* they were black (had black souls) and their common blackness actually caused them to express themselves in unison in this way.

But if black protesters had anything like a common, universalized set of demands then is it not obvious that this was not because they had something common and universal *inside them*, but because they suffered under a common mode of oppression? In fact the crux of this whole argument lies not in their *being* black (insofar as this suggests a substantial essence), but in their being *perceived* and *treated* as black. So terms of race are inefficient because they suggest that the people they denote share common characteristics as a *direct consequence* of their 'race', when it is often because groups of people are *treated* as if they are a single race (e.g. through racial abuse, enforced or spontaneous segregation, racial propaganda, etc.) that they find themselves acting as a solidary group. To reinforce racial concepts is often to reify them, in political and economic policy and procedure, in socio-cultural divisions.

Ironically enough, these arguments against racialization also form a telling criticism of the way that Senghor conceptualizes Europeans. For example, on one of the many occasions when he contrasts 'black' with 'Europe', he says of 'le Nègre' that he is '*tact* avant que d'être œil, comme le Blanc européen.' What is interesting about this and other similar instances is that, not only does he assume that all Europeans are white, but he also seems to take it for granted that they compose a single, homogenous unit: uncoloured and pure, they are all supposed to have the same civilization, the same way of thinking (i.e. analytic thinking) and the same culture. Yet, on the contrary, Europe consists of many different ethnic groups, each of which has different cultures and traditions. Nor is it easy to see that there is anything which unites them all, so to call them all 'white' is to be

guilty of a gross misconception. On the other hand, Africa is not the indigenous homeland of a single race, with a single culture and a single way of thinking; to believe it is, is to be sucked into the vortex-like pull of Senghor's misguided dialectic.[50] Paulin Hountondji puts it this way:

> Ainsi parlons-nous couramment de la civilisation africaine 'traditionnelle' par opposition à la civilisation occidentale. Comme s'il pouvait exister "une" civilisation africaine au singulier, "une" civilisation occidentale au singulier, comme si 'la' civilisation n'était pas toujours, par essence, un choc permanent de décisions culturelles contradictoires. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 226)

Furthermore, although Senghor assumes that to be European is to be a colonizer, not all European countries and peoples have been colonialist countries and peoples (far from it!), and not all people in colonialist countries have been involved in colonialism, though it may be argued that all were affected by colonialism.

Further problems arise from the oversimplification involved in sustaining the black/white dichotomy that Senghor uses. The way the text is set up, it is easy to be led into thinking that in talking about Africa and Europe we are talking about the whole world. But on reflection it is obvious that the dichotomy does not by any means exhaust the world's actual or possible population: on which side of the binary would a Chinese or a Mauri person figure, for example? On which side of the divide 'analytique par utilisation/intuitive par participation' would their reason belong? The terms in which Senghor couches his essay restrict the form of the discourse to an over-simplified schema of opposed concepts which are, however, not at all opposites. He thus misrepresents the underlying structure of our societies and effectively discourages the impulse to investigate this structure using terms other than his own, which are themselves derived from the long-lived and persistent idiom of colonialism.

This tendency to racialize his arguments often leads Senghor to submit historical events to quite implausible explanations. For example in 'Éléments constitutifs d'une civilisation d'inspiration Négro-Africaine' he argues that it is the 'réflexes plus naturels, mieux adaptés' of the Afro-American which explain the disproportionately high employment ('utilisation' in the French) of Afro-Americans in industry and in 'les services techniques de l'Armée' (p. 259). Due to his over-emphasis on race and racial characteristics, it does not occur to him that this fact may have more to do with the cheapness of Afro-American labour, with respect to their white American counterparts. By trying to valorize the supposedly 'black' attributes of the workers, Senghor manages to cloud the key issues, which are surely the actual material conditions of Afro-American workers and the devaluing of their labour. Hountondji also sees this as a major flaw in the structure of Senghor's theoretical stance against colonialism:

> l'exaltation des cultures noires fonctionne […] chez Senghor comme un alibi servant a éluder le problème de la libération nationale. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 225)

In order to discuss this point more fully, let us return to the notion of African reason which was mentioned in the previous section. The first quotation given above ('la raison Nègre n'appauvrit pas les choses …') may be perceived as a protest against the evolution of a hyper-analytical philosophy, a protest against the scientific culture of classification and schematization ('elle ne les moule pas en des schemes rigides'), which does not stop at the natural world but tries to sort and archive humans as well. Senghor's emphasis on the vital role played by perception and imagination is not unheard of, it is an idea which also finds expression in the texts of European philosophers such as Henri Bergson.[51] And it might not be going too far to suggest a rapport with the Marxian critique of

philosophy, which enjoins us to analyze the real relations which obtain in the world as it is, not to idealize existence and try to extract an abstract, rationalized essence.[52]

Though clearly conscious of Marxist theory, Senghor was never an adherent (unlike his counterpart Kwame Nkrumah).[53] The second quotation helps us to clarify Senghor's position:

> c'est cette psychophysiologie du Nègre qui explique sa métaphysique, partant sa vie sociale, dont la littérature et l'art ne sont qu'un aspect. (p. 203)

Whereas Marx would have it that the structures of the social environment in which we are all agents are the primary determiners of our psychology and culture, Senghor has it the other way around: not only is culture not structured through the modes of production ('sa vie sociale'), but both of them, together with the specific evolution of philosophical thought ('sa métaphysique'), are dependent on the prior essence which is genetically (racially) given.

A further qualification is in order: it seems that the notion of *psyche* in use is far closer in spirit to the equivalent Platonic, and not Aristotelian, concept. That is, Senghor is using *psyche* to denote neither a principle of growth and change (the *animating* force), nor a collection of non-material personal attributes which exist and develop in close relation with empirical experience. On the contrary, the Senghorian *psyche* is an ideal, an essential racial archetype; psychic determination is pre-social and pre-rational (the line of causation is *Psyche* → Reason → Social Life (including art and literature)).

As for the interpretation that posits perception and imagination as central to specifically African reason, we may ask why these aspects should be seen as elements internal to the rational, rather than as external appendages or culturally specific forms of expression. In other words, it seems gratuitous to posit a

particularly African reason in order to grant these characteristics a rational status. Why not instead bring into action a universal critique of the form and role of reason, arguing that the conventional understanding of reason leaves too much unsaid and impoverishes our philosophical capacities? The rational role of imagination could then be established without any need to diversify the idea of reason itself, on the contrary the latter would actually be enriched. On the other hand we might agree with the conventional, abstract type of reason, posit it as common to all cultures, and then suggest that the particularly African way of making philosophical enunciations involves imaginative symbols and other sensual/perceptual means. Therefore, it is possible to attempt a renovation of the entire concept of reason, or alternatively simply to limit the scope of our argument to a purely socio-cultural context. In either case there seems little or no justification for creating an entirely new category.

The idea of a single reason may perhaps be perceived as analogous to the axioms of a constitution: a single foundation may be (severally) consistent with many different and incommensurable superstructures, according to our interests, tastes and customs. The analogy is that Western philosophy is a *single* structure which rests on the rational foundation; there could be other structures, but they always presuppose the same base. As Hountondji argues: 'ces *différences de contenu* n'ont de sens qu'en tant que différences *de contenu*, renvoyant, comme telles, à l'unité principale d'une même discipline, d'un même style d'interrogation' (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 52-3). The question is therefore why Senghor chooses to posit 'black thought' as a totally different kind of reason, rather than a culture-specific manifestation of the original, universal, unique reason. For there is no adequate explanation of exactly how black reason

complements white reason, only some rather vague, poetic asides. Is there something missing from white reason, some things it cannot understand? If so, then surely this is an incomplete, imperfect reason (and hence not reason at all). Do the two reasons describe the same facts, or do they refer to separate realms of existence? Senghor says that black reason perceives the sur-reality (an essential, transcendent reality) of things. But this implies that white reason is concerned with the superficial, the phenomenal, and again this leads us to ask whether such a faculty, or method, or perspective is truly rational. If we are working with something like a Platonic dichotomy, here, then one form of reason must be privileged over the other, it must have privileged access to reality (the Forms).[54] And the logos which concerns itself solely with phenomena is not reason at all, but opinion.

This is not at all the conclusion Senghor wishes to draw, he is committed to Western reason as a valid and truth-yielding faculty,[55] and yet it is difficult to see what else can be said. Unless he adopts some sort of relativism, which Senghor gives no sign of doing, so long as he posits two distinct forms of reason he must go all the way and say exactly what they are, how they operate, how they are limited to specific races, and which provides a closer link with truth itself. Anything less leaves us with no clear idea of what is at stake.

2.4 Ethnocentrism, Europe and Négritude:

In this section it will be discussed how Négritude, as representative of the putatively African culture, is linked to European culture. Such links fall into three main categories: first, the European *origins* of the concepts used by Négritude writers; secondly, the European *destination* (i.e. audience) of Négritude; and thirdly, the European *ideological framework* in which the concepts of Négritude

were situated and developed. The last category will to a certain extent be a recapitulation of the points expressed under the first two categories.

2.4.1 European Origins

Among the many critics of Négritude, Wole Soyinka argues that the movement was too European in its conceptual origins to be authentically African: 'its reference points took far too much colouring from European ideas even while its Messiahs pronounced themselves fanatically African'.[56] There is much evidence in support of this view (particularly with respect to Senghor), both in the Négritude texts themselves and in similarities between these texts and certain others which preceded and clearly influenced them. Let us begin with this comparative glance.

Valentin Mudimbé, speaking of the work of Lévy-Bruhl, the 'armchair' ethnologist, refers to the latter's theory of two types of mentality, and describes it thus:

> one is rational, functioning according to principles of logic and inquiring into causal determinations and relations; the other, prelogical, seems completely dominated by collective representation and strictly depends upon the law of mystical participation. (*The Invention of Africa*, p.136)

This sounds rather familiar. Although the dichotomy that Senghor repeatedly presents is not the traditional one of 'white rationality versus black irrationality' (it is rather 'white rationality versus black *rationality*'), there is in his work a great emphasis laid on the 'black way of knowing', which comes very close to 'collective representation' and 'mystical participation'. In the paper given at St. Anthony's College, he speaks of how the values of black culture, i.e. Négritude, are expressed emotionally by the intuitive reason using myths, the 'archetypal images of the Collective Soul':

> … the sense of communion, the gift of myth-making, the gift of rhythm, such are the essential elements of Négritude, which you will find indelibly stamped on all the works and activities of the black man. (*The African Philosophy Reader*, p. 440)

Could it be that intuitive reason is nothing more than what writers like Lévy-Bruhl posited as the 'prelogical mentality': essentially the same concept but wearing different colours?[57]

There are further clues to the Western origins of Négritude, it will help to note a few in passing. The description of culture as the 'spirit of civilization', for instance, is a quite Hegelian expression of an extremely Hegelian idea.[58] And Henri Bergson had already elaborated a notion of intuitive knowledge as a complement, or indeed an alternative, to the knowledge acquired by the intellect.[59] Senghor acknowledges this parallel in 'La Négritude est un Humanisme du XXe siécle', and seems to offer it by way of evidence for his convictions (*Liberté 3*, p. 70). In fact, the vast majority of the sources cited by Senghor in support of his arguments are Western writers or Africanists, and three individuals in particular: the first is the Belgian ethnologist and missionary, Placide Tempels.

Senghor relies quite explicitly on Tempels' book *La Philosophie bantoue* in which the priest 'reconstructs' the implicit world-view, or philosophy (both he and Senghor treat the two terms as synonymous), of the Bantu people.[60] Senghor accepts at least the broad lines of this treatise, despite the spurious philosophical credentials and dubious 'civilizing' aspirations of the author. This is what the latter says of his enterprise:

> Ce n'est qu'en partant de la vraie, de la bonne et solide coutume indigène, que nous pourrons conduire les nègres vers une véritable philosophie bantoue. (p. 25)

It was Tempels who argued for an end to the 'superficial assimilation' of African colonial subjects and for a concerted effort on the part of colonizers to return them to their truly African roots (*La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 123). Senghor takes on board these ideas and accepts that Africanness (Africanité), whatever it is, must be something quite different from Europeanness, such that Europeanized Africans can only be inauthentic Africans. He also accepts Tempels' quite unwarranted assertion that the philosophy of the Bantu is quite probably 'la philosophie de tous les primitifs' (p. 25). However, Senghor denies that blacks require white reason to lead them to a truly African civilization and, as we have seen, believes that this civilization is actual and not merely possible. In sum, Senghor may justly be criticized for his failure to question the objectivity of Tempel's ethnological enterprise or the veracity of his ethnophilosophy, but the most important difference between the two writers is that, unlike Tempels, the Négritudinist does attempt to show that blacks are responsible for themselves and can elaborate their own culture.

The next major influence on Senghor's thought that we shall consider is Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest who, in posthumous works, laid down his ideas for a new humanist, historicist philosophy. The relevance to Négritude is clearly stated: 'la Négritude, par son ontologie, sa morale et son esthétique, répond à l'humanisme contemporain …' (*Liberté 3*, p, 72). In the same essay, Senghor makes explicit use of Teilhard de Chardin's teleological metaphysics and the related theory of cultural syncretism to argue that black culture is necessary to the world because it will be an integral part of the 'Civilization of the Universal'. Without black culture, objective History could not make the progress for which it is destined, therefore black culture is necessary and valuable.

Yet on comparing Senghor's work with the original text of Teilhard de Chardin it becomes clear that there is no real conceptual development between the two. Of course, the emphasis in the former is placed squarely on the importance of the role of black consciousness, whereas the original is phrased in far more abstract terms, but as Augustine Shutte says in an otherwise enthusiastic essay on Senghor's 'Civilization of the Universal', 'Senghor is content to use Teilhard de Chardin's concepts; he does not develop or shape them in his own way' (*The African Philosophy Reader*, p. 437).

As for the political formation of Négritude, this derived from a source very different from the Belgian missionary-cum-anthropologist or the Jesuit philosopher-priest. In this case the source was the atheist, existentialist, Marxist philosopher and author, Jean-Paul Sartre. In *The Invention of Africa*, Mudimbé writes that

> it is Sartre who in 1948 with his essay, *Black Orpheus* […] transformed Négritude into a major political event and a philosophical criticism of colonialism. (p.83)

Sartre, too, accredits the African with 'une compréhension par sympathie' (*Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre*, p. xxxi). But this other way of understanding is not, for Sartre determined by anything so mysterious as a soul, rather it is 'une certaine forme d'humanité concrète et determinée' (p. xxvii). Although the term 'Nègre' is used, it does not here denote a racial essence: 'le Nègre' is *historically*, not metaphysically, determined to express black cultural values and to fight for black emancipation. This is representative of Sartre's dialectical materialism, according to which blackness is part of an ideological progression, the antithesis to the thesis that is white domination. Eventually, both will be subsumed into a humanity 'sans races', but until then 'le Nègre ne peut

nier qu'il soit Nègre ni réclamer pour lui cette abstraite humanité incolore: il est noir. Ainsi est-il acculé à l'authenticité … ' (p. xiv).

This position is symptomatic of one of the major problems with the Sartrean formulation (and, afterwards, the Senghorean exposition) of Négritude, which is that the role *assigned* to the African exists solely in opposition to Western oppression, which is why Sartre refers to colonization as: 'le premier fait de l'histoire Nègre' (p. xxxvii). What this means is that the first important moment in the history of Africans *conceived of and treated as blacks* ('l'histoire Nègre') is the process of colonization, for it is the beginning of white oppression of blacks *as blacks*. But what is also implied (and by a non-African, non-black philosopher) is that insofar as one feels oneself to be *nègre* one's history only goes back as far as the advent of colonialism. The problem is that there is no recognition that there may be anything other than this second-hand existence: it is assumed that blacks borrow their identities from the eyes of their colonizers, and that the most meaningful and pressing aspect of black existence is for them to wrest their identity back from whites. So all meaning in black existence is seen to stem from, or consist in opposition to, white existence ('c'est la Négritude qui se définit contre l'Europe et la colonisation', p. xxvii). It is a pretty poor existence which is independent and meaningful only by virtue of continuing oppression.

Senghor, too, defines Négritude by opposition to the norms of European culture; the maxim would seem to be 'black is what white is not'. This general tendency to assimilate his thought with that of others is noted by Janet Vaillant, who writes: '[in his home culture] harmony was the most important social goal […] When he became a student in Paris, he instinctively reached out to bring different groups of people together, and to find common ground among differing points of view

rather than to out-argue or oppose them'.[61] The implications of this strategy will be discussed in section 4.3, below.

2.4.2 European Audience

From the very beginning of 'L'Esthétique' Senghor makes it clear that he is speaking to a European audience, producing a clarifying account of all things African to enable Europeans to come to a true and accurate appraisal of African art and culture. But this instruction-manual approach is not as innocuous as it may at first seem. It conceals the fact that here, as in many other of his essays and papers, Senghor continues to treat European reason and judgement as the standards of reason and judgement; even while proclaiming blacks 'les fils ainés de la terre' (p. 207), he reconstructs a Eurocentric mode of discourse because he chooses to make the proclamation *to Europe*.

It is a fundamental contradiction of Négritude that it was produced both in spite of, or in opposition to, and for the attention of Europe. That is, it partly consists in an attempt to address the former colonizers in order to convince them of the validity of the movement; because, in the words of Sartre, '… il faut qu'il [le 'Nègre'] les oblige à le reconnaître pour un homme' (*Anthologie*, p. xiv).[62]

Consequently, among the generations of African thinkers who have followed in the wake of Négritude there have been many critics of the movement who see it solely as a product made for European consumption. And there is evidence in Senghor's work to support this complaint, but Négritude was not merely a Eurocentric discourse, it was also a deliberate and ostentatious turning away from Europe; indeed it is this deliberation, this ostentation, which shows exactly which audience was intended to observe it.[63] By turning away from European values and extolling African ones, in the face of Europe, Senghor is trying to demonstrate the

value of the black man to the Western world. There remains, however, the potent criticism that he does not once question whether this world should be the judge, nor does it occur to him that the West may not be uniformly white, that the two 'worlds' of Africa and Europe are already interacting and intermingled.

2.4.3 European Ideology

It should by now be clear that both the origins and the destination of Négritude texts and theory was ultimately European. In this section it will be considered how this may have lessened the force or the credibility of the movement.

And if Négritude was made within a European tradition, with a European audience in mind, what does this matter? An answer to this question should be bipartite, distinguishing, as far as is possible, two aspects of Négritude: content and context. That the concepts expressed by the movement were non-African in origin belies the stated authenticity of Négritude as *African* cultural values, for it can be seen that these values have actually been imposed or imported from outside. Yet this does not mean that the concepts are not or could not be of use for Africans, they just are not what they purport to be. By saying the content of Négritude is non-African, which may perhaps come as a disappointment, we have not yet said that it is false.[64]

As for the context, however, the fact that so much conceptual background has been imported from European ethnology, anthropology, humanist philosophy, and so on, should make us suspicious about the ideological framework assumed by Négritudinists. For these are precisely the disciplines which have in the past helped to assert the superiority of 'whites' over 'non-whites', in order to justify the quite unjustifiable colonial enterprise. We should be suspicious of this inherited framework because, even if it is used against Western domination, it

may well replicate the modes of thought that once made the unthinkable seem reasonable. Mudimbé says this:

> pour l'Afrique, échapper réellement à l'Occident […] suppose de savoir, dans ce qui nous permet de penser contre l'Occident, ce qui est encore occidental; et de mesurer en quoi notre recours contre lui est encore peut-être une ruse qu'il nous oppose et au terme de laquelle il nous attend. (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 13)

There are also more immediate problems. Soyinka argues that Négritude could make no significant advances from the colonialist era because it issued no challenge to the basic premises of European racist oppression, namely, that the white is a highly developed human because s/he employs analytical thinking. Instead the movement asserted the equality of Africans on different grounds: that they are also highly developed because they employ intuitive understanding (*Myth, Literature and the African World*, pp. 127 and 136). It may be queried whether this argument was in fact a strength or a weakness, since, by accepting the basis for colonialist arguments yet deriving a different conclusion, it disarmed from the inside the sting of the colonial presupposition that whites are superior to blacks and therefore should rule them. So Sartre understood the matter, when he wrote 'à la ruse du colon ils répondent par une ruse inverse et semblable: puisque l'oppresseur est présent jusque dans la langue qu'ils parlent, ils parleront cette langue pour la détruire' (*Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre*, p. xx). This is quite possibly true, but there is still an irreducible problem here, in that with the basis for the old arguments intact they are available to be remade and would still retain much persuasive force. As a safeguard against this possibility, Négritude, a young and underdeveloped movement, was not entirely adequate.

Moreover, this attack on colonialism was too limited in that it tried to replace ideas of white superiority with ideas of black and white equality. It thereby

replaced one form of chauvinism with another, by not leaving room for the self-assertion of other marginalized groups.[65] Rather than reasserting the black/white divide, however well-balanced, what was needed was a demonstration of the contradictions and irrationality at the heart of the Eurocentric discourse, which would then give room to speak to all marginalized cultures, not only African ones. As it is, Sartre is plainly wrong in writing: '[le Nègre] affirme sa solidarité avec les opprimés de toute couleur' (*Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre*, p. xl), as Négritude actually constructed a new chauvinism which was built to accommodate black Africans alone.

Yet more distressing is the way in which Négritude allows a certain complacency with respect to Africa. Sartre felt confident enough to write:

> …le Nègre […] se crée un racisme antiraciste. Il ne souhaite nullement dominer le monde: il veut l'abolition des privilèges ethniques d'où qu'ils viennent; il affirme sa solidarité avec les opprimés de toute couleur. (p. xl)

That was in 1948. The last few decades have shown it to be anything but true: Africans, like people the world over, have proved themselves capable of authoritarian and military rule, dictatorship, governmental corruption, torture, terrorism and genocide.[66] Négritude encouraged us to think such things were impossible, but the only basis for this was ideological doctrine, and not historical or psychological analysis, which would have told us that Africans were capable of all the crimes of colonialism, authoritarianism and racism that have been attributed to the West. Indeed, a quick glance at the history of the slave-trade, when *African* leaders sold slaves to Western traders, would have told us that Africans were as capable of these things as any people.

2.5 Replies & Other Texts

In this section I shall recall some of the problems faced by Senghor and, using some of his other writings, see whether he is able to overcome them.

First, the text we have concentrated on so far, *L'Esthétique Négro-Africaine*, seems to suggest that the epistemic approach that is assigned to the African, intuitive understanding, is *exclusive* to the African, and that the African is *limited* to the use of intuitive reasoning alone. Does this mean that, according to Senghor, a non-African could not appropriate essentially African conceptual techniques, in the same way that Africans have been said to appropriate 'non-African' or 'Western' forms of thought?[67] Could intuitive reason not form a part of some other culture?

There is plenty of evidence in favour of an affirmative reply to this question. Even Placide Tempels, the Belgian missionary whose book *La philosophie bantoue* was so influential on Senghor's thought, wrote the following:

> I must say that my goal, in this study of the Bantu was to feel myself 'Bantu' at least once. I wanted to think, feel, live like him, have a Bantu soul […] My attitude perhaps included an element of sympathy towards this living individual…[68]

Surely this is a case of understanding through sympathy?

Senghor apparently sees this possibility, for he writes, in the last pages of 'L'Esthétique':

> On me dira que l'esprit de la Civilisation et les lois de la Culture négro-africaine, tels que je les ai exposés, ne sont pas du seul Négro-africain, et qu'ils lui sont communs avec d'autres peuples […] Je ne le nie pas.

But he does not face the objection in full, for he continues:

> Chaque peuple réunit, en son visage, les divers traits de la condition humaine. Mais j'affirme que ces traits, on ne les trouve nulle part réunis dans cet équilibre, sous cet éclairage; nulle part, le rythme n'a régné aussi despotiquement. (p.216)

While agreeing that people other than Africans may have traits in common with Africans, he reasserts the view that possession of these traits depends on racial essence: people of different races have common features because their essences share those features. The idea that human characteristics depend, not on essences, but on historical circumstances and individual choices is not considered, and the problems engendered by the essentialist view find no true resolution in the text.

It may be apparent from what has been said that Senghor is stating something like 'one race, one culture', indeed, from his claim that culture is determined by race it does seem to follow that distinct races produce distinct cultures. Nevertheless, he certainly is not claiming that cultures are eternally stable and distinct from one another. In fact, the teleological aspect of Négritude, which consists in the prediction of an eventual cultural syncretism, is one of its most important and salient features. This is the idea of the *Civilization of the Universal*, borrowed from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and according to which all cultures will eventually be merged and submerge their differences in a 'universal culture'.[69] Presumably, on Senghor's account, this merging of cultures must proceed from a merging of races. But if the mechanism linking race-to-metaphysics-to-culture is obscure, there is little hope of our finding a Senghorian account of how mixed races would account for mixed metaphysics, and thereby for mixed culture. Indeed there is no clue in any of the texts as to how Senghor would resolve this particular issue.

As for the objection that racial terms do not denote objective racial types at all, he acknowledges this in the Oxford paper:

> and then the anthropologists taught us that there is no such thing as a pure race: scientifically speaking, races do not exist. […] with a mere two hundred million people, we would in the end disappear as a 'black race' through miscegenation. (*The African Philosophy Reader*, p. 440)

And elsewhere he remarks that 'la pureté raciale était un faux mythe' (*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*, p. 21). But although he accepts this critique, he does not give up his ideas on the links between race, soul, and metaphysics, and he still insists on presenting the same racial stereotypes as before.[70] How can traits deriving from racial essences be at once fixed and surpassable? Yet Senghor's position includes the view that all particular cultures will be subsumed in the universal. Does this mean that the idea of 'l'âme nègre' is just another myth, an impermanent rhetorical device? Since it is in practice impossible to say with any great accuracy or finality whether a person's behavioural tendencies results from pre-programmed, innate information, or from the way one has been educated and one's cultural milieu, any attempt to philosophize about such matters tends to end up as a straightforward statement of doctrine, in the absence of testable hypotheses. [71]

It is something of a conundrum that, although Senghor believes that through biological miscegenation and cultural syncretism, distinct races and cultures will disappear, he still insists on the homogeneity of Africa and Europe as both racial and cultural units. It does not seem obvious to him that we may *already* be involved in this process: for a long time now, and certainly during the time Senghor was writing, black people and cultures have subsisted in countries traditionally regarded as 'Western'. There have even been consecutive generations of people with African ethnic origins, but who have never known a home other than Europe or America.

2.6 Conclusion

Senghor does seem to recognize that many of the origins of Négritude lie in the philosophical traditions of Europe, but this does not worry him; indeed, often he

leans heavily on European texts in order to support his views. He is not concerned that his portrayal of the African might simply reproduce Western stereotypes, though it is not clear whether this confidence stems from an implicit belief in the veracity of his sources, or an unquestioned complacency about his own undertaking.

The criterion he gives for Africanness, i.e. expressing the 'black soul', means that a work of art made by an African national, but in a European artistic tradition, would not be (essentially) African for Senghor. There is a good reason for this: Négritude is, or rather was, first and foremost an affirmation of African culture, an affirmation set in contra-distinction to European culture; and secondly a critique of European culture. As a political and ideological movement with the stated intention of empowering Africans, though the reality of this claim is denied by critics like Hountondji (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 225), it was important for Négritude that its characteristics were at once different from European models, and promoted *because of* those differences. If the movement had limited itself to the claim that Africans were just as able to take part in (European) culture and civilization as Europeans themselves, then there would have been no concerted attempt to question the values of those European cultures. To say to Europe 'we of Africa can do what you do, just as well as you' *is* a positive statement, and it does assert the sophistication and the capabilities of African peoples. But it leaves intact the assumption that the *standard* against which sophistication and capability are to be measured is the European one, which straightaway disarms any attempt to criticize Europeans for their colonial history (if *they* set the standard, then *they* must be right).

But since it turns out that Négritude was itself largely inspired by and created for European tastes, we arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that Négritude was itself inauthentically African despite its vociferous and repeated assertions to the contrary. And so we are still left with the rather problematic question as to what *is* authentically African; perhaps this shows that the matter was never as straightforward as it may have seemed.

Soyinka diagnoses what went wrong with Négritude as follows:

> Négritude proceeded along the route of over-simplification. Its re-entrenchment of black values was not preceded by any profound effort to enter into this African system of values. It extolled the apparent. (*Myth, Literature and the African World*, pp. 126-7)

Yet Senghor was right to think that in order to be in a position to surpass the inferiority complex imposed on Africa by Europe, an active promotion of norms radically different from those of Europe was needed. Mudimbé writes that 'the alienation of colonialism entails both the objective fact of total dependence [...] and the subjective process of the self-victimization of the dominated [...]. Black personality and Négritude appear as the only means of negating this thesis' (*The Invention of Africa*, p.93). What is surprising, and not a little disappointing, is that it never occurred to Senghor that the Africa/Europe dichotomy deserved to be laid to rest for good. The portrayal of differences between Africans and Europeans as metaphysical, rather than simply cultural, reinforced the conceptual divide and left a weighty burden for African writers to come, which many would work hard to diminish.

After considering all these issues, it is clear that the picture Hountondji gives us of the animating force behind Négritude is quite accurate, when he says that it is

> la quête passionnée d'une identité niée par le colonisateur, mais avec cette idée sous-jacente que l'un des éléments de l'identité culturelle est précisément la "philosophie", l'idée que toute culture repose sur un substrat

métaphysique particulier, permanent, inaltérable. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 60-61)

Which is not belied by Léopold Senghor:

And so we set out on a fervent quest for the Holy Grail, which was our *Collective Soul*. (*The African Philosophy Reader*, p. 439)

Chapter 3: Hountondji and Professional Philosophy

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter we examine the ideas of Paulin Hountondji, a writer who has for over twenty-five years been a key figure in francophone African philosophy. The text we look at, *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, like those of the previous chapter, was first published in Paris by a prestigious publishing house (in this case, Maspero). The authors, too, bear certain similarities: like Senghor, Hountondji is a francophone African intellectual who received his education in France at the *Ecole normale supérieure*; here, he took his *agrégation* in philosophy and completed a postgraduate thesis on the philosophy of Husserl. Since then he has held various teaching posts throughout Europe and Africa.

Unlike Senghor, however, we find in Hountondji no lengthy paeans to the African spirit, no detailed examinations of the essence of African art, no extolling of the particular qualities of 'the Negro-African'. Indeed, the book is a lot more measured, more explicit and more self-aware than the Négritude texts. Apart from the style, however, it is the content of his work which so distances Hountondji from his predecessors, for this is one of the first and most distinguished examples of what has come to be called African 'professional philosophy'.[72] As Henry Odera Oruka, a fellow African professional philosopher, explains, 'it is "professional" precisely because it is technical philosophy having professionally trained philosophers as its managers'.[73] This sort of philosophical discourse, generally characterized by a marked affinity with Western academic philosophy, has emerged as one of the major critical reactions to — and in this case, against — Négritude.

In trying to expand the concept of 'professional African philosophy', Oruka also comments: 'current African professional philosophy is predominantly a metaphilosophy. Its central theme is the question "What is philosophy?" And a corollary of this question is "What is African philosophy?"' (ibid.).

Hountondji's text attempts to take on these questions, as well as others which spring up in the course of the debate; for our purposes we may discern four central themes which dominate the text. First, Hountondji contends that philosophy in Africa has, to date (the text is from 1977), consisted in various forms of ethnology and ethnophilosophy which are, he argues, fundamentally flawed in their representation of African cultures and peoples.[74] Secondly, he discusses how the term 'philosophy' and its cognates are currently understood, and how he thinks they should be understood, with respect to culture. Thirdly, there is an attempt to redefine culture in contrast to the view that Senghor (influenced by Teilhard de Chardin) puts forward, according to which individual cultures are homogeneous units which will eventually meet in a cultural syncretism (see the discussion of the 'Civilisation de l'Universel' in the preceding chapter). Fourthly, he discusses the future of African philosophy, and the conditions he believes are necessary for its growth and development.

The order of our analysis of Hountondji's text will be as follows: the critique of Négritudinists and culturalists, the discussion of the concept of culture, the critique of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji's own conception of philosophy and his analysis of the conditions needed to create a truly African philosophy for the future. Once we have become familiar with Hountondji's ideas we shall turn to the objections raised by his critics, and see whether he is able to reply convincingly.

3.2 Senghor, Négritude and the Concept of Culture

Let us begin by looking at Hountondji's reaction to Léopold Senghor and the Négritude movement. In *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'* it is possible to distinguish two major criticisms of the Senghorian approach to African philosophy: the first concerns the observation about the European origins of Négritude, and the second refers to the concept of culture.

Hountondji sees Senghor's account of African philosophy to be quite conspicuously developing themes taken from European sources, serving European interests, and ultimately playing to a European audience. As we have seen, there is ample evidence for the view that Négritude has its roots in European thought. Most, if not all, of Senghor's most important ideas derive in one way or another from European sources such as Lévy-Bruhl, Placide Tempels, Teilhard de Chardin, Bergson, Hegel, Marx, Sartre, etc.[75]

But it is not this alone which provokes Hountondji's criticism; after all, he himself will go on to recommend that Africans assimilate and continue the 'héritage philosophique international' bequeathed by European philosophers, among others.[76] The objection Hountondji raises is that, without appearing to question their validity, Senghor adopts and promotes Eurocentric theses which assert the existence of radical, and principally racial, differences between European and African peoples, usually to the detriment of Africans. Thus, Senghor tells us that Western reason is analytic, objective, and eminently scientific, while African reason is synthetic, subjective, and largely poetic: views succinctly expressed in maxims like: 'l'émotion est nègre, comme la raison hellène'.[77] Such ideas were easy for European commentators to commend as they were merely transformations of pre-existing European ideas about Africa.[78] Like

Soyinka, Hountondji believes that by accepting this ideology, rather than subjecting it and its producers to critical interrogation, Négritudinists rendered themselves politically impotent against the continuing influence of colonialist powers:

> L'exaltation des cultures noires […] fonctionne chez Senghor comme un alibi servant a éluder le problème de la libération nationale. (p. 225)[79]

Hountondji also finds it highly ironic that these texts, which should have been the documents of African intellectual and political emancipation, were aimed primarily at a European public. He points out that, like the long list of European ethnological works in which African peoples were treated as the unthinking, non-rational subjects of rational Western anthropology, Négritude was also a discourse *about* Africans but *for* Europeans. Goaded by this irony, Hountondji proclaims: 'il nous faut aujourd'hui mettre fin à cette extraversion scandaleuse' (p. 35); and it is indeed a startling characteristic of Négritude that it is almost completely extraverted: a defence of blackness delivered before a colonialist audience.

The concept of culture and the particular use to which it is put in Senghor's writings also testify to the exteriority of his discourse. As was explained in the preceding chapter, Senghor believes that the African 'psychophysiology' (something like a unique ethnic 'personality') is the metaphysical basis upon which all African culture is formed. This culture is single and specifically determined by the unique psychophysiology that all Africans are deemed to possess.[80] The same is assumed of other cultures, so there is also a specific European civilization which, no doubt, derives from the uniquely European psychophysiology.

It is important to recognize what is going on here, for, bizarre though these ideas may sound, their origins are not so mysterious. Once again Senghor is responding

to two key ideological elements which have characterized Europe's relations with Africa for centuries: the first is the belief that African and European cultures are radically different from each other, together with the attendant wondrous mystification in the face of the exotic; the second is the (highly successful) attempt by Europeans to exclude Africans from the idea of objective historical progress, on the grounds that they were savage, or prelogical, or even non-human.

By setting up a discourse based on the idea of psychophysiology, Senghor hopes to explain African 'difference' by claiming that it does not stem from a debased humanity, but simply another *kind* of humanity. Armed with this new weapon, Senghor tries to subvert the sort of historicism which, in the hands of writers like Hegel, excludes Africans on a Eurocentric basis. What he has in mind is an idea taken from Teilhard de Chardin, the 'Civilisation de l'Universel', which is postulated as a synthetic global civilization into which all individual cultures will be subsumed.[81] Thus, Senghor reassures us of the intrinsic worth of African peoples: they are to be part of the great synthesis, therefore they are a necessary part of History.

Psychophysiology aside, Hountondji makes three principal objections to Senghor's account. First, he argues that the conception of African civilization as single and uniform is totally misleading and obviously false, which can be seen when it is considered that there are many different cultures on the African continent, not just one (pp. 226-8). In fact there are scores of societies that define themselves variously through different religions, customs, languages, and ethnicities.

Secondly, each one of these cultures is itself composed of a wide range of differing, often conflicting, elements. Importantly, Hountondji does not claim that

these differences are merely tolerated by the culture of which they are part, but rather that they are actually vital to its survival. For cultures are not based on a mere consensus on religious, moral, social and practical matters, quite the opposite, and if there were no divergence from those practices perceived as 'traditional', societies would come to a stagnant halt (p. 227). This means that there is no straightforward way to delineate a 'single' culture on the basis of shared traditions, since, by its very nature, culture is heterogeneous. If it were not, then the innovator, by the very fact of her/his innovation, would no longer be part of her/his culture. Given that the criteria according to which we demarcate cultures are in fact criteria of difference, picking out one sort of difference, say ethnicity, as an *inter*cultural boundary rather than an *intra*cultural difference is likely to come down to a matter of arbitrary decision, and we may wonder as to the identity and intentions of the arbiter.

Thirdly, Hountondji repudiates the assumption that cultures are, or should ideally be, stable entities, and that cultural authenticity consists in the preservation of unbroken traditions. On the contrary, cultures are (not only synchronically, but also diachronically) heterogeneous. Consequently, we can no longer assume that there is an unchanging African *essence* that will define African culture throughout history, nor should we assume that colonialism was some kind of break in the thread of African culture, because 'la tradition culturelle africaine n'est pas close, […] elle ne s'arrête pas quand commence la colonisation mais inclut aussi bien la vie culturelle coloniale et postcoloniale' (p. 228).

The upshot of all this is that the idea of a single, monolithic African civilization is sustainable only when Africa and African cultures are approached from the outside, in the form of a discourse serving the needs of a Europe which defines

itself through images of what it believes it is not, namely, the 'dark' continent. The only obvious way in which Africa is a single entity is as a geographical landmass:

> C'est seulement en ce sens — au sens d'une *désignation externe* et non d'une impossible caractérisation interne — qu'on peut parler de 'la' civilisation africaine au singulier, la seule unité réelle étant ici celle d'un continent. (p. 227, emphasis added)

So this implicit exteriority is itself a sign of inauthenticity: Senghor claims to be speaking for Africans, yet his discourse originates from outside Africa; it imposes itself from outside, and it remains outside. His position is untenable because, while ignoring the inherent change and diversity of African culture, he continues to write from an unreflectedly Eurocentric position (p. 228).

Once we understand that even localized cultures are by nature heterogeneous it becomes clear that the idea of a synthetic 'world-civilization' is simply incoherent. For if culture consists in successive conflicts and contradictions, how could we ever come to the point where we agree on everything? Hountondji puts it thus:

> La civilisation mondiale, telle qu'elle existe effectivement, est loin d'être une synthèse. C'est au contraire l'approfondissement des conflits culturels qui existaient jusque-là à l'intérieur de chaque société et la prise de conscience que ces conflits sont finalement les mêmes dans les diverses sociétés. (p. 235)

In Hountondji's view, the effect of Senghor's efforts was not to valorize African culture, as had been hoped, but instead to shackle it and its supposed substratum, African philosophy, by forcing them into a restrictive metaphysical category. Or, in the words of Mudimbé, Senghor '[aurait] pris simplement et fidèlement catégories, concepts, schèmes et systèmes occidentaux pour y couler des 'entités' africaines' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 43). Since these efforts were strongly influenced by European anthropological and ethnological sources, Hountondji's accusation

becomes one of complicity between the 'nationalist-ideologist' (Senghor) and the ex-colonialists.

Thus, the hypertrophy of Senghor's culturalism brings him to a state of political disablement, where arguments about the essence of African culture are only 'un alibi servant à éluder le problème politique de la libération nationale' (p. 225). Although originating in a desire to protect African culture from what was seen as a gradual extinction due to the Westernization of Africa (of the sort decried by Tempels, in *La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 123), what Négritude actually achieved was a sort of cultural fetishization, by promoting degraded stereotypical images of African culture as something rare and exotically different. The result was that,

> à vouloir coûte que coûte défendre nos civilisations, nous avons fini par les figer, par les momifier. Nous avons trahi nos cultures d'origine en voulant à tout prix les donner en spectacle, en en faisant des objets de consommation externe, des objets de discours, des mythes. Nous faisons ainsi inconsciemment le jeu de l'Europe, de cette même Europe contre laquelle nous prétendions au départ nous défendre. Et nous ne trouvons au bout du chemin que cette même platitude, cette misère étalée, ce renoncement tragique à penser par nous-mêmes et pour nous-mêmes: l'esclavage. (pp. 43-4)

Now let us proceed to look at the details of Hountondji's critique of what he sees as another major obstacle in the search for an authentic African philosophy: ethnophilosophy.

3.3 Critique of Ethnophilosophy

In order to examine Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy we should have a more accurate idea of what it is we are dealing with. *Ethnophilosophy* is one member of the family of so-called 'ethnosciences', which take peoples or cultures as the focal objects of study. Thus, *ethnobotany* is the branch of botany which studies the use of plants in folklore and religion. *Ethnology* is the branch of anthropology which takes as its subject 'races' or peoples, their relations to one

another, their origins, and their more distinctive characteristics. Hountondji describes *ethnophilosophy* as 'l'ethnologie à prétention philosophique' (p. 14). A prime example of an ethnophilosophical work is Placide Tempels' *La Philosophie bantoue*, which was intended to reveal the philosophical structures intrinsic to Bantu culture.[82] The implied sources of this text are anonymous and silent — the Bantu themselves do not speak, for they are the objects of study — and the only voice belongs to the Belgian missionary, Tempels.

Although ethnophilosophy started out as a development of European ethnology, it swiftly attracted African writers such as Kagame, Nkrumah and Diop.[83] Thus sprang up the first growth of what would come to be called African philosophy, which consisted in a series of attempts to reconstruct an 'authentically' African world-view from the remnants of pre-colonial culture. When Hountondji initiated his critique of African philosophy, this sort of approach predominated to such an extent that he wrote the following:

> L'histoire de notre philosophie n'a été de ce fait jusqu'ici, pour une grande part, que l'histoire des interprétations successives de cette 'philosophie' collective, de cette vision du monde qu'on supposait donnée d'avance, sous-jacente à toutes nos traditions et à tout notre comportement, et que l'analyse n'avait plus qu'à mettre au jour, modestement. (pp. 20-21)[84]

But neither the origins nor the ends of ethnophilosophy were merely academic. Tempels himself wrote that one of his work's primary aims was to give Europeans a deeper and more sympathetic insight into the Bantu peoples, in order to make Europe's 'mission civilisatrice' more efficient and less traumatic (*La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 17). Marcien Towa says of this work that it 'n'était qu'une propédeutique à la Catéchèse bantoue'.[85]

There were also less opportunistic ends in sight, of which Lausana Keita writes:

> As defined both by African and European scholars, ethnophilosophy serves the function of the subjective valorization of traditional African thought in

> contradistinction to colonial anthropological thought which engaged in a
> purportedly objective devalorization of the African's intellectual efforts.
> (*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 137)

For the liberal European scholar, as for the nationalist African scholar, ethnophilosophy becomes a way to demonstrate the value of African civilization by showing that it too possesses what writers from classical Greece to the Enlightenment urge is one of the defining characteristics of humanity: philosophical thinking.[86] For Hountondji, the desire to prove the validity of African cultures takes on the form of a 'quête passionnée d'une identité niée par le colonisateur' (pp. 60-1). He continues:

> mais avec cette idée sous-jacente que l'un des éléments de l'identité
> culturelle est précisement la 'philosophie', l'idée que toute culture repose
> sur un substrat métaphysique particulier, permanent, inaltérable. (Ibid.)

Since traditional African philosophy is taken to be something which underlies or informs traditional African culture, the correct way to study the former is assumed to be a straightforward analysis of the latter, by examining myths, fables, cosmogonic and cosmological stories and poems. Conversely, the more Africa seems to leave behind its pre-colonial past, the more it seems to be in danger of losing (the elements that might enable a reconstruction of) traditional African philosophy. Thus, if we are to hold on to what is seen as the proof of African rationality and the basis of an authentic African philosophy, we must do all we can to prevent African culture from becoming less African. Essentially this would be a matter of shielding it from the forces of modernization and Westernization, which are so alien to African culture.[87]

Hountondji believes that such arguments as these lead to intellectual and cultural stagnation, for they assert that what is truly African does not change, and

thus any attempt to introduce change is instantly vilified as being inauthentically African, or Eurocentric. In opposition he contends that

> la prétendue acculturation, la prétendue 'rencontre' de la civilisation africaine avec celle d'Europe, n'est en fait qu'une mutation supplémentaire opérée par la civilisation africaine elle-même. (p. 233)

But the main reason for the attack on ethnophilosophy is that Hountondji finds it does not fulfil the goal it set itself, which was to reveal an African system of thought that is authentically philosophical. Hountondji criticizes ethnophilosophy for taking what is essentially un-philosophical to be philosophical, that is, ethnophilosophy bases its reconstruction of 'traditional African philosophy' on the wrong sorts of sources. In order to compete with the long history of European philosophy, ethnophilosophers appropriate 'matériaux extra-philosophiques tels que les contes, les légendes, les proverbes, les poèmes dynastiques, etc.' (pp. 44-5). This is objectionable because such sources were not created to be philosophical, instead they are mainly religious, cultural, and literary texts. Although they may reveal certain metaphysical prejudices unique to a group's social conventions, they do not form an explicitly philosophical discourse.

Hountondji's concept of philosophy here refers to a discipline that it is more scientific than literary, more akin to the mathematical and experimental sciences than to the arts or theology. To interpret non-philosophical sources in a principally philosophical manner is, therefore, to be caught in 'une confusion des genres' (p. 31). Furthermore,

> la rigueur scientifique veut que d'un document sociologique on donne *d'abord* une interprétation sociologique, que d'un texte de botanique […] on donne *d'abord* une interprétation biologique […] Cette même rigueur scientifique interdit de projeter arbitrairement un *discours philosophique* derrière des produits du langage qui se donnent eux-mêmes, expressément, pour autre chose que la philosophie. (p. 30)

As the closing sentence of this quotation may indicate, Hountondji goes further than the claim that ethnophilosophy uses the wrong sort of text, he also sees ethnophilosophy as a blatant act of projection:

> l'effacement du philosophe devant son propre discours était inséparable d'une projection qui lui faisait attribuer arbitrairement à son peuple ses propres choix théoriques, ses option idéologiques. (p. 21)

Hountondji does indeed recognize ethnophilosophical works as works of philosophy, but argues that the sources of these works, the material which they claim simply to be ordering and interpreting, are not in fact philosophical. All that is philosophical in the texts comes from the ethnophilosophers themselves. Yet this translation from explicitly non-philosophical sources into explicitly philosophical texts is not perceived by the ethnophilosophers as anything more than the collection and ordering of data: they claim that the philosophy *already* exists in the original sources.[88] For this reason, Hountondji describes ethnophilosophy as: 'une interprétation […] croyant traduire un texte qui n'existe nulle part, et méconnaissant, de ce fait, sa propre activité *créatrice*' (p. 29, note 16, original emphasis). Of course, he is not stating that the texts do not exist at all, that they are fabricated, but rather that they do not exist in the form of a philosophical discourse. Since this is the case, ethnophilosophers cannot be performing a philosophical *interpretation* of traditional African philosophy, they are actually *creating* it, from information of a non-philosophical nature.

> Dans le cas de la 'philosophie' africaine, les sources manquent; ou du moins, si elles existent, elles ne sont pas des *textes*, des *discours* philosophiques [… Les documents] sont *radicalement hétérogènes* à la philosophie; ils n'ont rien de comparable aux 'sources' que constitueraient par exemple, pour un interprète de l'hégélianisme, du matérialisme dialectique, de la théorie freudienne ou même du confucianisme, les textes explicites de Hegel, Marx, Freud ou Confucius dans leur teneur discursive, en tant que produits du langage perpétuellement disponibles. (p. 29)

By ignoring this fact, argues Hountondji, the ethnophilosophers are in fact ignoring their own liberty. He is at pains to stress that he does regard their work as genuine philosophy, because it attempts to apply a philosophical method, even though the objects of this application are mainly cultural remnants: 'ils font preuve néanmoins de qualités philosophiques incontestables, dans la *manière* dont ils prétendent justifier cette fiction' (p. 22, original emphasis). But ethnophilosophy is an *inauthentic* form of philosophy because it denies its own creative power, which amounts to a denial of the freedom to produce original thought.

Once more Hountondji is emphasizing that the development of African philosophy lies in the present and the future, and is not something which has already been done, requiring nothing more than to be sifted out from all the other material. He is reclaiming his own immediate intellectual power, and urging others to do likewise.

So what happens when this creative freedom is not recognized? According to Hountondji, the result for the ethnophilosopher is an objectification both of the ethnophilosophical text and of the source, namely African cultural traditions. This objectification transforms the two into what are essentially artefacts, museum-pieces to be viewed and manipulated, thus nullifying the possibility of philosophical discourse and rendering old customs dry and lifeless.

We are given an analogy with African languages. Although universities both within and without Africa are taking an ever greater interest in indigenous African languages, the emphasis tends to be on teaching *about* African languages — their origins, morphology, semantic structure, and so on — but not *in* them: they are treated as *objects* rather than *vehicles* of learning (p. 237). Similarly, cultures and

philosophies are transformed by the ethnologist into objects of study, instead of ways of life and critical discourses in which anyone may take part.

This is partly due to ethnophilosophy setting itself in the role of a descriptive, rather than discursive, discipline. What the ethnophilosopher aims to do is to reconstruct the collective philosophy of a pre-colonial society, in order to demonstrate and explore this society's philosophical capabilities.[89] Yet there is no obvious attempt to engage in a critical way with what is 'discovered'. Peter Bodunrin, a Nigerian 'professional' philosopher, argues:

> Criticism and argument are essential characteristics of anything which is to pass as philosophy. Hence mere descriptive accounts of African thought systems or the thought systems of any other society would not pass as philosophy. (*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 65)

Now there are many areas of history in which we are not sure how the individuals of a particular society thought about certain aspects of their existence. Ancient Greece, especially of the Presocratic period, is a good example, all the more so because Greece is commonly held to be one of the first civilizations to have engaged in specifically philosophical speculation. There have been attempts to reconstruct Heraclitean thought, to take a single author, from surviving fragments of papyrus and the extant reports of contemporary and later writers. This sort of reconstructive work seems to be purely descriptive, so is it therefore unphilosophical?

An answer to this question should probably equivocate: such works may or may not be philosophical, depending on the use to which they are to be put. Insofar as we are only trying to discover what Heraclitus thought we are only practising a form of historical studies, or, if we are trying to learn something about the mores of the time, a form of anthropology. This is true even though we know that the primary text was written with philosophical intention (allowances made for the

discrepancy between ancient and modern senses of 'philosophy'). It is only insofar as we *engage* philosophically with a text that we are treating it as philosophy, for then we are taking the author to be a real interlocutor, someone to engage with and criticize. It is no great problem that the original author is no longer alive, what he has produced is still an invitation to dialogue. By studying a text philosophically we are leaving open the possibility that our objections were anticipated and satisfactorily dealt with; we are simultaneously leaving open the possibility that they were not.

It is this openness of discourse that Hountondji finds lacking in the ethnophilosophical text, and that leads him to make the charge of philosophical inauthenticity. He objects that ethnophilosophers claim that the discourse they reveal is a philosophy, yet do not treat it as philosophy for they do not allow it to be brought into doubt or contradicted (pp. 14 and 22). He also argues that

> une contradiction entre deux thèses ethnophilosophiques est nécessairement circulaire, ne pouvant être tranchée par aucune expérimentation ni par quelque autre procès de vérification. (p. 64)

Since the texts it claims to interpret or reconstruct are non-existent, because there is no unanimous, implicit African philosophy, ethnophilosophy is 'une science sans objet'. Scraps of oral tradition and literature are patched together to form a screen onto which the philosophical beliefs of the academic authors are projected (pp. 64-5). Moreover, the key interest lies not in the truth of this new 'traditional' philosophy, but in its Africanness. As Marcien Towa writes, ethnophilosophy presents '[un] système que les Africains sont invités à assumer, non parce qu'il serait plus vrai que les autres systèmes, non parce qu'il jouirait d'une supériorité quelconque qu'on s'efforcerait d'établir, mais du seul fait qu'il est africain' ('Conditions d'une affirmation …', p. 348).

But the recurring representation of the traditional African as the unskilled bearer of a philosophy of which s/he is blissfully ignorant, and which will only be discovered by ethnologists, effectively casts the African subject as 'le Monsieur Jourdain de la philosophie'.[90] This is perfectly consonant with the following remark, from the ethnologist and missionary, Placide Tempels':

> C'est nous qui pourrons leur dire, d'une façon précise, quel est le contenu de leur conception des êtres, de telle sorte qu'ils se reconnaîtront dans nos paroles et acquiesceront en disant: 'Tu nous as compris, tu nous connais à présent complètement'. (*La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 24)

Not only does this attitude support the continuation of an ideology which posits Africans as unconscious primitive beings, thus reasserting the fundamental superiority of Europe over Africa, but furthermore, this sort of representation encourages the objectification of culture (as discussed above).

Another analogy may be apposite here: a common attempt to justify colonialism has consisted in a claim that it was the *duty* of the colonizers to exploit the otherwise untouched sources of material wealth that lay in the colonized lands. Although in normal circumstances liberal humanism encourages respect for others and states that it is wrong to dispossess people of their land and wealth, in this case it is the colonizers' *duty* to do so, as it will have the beneficial effect of global enrichment.[91] Similarly, if traditional Africans constitute a source of scientific or philosophical wealth that they themselves are unable to exploit due to their ignorance, then it becomes very easy to suggest that someone should attempt to do it for them, *for their own good*, or perhaps *for the good of humanity*. It is a short step from the image of Africans as the unwitting bearers of an implicit philosophy, to the picture of the African psyche as a treasure-trove waiting to be plundered by the intrepid explorer.

And who should this explorer be other than the European-formed ethnologist? Hountondji comments:

> On oublie trop facilement que l'africanisme a été aussi inventé par l'Europe et que les 'sciences' ethnographiques sont partie intégrante du patrimoine culturel de l'Occident, ne formant, somme tout, qu'un épisode passager dans la tradition théorique des peuples occidentaux. (p. 47)

At this point Hountondji is berating the African ethnologist for failing to recognize the provenance of her/his own discipline. Ethnology and ethnophilosophy were first conceived by Europeans and this origin is evident, not only in the way African philosophy is reduced to nothing more than a collective belief system, but also in the continued exclusion of African subjects from the discourse. Even African ethnophilosophers do not seem to be talking to their fellow Africans, but, like Senghor, addressing European academia in an effort to prove the value of their traditional cultures. Consequently, for Europeans 'le Noir continue […] d'être tout le contraire d'un interlocuteur: il est *ce dont* on parle, un visage sans voix qu'on tente de déchiffrer, entre soi, objet à définir et non sujet d'un discours possible' (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 15).

Hountondji believes that this exclusion is possible because the societies studied by the ethnological disciplines are characteristically dominated (e.g. colonized) societies. Generally without access to a standard of (a particular type of) education which would allow them to reciprocate the anthropologists' questioning and enter into a true dialogue, the 'silence' of these societies gives ethnology the security of a certain distance between the maker of the discourse and its subjects. Thus 'le discours savant de l'anthropologue n'a de sens qu'à l'intérieur d'un débat scientifique auquel ces peuples n'ont aucune part, mais qui a toujours son origine ailleurs: dans les classes dominatrices elles-mêmes…' (p. 16).[92]

In the hands of Africanist writers such as Senghor this uneven arrangement is maintained because the terms of the discourse are simply taken over from its originators. Thus, the language of difference continues to dominate the debate and continues to generate binary oppositions: 'primitive/civilized' becomes 'African/European' or 'négro-africain/européen'. Although at first it seems as if the former colonialist ideology is no longer at work in these new terms, we soon find that they are put to exactly the same use as the old ones, for the next step is to comment on the intrinsic and substantial difference between the two types, and the following step to try to account for this difference.

In the case of ethnophilosophy, the difference is that what is taken for philosophy in European academies is quite distinct from what is called 'African philosophy, both in form and content. The reduction of African philosophy to a collective world-view is in part a consequence of what Hountondji calls 'le mythe de l'unanimité' (p. 62), which is the supposition that, in 'primitive' societies, group consensus on all things is a way of life, that the thoughts and beliefs of individual members are eternally subordinate to something approaching a herd instinct. In such a society there could be no distinct individual beliefs, but only collective systems of belief, which is why it is assumed that if there is a traditional African philosophy it must exist in the form of a collective thought-system. Clearly this is an ethnocentric bias; no-one would suppose that there was a single system of philosophical beliefs, or indeed a single system of *any* sort of beliefs, held by all of the people who live in Great Britain, or Europe; yet this is the order of the premises that ethnophilosophy requires us to accept.[93]

With the myth of unanimity there co-exists another misconception, together they are mutually reinforcing. The other misconception lies in the presumption

that any member of the subject-society may be taken as a fair representative of their cultural group: clearly, if every person in a society agrees with one another, then each person is an equally good indicator of the group's cultural conventions. So while sociological studies of Western cultures take into account the human diversity within a population, and therefore try to effect a 'representative' sample, in an African society there is no need to conduct a broad survey. For Tempels, the conclusions of his research into Bantu world-views are susceptible to an immediate and direct extrapolation to cover all African peoples, indeed 'sauvages' in general. Similarly, when the ethnologist Marcel Griaule goes into the field, his main concern is to take for his subject an individual suitably well-versed in the traditional culture. Griaule analyses his interviews with the sage, Ogotemmêli, as if his sample were an authentic representative of all Africans, simply because the subject is a wise man who is particularly knowledgeable about certain esoteric traditions.[94]

Henry Odera Oruka objects that this amounts to the presumption that precolonial Africa could not support personalized critical thinking, that only an anonymous, collective and implicit view of the world could develop. Oruka argues that the truth of such a presumption would mean that Africa was empty of paradigmatically philosophical thought, for what is a philosophy if it is not auto-critical? (*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, pp. 47-63).

A striking feature of the ethnophilosophical enterprise is that it depends upon a concept of culture as a stable and unifaceted artefact, such as we find in Senghor. For if one's authentic philosophy is to be found in the culture of one's ancestors, then this culture, in order to be the carrier of a stable and non-contradictory philosophy, must itself be stable and non-contradictory. Yet if cultures really do

evolve while remaining authentic (whatever that might mean), there is no need for this fixation with the past because the past is not the sole, true repository of culture, it is simply a previous incarnation.

A further criticism levelled at ethnology and its associated disciplines is that, as critical disciplines, they fail from the beginning because their foundations rest upon the assumption of the very thesis they wish to demonstrate, namely, that the subject-cultures of the study are radically different in nature from the ethnological culture. On this point, Towa and Hountondji are in agreement:

> L'ethnophilosophie est essentiellement stérile. Aucun véritable esprit de recherche ne l'anime, puisque l'ethnophilosophie est déjà en possession de son credo. ('Conditions d'une affirmation …', p. 344)

> L'ethnologie […] présuppose toujours ce qui est à démontrer: la distinction réelle entre son objet et celui de la sociologie en général, la differénce de nature entre les sociétés 'primitives' […] et les autres sociétés. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 16, note 4)

One of the foundations of ethnophilosophy is therefore:

> la thèse, généralement tacite, d'une spécificité absolue des sociétés non occidentales, le postulat silencieux d'une différence de *nature* […] entre les sociétés dites primitives et les sociétés 'evoluées'. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 62)

It is this assumption of the existence of a fundamental difference in nature between European and African societies which explains why, within the domains of the ethnological discipline, it seems perfectly natural that the term 'philosophy' should have a different meaning in an African context, compared with its paradigmatic European usage. But Hountondji objects that the notion of traditional philosophy being the substratum of cultural and literary sources is based on a confusion of the rigorous, theoretical meaning and the popular, ideological meaning of the word 'philosophy'. The former indicates 'une discipline théorique ayant ses exigences propres et obéissant à des règles

méthodologiques déterminées', while the latter may be nothing more than 'toute sagesse individuelle ou collective, tout ensemble de principes présentant une relative cohérence et visant à réagir la pratique quotidienne d'un homme ou d'un peuple' (p. 39). According to the former, we may not be unconscious philosophers any more than we may be unconscious mathematicians or physicists; according to the latter, we may truly be said to be naturally philosophical. The conflation of these two, quite different, senses which leads to the attribution of the latter to Africa, while Europe stays the guardian and master of the former, is just another example of the patronizing attitude that ethnology assumes with respect to the objects of its gaze.

> C'est ce qui se passe pour le mot 'philosophie'. Quand on l'applique à l'Afrique, il n'est plus censé désigner la discipline spécifique qu'il évoque dans le contexte occidental, mais seulement une vision du monde collective, un système de croyances spontané, implicite, voire inconscient, auquel tous les Africains sont censés adhérer: usage vulgaire du mot, autorisé, comme on dirait, par la vulgarité présumée du contexte géographique auquel on l'applique. (Ibid., p. 62)

Marcien Towa has an interesting and quite apposite explanation of this conceptual confusion. He says that the principal characteristic of ethnophilosophy is that it dilates the concept of philosophy to such an extent that it becomes co-extensive with the concept of culture. So the reason ethnophilosophers look for traditional African philosophy within cultural sources is that what they are in fact looking for is a cultural artefact in the guise of philosophy. Towa demonstrates his point with the following argument:

> Supposer que l'oeuvre de Sartre disparaisse, on peut pas reconstituer l'existentialisme sartrien à partir de la structure de la langue française, du système éducatif, politique, familial de la France. Or c'est cette impossible reconstitution que prétendent effectuer les ethnophilosophes. ('Conditions d'une affirmation …', p. 350)

In examining these arguments against ethnophilosophy, it is important to bear in mind that, as an African himself, Hountondji is not attempting to show that Africans are or ever were *incapable* of philosophical dialogue, nor is he claiming that Western reason reigns supreme. His arguments against the ethnophilosophical rendering of philosophy do not stem from any particular ideological stance on African philosophy, but from his own conception of what philosophy is and must be in general. We shall now move on to discuss this conception.

3.4 Hountondji's Concept of Philosophy

The text *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'* works towards two principal ends: to debunk ethnophilosophy, and to construct a truly African philosophy which is dependent neither in theory nor in substance on Europe. In view of these ends, Hountondji introduces a concept of African philosophy different from those already examined. He intends not only to substitute this new concept for those which have so far dominated the field, Senghor-style essentialisms and theories of collective implicit philosophies, but also to effect a penetrating critique of those positions; and once subjected to this critique it is hoped that they will lose their influence.

Why is there such a need to argue for the existence and philosophical credibility of implicit world-views and distinct, racially-determined types of reason? Hountondji believes this need originates in the desire to promote a positive idea of Africanness: the Négritude movement is primarily animated by a desire to recover a racial identity which has been annihilated or mutilated by colonialism (compare Mudimbé's description of 'a young ideology devoting itself to the needs of a self-rediscovery', *The Invention of Africa*, p. 84). Underlying this desire is the conviction that one of the elements of this 'lost' identity is precisely philosophy, a

conviction which comes down to 'l'idée que toute culture répose sur un substrat métaphysique particulier, permanent, inaltérable' (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 60-1).

From this it results that, in the name of philosophy, a heavier emphasis is placed on the revival of an ancestral cultural identity. Authentic African philosophy is seen as something which consists solely in authentic African culture, which is in turn found only in the conventions of *traditional* Africa. Since these conventions fall increasingly into neglect, discourse about African philosophy frequently involves a nostalgia about traditional Africa.

We have already seen (in section 3.2) that Hountondji takes issue with such ideas about culture, and the present section is intended to show how he attempts to disentangle the concept of philosophy from those ideas. Since we have previously dealt with the negative phase, we shall move on to look at how Hountondji tries to effect a reconstruction and redirectioning of African philosophy.

3.4.1 Towards a New Concept of 'African Philosophy'

One of the main problems with the anthropological or ethnological approach to African philosophy would appear to be that it leads to a certain closure of discourse, limiting African philosophy to something 'constituée, donnée d'avance, recluse une fois pour toutes dans l'âme éternellement immuable de l'Africain […] ou tout au moins […] dans l'essence permanente de sa culture' (p. 28). Hountondji's response is to try to open up African philosophy, just as he tries to open up the concept of culture. First, though, he has to acknowledge that the bulk of what has gone before has been a rather poor substitute for philosophical research. In his first chapter, written in 1969, he says:

> L'histoire de notre philosophie n'a été de ce fait jusqu'ici, pour une grande part, que l'histoire des interprétations successives de cette 'philosophie' collective, de cette vision du monde qu'on supposait donnée d'avance, sous-jacente à toutes nos traditions et à tout notre comportement, et que l'analyse n'avait plus qu'à mettre au jour, modestement. (pp. 20-21)

This, for Hountondji, is philosophy only in the 'vulgar' sense of the term and he wants to replace it with philosophy proper: a rigorous and explicit critical discourse consisting in a collection of written texts.

In the opening pages of *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'* we are given an explicit definition of his alternative conception of African philosophy:

> J'appelle *philosophie africaine* un ensemble de *textes*: l'ensemble, précisément, des textes écrits par des Africains et qualifiés par leurs auteurs eux-mêmes de 'philosophiques'. (p. 11)

It should be remarked that this definition does not involve a specification of content, that is, there is as yet no mention of the sort of subject African philosophy should be concerned with, nor whether there are any peculiarly African ways of thinking about philosophy. Moreover, although the word 'philosophy' is one of the major terms in the *definiendum*, i.e. the phrase to be defined, it also occurs in the *definiens*, the definition. Hountondji is at pains to point out that this does not amount to his begging the question:

> Cette définition n'entraîne, remarquons-le, aucune pétition de principe. […] Seul importe le *fait* de la qualification lui-même, le recours délibéré au *mot* 'philosophie', quel que soit par ailleurs le sens de ce *mot*. Seule nous importera, en d'autres termes, l'intention philosophique des auteurs, non le degré (difficilement appréciable) de sa réalisation effective. (pp. 11-12)

What does this mean? The first citation makes reference to 'des textes écrits par des Africains', and we may wonder whether, by the term 'Africain', Hountondji means to denote nationals of African countries (making it a geographical criterion) or ethnic Africans (making it a 'racial' one). We might suspect it is the former, for four reasons.

First, Hountondji insists that he only omits to consider North-African philosophical literature for 'des raisons matérielles' and that this literature is obviously 'partie intégrante de la littérature africaine en générale' (p. 14, note 1). This is significant as it suggest that Hountondji does not take 'africain' to be co-extensive with 'négro-africain' (as Senghor does: see section 2.2).

Secondly, the expression 'philosophie africaine' is supposed to be analogous to examples like 'philosophie européenne', 'philosophie française' and, I suppose, 'philosophie britannique'(p. 61). Now, Karl Popper and Ludwig Wittgenstein also are said to be British philosophers, yet they were originally Austrian;[95] so, by analogy with these examples, a European who is naturalized in an African country could produce African philosophy.

Thirdly, when he comes to discuss the concept of African civilization, Hountondji reduces it to 'l'unité réelle et empirique d'une aire géographique déterminée': the only unifying factor amongst the diverse facets of African civilization is the continent to which they belong. If the scope of the term 'African civilization' is limited to those elements of civilization which develop on African soil, then, in order to be consistent, the term 'African philosophy' must refer to the nationals of those countries which comprise the continent of Africa, and not to ethnic Africans.

Lastly, proving that Hountondji holds Africanity separate from the content of African philosophical discourse, we find this comment: 'l'africanité de notre philosophie ne résidera donc pas forcément dans ses thèmes, mais avant tout dans l'appartenance géographique de ceux qui la produisent et dans leur mise en relation intellectuelle' (p. 48).

This point is linked to the second criterion, according to which the class of African philosophy is to include all texts that are qualified as philosophical by their (African) authors, no matter what the precise subject matter, and 'même s'ils portent sur les auteurs européens les plus classiques' (p. 13, note1). Again, it is through opening up the concept of African philosophy and allowing that it may legitimately occupy itself with questions debated in European philosophical writings that Hountondji hopes to safeguard its (philosophical) authenticity. The conviction that African philosophy should be limited to a study of African thought is itself inauthentically African because it derived from a racist idea of what Africans should be interested in (namely, 'their own kind').[96] Hountondji's solution is not to concern himself with questions of Africanity beyond the pedestrian sense of 'belonging' to an African country. Therefore the subject matter is irrelevant to this categorization: 'ce sont en effet des travaux de *philosophie*, et ils ont été produits *par des Africains*. Quelle raison aurait-on de les exclure?' (p. 13, note 1).

There is a danger of misunderstanding Hountondji's stipulation that it be the fact of a work being *called* philosophical that makes it philosophical. For let us suppose that an African author writes what is apparently a work of fiction, a novel, for example. Now, would we be satisfied with the author simply *calling* such a work philosophical? Or, conversely, what if someone produced a text which seemed quite obviously philosophical, yet this person was quite adamant that it was actually a historical novel. In both cases it seems wrong to assume that attempting to force an object into a certain category is the same as proving that the object really does belong there.

But it is at this point that Hountondji takes his leaves from us, for his definition is not supposed to address the question of exactly what a philosophical text should look like: 'le sens du qualificatif 'philosophique' n'entre pas ici, en effet, en ligne de compte, encore moins le bien-fondé de cette qualification' (p. 11). All that this 'définition naïve' is supposed to do is to allow us to 'apercevoir les dissonances internes de cette littérature'. These discords have already been mentioned, in the course of the argument that many of the original sources of ethnophilosophic reconstruction, such as 'proverbes, contes, poèmes dynastiques et toute la *littérature orale* de l'Afrique' (p. 29, original emphasis), are void of philosophical intention. And if, as Hountondji argues, it is true that the only philosophical content of these 'reconstructions' originates in the delusory projections of their Africanist authors, then those works whose authors are not African might properly be excluded from the category of African philosophy, even though they claim to be bringing to light a traditional African philosophy.

On the other hand, we might regard this definition as peculiarly Eurocentric, reflecting an environment where there is relatively little contention about what is and is not a philosophical text (disputes about what counts as *good* philosophy aside) and where relatively little is at stake for the culture as a whole. Indeed, if the very idea behind ethnophilosophy is that some things (outlooks, worldviews, etc,) are implicitly, secretly, or unconsciously philosophical, then to demand that philosophical texts herald themselves as such seems to be, so to speak, a blow below the belt. For this is the basic premise that the ethnophilosopher is unwilling to concede, namely, that all philosophy must, like European philosophy, exist in the form of a deliberately constructed academic discipline. While it is true that Hountondji's subsequent analysis (see below) brings into perspective the

importance of explicit debate, stable texts and disciplinary foundations, and serves to explain the rationale behind the definition, nevertheless, one may harbour doubts about the impartiality of this position.

Curiously enough, a further discrepancy in this tentative definition is that it is somehow intended to include what Hountondji calls 'Africains de la diaspora' in the list of African philosophers. Thus, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon number among them, even though they are not, strictly speaking, Africans. It is difficult to know what to make of this decision, if we are to define the term 'African' according to nationality and not ethnicity. For although it may be legitimate to count Césaire and Fanon as ethnic Africans (perhaps without taking too much trouble over the notion of the purity of the *ethnos*), they are in fact Martinican, and thus French nationals. Yet it seemed that the criterion in question had nothing to do with ethnicity, so what has happened? Unfortunately, there seems to be no answer to this question in the text. The only logically consistent response to which Hountondji might have recourse is that ethnicity wholly or partly *constitutes* 'l'appartenance géographique': that is, Césaire and Fanon may be said to 'belong to' Africa because their ancestors came from Africa, and they thus have an ethnic link with the continent.

If this explanation fails to convince (for it merely exploits the ambiguity of 'appartenance') then, for want of a better explanation, the discrepancy should be regarded as an attempt to reintroduce a racial criterion into the definition of African philosophy, and thus as another weakness in Hountondji's position. In another text it is claimed that Antoine-Guillaume Amo, although a naturalized German, may be counted as an African philosopher, the argument being that 'ce qui fait l'Africain, [… c'est] la généalogie, renforcée le cas échéant, voire, à la

limite, remplacée par la conscience d'une solidarité historique' (*Libertés*, p. 39).
One wonders, in this case, whether a European born and bred, but thoroughly
convinced of his historical solidarity with Africans (e.g. Tempels?), could
produce philosophy that could count as African. As Lucius Outlaw writes: 'it
takes only a few probing questions to uncover the fact that Hountondji uses
"African" as a signifier not just for *geographical* origins, but also for
race/ethnicity'.[97]

It is also significant, and again quite confusing, that Hountondji freely admits
that neither Césaire nor Fanon themselves claim to be philosophers. So they
cannot be said to express philosophical *intention*, and therefore do not fulfil the
second criterion either. The reason given for their inclusion in the list is that 'ils
nous donnent cependant les moyens de mener une critique politique féconde
d'une certaine forme de philosophie' (p.13, note 1).

At first this seems just bizarre, would Hountondji's justification amount to no
more than the insistence that the work of two essentially political writers be
counted as African philosophy simply because it has been influential on certain
major currents within African philosophy? This is no justification at all. After all,
following this line of thinking, if I am sufficiently inspired by Shakespeare to
produce a work of philosophy (perhaps along the lines of there being 'nothing
either good or bad but thinking makes it so') then Shakespeare too, by this token,
is a philosopher.[98] But this leads to some peculiar effects: if we take the line far
enough there will be no separation between disciplines at all because every
discipline is to some extent, often to a considerable extent, influenced by other
areas of study. Of course the boundaries between disciplines are to a degree
contrived and may frequently be ignored, but when one of the tasks Hountondji

sets himself is to delimit the boundaries of philosophy in order to extract it from the coils of ethnophilosophy, it seems strange that he should abandon these same boundaries within the opening pages of his critique.

There is no explicit treatment of this problem, indeed it is not even recognized as a problem, and I suggest that these considerations should lead us to suspect that what Hountondji has given us is not in fact a definition, but something like a point of departure, a critical direction in which he wants us to look. He develops this initial position in many ways, and, having noted some preliminary objections, we shall now move on to examine the position in more detail.

3.4.2 Universality and Philosophical Authenticity

In the works of ethnologists such as the Belgian Jesuit missionary, Placide Tempels, there is a tendency to use terms such as 'African philosophy' to refer to what is at most a *Weltanschauung*, a so-called 'world-view'. Now this sort of thought system is very different from what is called philosophy in European academic departments, not just in style or content but also in method. Hountondji thinks that this discrepancy is so great that in effect we are confounding two senses of 'philosophy', the one strict and theoretical, the other popular and meaning something like 'ideology' or 'culture' (p. 33, note 20).

The question Hountondji poses is whether the word 'philosophy' should retain its general sense when determined by the epithet 'African', or whether it should be modified by the addition:

> Est en cause, en un mot, l'univocité du mot *philosophie* à travers ses diverses applications géographiques. (p. 52)

It is Hountondji's view that univocity should be retained, not because philosophy should develop the same themes or ask the same questions throughout the world,

> mais parce que ces *différences de contenu* n'ont de sens qu'en tant que différences *de contenu*, renvoyant, comme telles, à l'unité principale d'une même discipline, d'un même style d'interrogation. (pp. 52-3)

African philosophy can only be recognized as philosophy if it is constructed along the same lines as any other type of philosophy. Towa agrees with this position:

> Dans l'expression 'la philosophie africaine', il ne faut voir aucun lien essentiel entre le sujet et le prédicat. Aucune civilisation n'entretient un tel rapport ni avec la philosophie comme telle ni avec une conception philosophique quelconque […] La philosophie dans l'expression 'philosophie africaine' n'a pas de contenu particulier mais renvoie au concept général de philosophie. ('Conditions d'une affirmation …', pp. 347-8)

But given that Hountondji admits that the sort of discourse he is talking about has not really existed in Africa to date, how can he be so sure that such a discipline is what Africa really needs? Moreover, how can he be sure that he is actually talking about a universal discipline, rather than one that is specific to Europe? This is an objection taken up by Oyenka Owomoyela:

> Hountondji's suggestion that African Studies as a discipline is suspect because it was invented by Europeans and is, therefore, part of a European tradition, is strange. It is strange because it comes from someone whose central belief is that the only sort of philosophy fit for African attention is European style philosophy, and one who advocates the dissolution of African particularities (real or imaginary) in the emergent world civilisation, meaning, of course, a cultural pax Europeana. (*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 177)

On the contrary, Hountondji does not accept that in insisting on philosophy's univocality he is therefore reducing it to 'European style philosophy'. He regards philosophy as a universal, abstract discipline of the same genre as mathematics and physics, hence its development in the West is purely accidental and it may be appropriated, assimilated and improved by anyone. Although there have been times when European philosophy was strongly Eurocentric, the issue is not for Africans to adopt *European* philosophy, but to participate in philosophy in general, that is, the *universal* discipline that Europe should likewise strive to

create. So Henry Oruka writes that one of the remarkable characteristics of African 'professional' philosophy is that 'it employs techniques commonly associated with European or Western philosophy. Yet, contrary to the general claim, such techniques are not unique to the West' (*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 48).

Africanism, on the other hand, is the particular study of Africa, and was invented by Western cultures during a period when their economic, political and ideological interests were deeply embedded in African soil. It is suspect as a discipline because it is essentially Eurocentric, in its genesis, concerns, and context. Ethnophilosophy originates from outside Africa and imposes itself on Africa, maintaining the concept of Africans as uncritical, unreflective individuals

Another of Hountondji's objections to ethnophilosophy is that the sources it uses to construct African philosophy are not the sort of texts that could genuinely support philosophy in the strict sense of the word (i.e. 'une discipline théorique ayant ses exigences propres et obéissant à des règles méthodologiques déterminées', p. 39). But might these very methodological principles, which Hountondji takes to be essential to the discipline, be subject to change over time and context? If so, it would undermine his definition and allow the possibility of different, culturally particular philosophies. Lansana Keita urges us to 'consider the fact that "philosophy" in the sense of Aristotle is not "philosophy" in the sense of Quine. Newton was regarded as a natural philosopher, whereas Einstein was seen as a natural scientist' (*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 133).[99]

This is not an insurmountable obstacle for Hountondji: he can easily admit that philosophy's subject matter has changed over time, but this is not to say that its methodological rules have drastically altered. Do we not have much the same sort

of criteria as Aristotle did for deciding when an argument is true and when false? Perhaps these criteria or their justifications have changed over the years, but we have no reason to believe that if we were able now to speak to Aristotle and try to explain some of our ideas there would be proofs which were, in principle, impossible to communicate. Is it not true to say that Aristotelian philosophy has more in common with modern philosophy than with classical mythology?

However, having dealt with that objection, we must follow Keita a little further:

> there is no consensus as to what methods of investigation are proper to philosophy […] For example, philosophical research in the Anglo-American world does not share much in common with the methods of research in Continental philosophy. In fact, there is the general feeling in the Anglo-American world that Continental philosophy is not genuine philosophy, and those whose main interests are in that area of philosophy hold a similar disregard for Anglo-American analytic philosophy. (Ibid.)

And if this is the case then why should African philosophers worry about being 'unphilosophical' according to someone else's criterion?

But Hountondji's specifications for philosophy are more fundamental than Keita imagines, and it is unlikely that adherents of either 'Anglo-American' or 'Continental' philosophy will want to quarrel with him, the level of generality of his arguments should mean that his position is common to both sides. Would not any philosopher claim that the discipline was based on 'une libre discussion, par la confrontation de thèses et d'hypothèses issues de pensées individuelles (ou au moins assumées par elles) et s'amendant réciproquement', and would s/he not likewise scorn the idea of a philosophy that is 'collective, définitive et immuable, soustraite à l'histoire et au progrès' (p. 40)?

Nevertheless, Towa still finds something wrong with Hountondji's analysis and remarks that 'le courant de pensée représenté par P. Hountondji n'occulte pas la

pensée africaine, il l'écarte ouvertement, au nom de la scientificité, comme non pertinente' ('Conditions d'une affirmation …', p. 344).

But Hountondji is African and obviously considers himself a philosopher, so when he produces a philosophical text it evidently belongs, according his own criteria, to the category of African philosophy. Moreover, he provides a list of African works he considers to be philosophical (pp. 12-3, note 1) and repeatedly states that he considers African ethnophilosophy to be included in the category of African philosophy (he just thinks it is bad philosophy and no credit to Africa). It follows, therefore, that Hountondji cannot be said to exclude *all* African thought, for he would certainly include his own works, and no doubt those of the other African professional philosophers, including Towa. This being the case, exactly what sort of African thought does Towa think Hountondji is excluding? Although there is no immediately explicit answer, it seems likely that he is talking about so-called 'traditional' African thought, especially since, in another text, he extolls the philosophical insights of certain ancient Egyptian parables.[100] Furthermore, Towa believes the professional philosophers reduce the scope of the term 'philosophy' to mere epistemology (or rather *épistémologie*, the philosophy of scientific methodology), and the term 'pensée africaine' could certainly refer to a far wider range of activities than Hountondji's 'strictly' defined philosophy.

Towa's accusation is a serious one, for it amounts to the charge that Hountondji, and whoever supports him, are perpetuating the same intellectual exclusion that has been practised against Africans by Europeans. Whether or not it is true that philosophy, in the strict sense of the term, must consist in rigorous, explicitly philosophical, written texts, is there nothing at all to be learned from traditional African culture?

On the contrary, Hountondji recognizes that there is a lot to be gained from studying African history (cf. p. 250). But on the question of philosophy, his answer remains the same: only the sources which were explicitly given as philosophy should be assumed to be philosophy, only texts which perform the function of philosophy must earn the title. This does not mean that we cannot study ancient Egyptian stories for their ethical content and, in so doing, learn something new, nor does it mean that we cannot integrate such findings into modern philosophy. However, what we must bear in mind, according to Hountondji, is that it is we who are responsible for the 'philosophication' of such sources; if we chose only to describe them, and never to engage with them critically, they would never play the slightest part in the history of philosophy.

Furthermore, there are texts which are presented as African philosophy, but which, because they are closed off from debate and interrogation, actually exclude themselves from philosophy. Thus,

> le discours d'un Ogotemmêli, dans la mesure où il prétend énoncer une sagesse éternitaire, intangible, un savoir clos issu du fond des âges et excluant toute discussion, s'exclut lui-même de l'histoire en générale et, plus particulièrement […] de cette recherche inquiète et inachevable, que nous appelons philosophie. (p. 101)

3.4.3 Orality and Literacy

When Hountondji denies that ethnophilosophy interprets genuine philosophical texts, he also mentions that one of the characteristics of a truly philosophical text is that it consists in 'produits du langage perpétuellement disponibles' (p. 29). By this he means that a philosophical text should exist through the medium of the written word, in such a way that it is always available for critical analysis and reinterpretation. Critics like Oyenka Owomoyela have objected that Hountondji is telling us that 'truth cannot exist except in a written mode' (*African Philosophy:*

The Essential Readings, p. 171). But Hountondji presses this stipulation of literacy, not because he accepts the chauvinism of colonial anthropologists, who assumed outright the superiority of the written over the spoken word, but for other, more interesting reasons.

The first reason is that he does not regard philosophy as a system in the way that the ethnophilosopher does. Ethnophilosophy attempts to bring to light the thought-systems of traditional Africa, fixed groups of beliefs about how the world operates — this may take the form of a metaphysics, a cosmology, a cosmogony, and so on. But just because they are *fixed* systems of beliefs, there can be no philosophical interrogation, for any criticism of the system immediately appears suspicious, even inauthentic.[101] As we saw above, for Hountondji this intransigency means that the object of the ethnophilosophical discourse automatically excludes itself from the domain of philosophy. Far from accepting such fixity, we must consider that

> en philosophie, d'une certaine manière, il n'y a pas de vérité absolue. Ou plutôt que l'absolu, ici, est dans le relatif: procès illimité, essentiellement ouvert. En d'autres termes, que la vérité ne saurait être un ensemble de propositions indépassables, définitives, mais le processus même par lequel nous cherchons, par lequel nous énonçons des propositions en essayant de les justifier, de les fonder. (p. 83)

It is clear that Hountondji is not talking about the content of philosophy, but its structure. Philosophy does not reveal a final truth, as such; it is a particular method for testing our ideas about the world, and there may be others. So (according to this definition at least) the charge that professional philosophy falsely restricts truth to the written medium does not stick. Not only does philosophy *con*sist in revisable argumentation, but it is also *per*sists (i.e. through time) in the continual movement from one thesis to the next, which is why it cannot be considered as a finished product, an artefact to be displayed or

'revealed'. For if an argument could say everything there was to be said, it would close the discipline as an inquiry, and turn it into dogma. Philosophical conclusions are by their nature imperfect and imperfectable, provisional and supersedable. When a discourse is supposed to attain a kind of all-encompassing perfection it either becomes a historicist philosophy, like Hegelianism, which tries to include all possible dialectical movement (and thereby historical development) and contain the multiple in one; or the discourse ceases to be philosophy, turning from a continuously revisable and revised debate into a thoroughly determined credo (cf. pp. 79-88).

The view of philosophy as an interminable debate is not a form of epistemological pessimism, it is not that we are somehow failing in our philosophic endeavour by not reaching some final answer. On the contrary, the perfection of philosophy is itself a continual movement, a continuing process of self-reinvention; when we treat arguments as temporary stages, ever to be surpassed, we are being perfectly philosophical. But, on the other hand, this is not to say that we do not aim to produce philosophical conclusions as if they were final. This, according to Hountondji, is the paradoxical but necessary situation in which we find ourselves:

> Nous croyons prononcer le vrai comme un tribunal prononce une sentence. Nous ne pouvons progresser que grâce à cette croyance. La vérité — la vérité de notre discours comme la vérité en général — n'est pas seulement un mythe idéologique, c'est un mythe idéologique nécessaire, fécond. (p.87)

Although we are inclined to believe that our best argument is the right one (and therefore the only right one) we are also constrained to see that any philosophical argument can be extended, criticized, refined.

The third reason for Hountondji's insistence that literacy is prerequisite for philosophy is a more practical matter: democratic access to philosophical texts.

Hountondji grants that pre-colonial Africa was not entirely void of writing (especially in areas with Arab populations), but he argues that there is no evidence that it was on a wide enough scale to support rigorous and sustained theoretical enquiry, and that it was most probably a medium of privilege, accessible only to those in power:

> la première et la plus élémentaire condition de la *philosophie* comme de la *science* (au sens strict de ces mots), c'est une large et démocratique pratique de l'écriture. (p. 127, original emphasis)

Without such widespread literature there is no way to make the substance of philosophy, formal texts, permanently available. Indeed, in a largely illiterate society, philosophy, as a literate discipline, can only remain an esoteric and mysterious pursuit.

On the basis of these three conditions Hountondji concludes that the subjects of ethnophilosophical study cannot in themselves be philosophy. Quite simply, this is because 'dire que la philosophie est une histoire et non un système, c'est aussi dire qu'il n'y a pas de philosophie collective' (p. 88). The very idea of a collective implicit philosophy is heterogeneous to the idea of philosophy as a discontinuous history:

> Il n'y a pas de philosophie qui serait un système de propositions implicites, un système de croyances implicites auquel adhéreraient spontanément tous les individus passés, présents et à venir d'une société donnée. (pp. 88-9)

Yet Towa accuses him of denying '*a priori* la possibilité d'une philosophie africaine pré-coloniale' ('Conditions d'une affirmation …', p. 345). In defence of Hountondji, we may say that he does not *aim* to exclude traditional world-views from the philosophical category. What he does is present a positive characterization of philosophy (as a discontinuous history, etc.) from which it results that collective representations or world-views as finished systems of

communal, consensual belief cannot be categorized as philosophy. He regards this procedure to be analogous to defining a discipline like physics in such a way that the definition will very probably exclude the like of folk-songs, myth and legend, though this is not to say that the latter are not valuable and worthwhile elements of our cultures.

As for the difference between the written and spoken word, he admits that there is no reason a non-literate society could not produce valuable philosophical insights: 'l'absence de transcription n'enlève certes rien à la valeur intrinsèque d'un discours philosophique'. It is simply a matter of pragmatics, he continues: 'elle l'empêche cependant de s'intégrer à une tradition théorique collective' (p. 135). The reason for this lies in the natural tendency of oral traditions to move towards a dogmatic representation of knowledge. In fact, a critical, literate culture also tends towards dogmatism because, as was mentioned above, the motive for our employing an argument is generally because we think it is right. So this feature is common to both oral and written traditions, as it appears to be the way humans approach the notion of truth. However, in an open, literate culture there are likely to be records which remind us that, for example, before we came to think the earth was round, we thought it flat. Thus, even though all traditions, oral and literate alike, attempt to establish dogmatic certainty (which is why it is possible to believe that the conclusions we reach right now are the right ones— see the discussion of the *mythe idéologique*, above), nevertheless the written culture retains the marks of its own dialectical, and hence discontinuous, development. It is this dialectic which is the hallmark of philosophical thinking:

> la tradition orale aurait plutôt tendance à favoriser la consolidation du savoir en une système dogmatique et intangible, tandis que la transmission par voie d'archive rendrait davantage possible, d'un individu à l'autre, d'une génération à l'autre, la critique du savoir. (p. 131)

Collective memory would only recall the *result*, the *conclusion* of a philosophical investigation, forgetting the 'long cheminement théorique qui y a conduit' (p. 133). Hountondji concludes that there could at most exist *philosophers* in the preliterate culture, but not a *philosophy* (p. 135). The philosophical morsels present in traditional cultural texts comprise 'non une recherche mais au mieux les résultats d'une recherche, non une philosophie mais tout au plus une sagesse' (p. 134).

3.5 A New African Philosophy

To understand the general direction and modalities for the future African philosophy which Hountondji prescribes in *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, it is enough to invert the preceding critique of Négritude and ethnophilosophy, two areas which he considers to be inadequate and highly misleading representations of what African philosophy is and should be.

To take the first term of this expression 'African philosophy', the African qualities of the discourse will no longer be limited to an essentialist expression of difference, instead they will be manifest in the dynamism of African culture, which, like any culture, is a constant flux of diverse and contradictory elements. So Hountondji does not intend to give up the idea of Africanity, but indicates that the latter is to be understood to reside in the geographical origins of the authors of African philosophy and, importantly, in the fact that they form a real academic community:

> L'africanité de notre philosophie ne résidera donc pas forcément dans ses thèmes, mais avant tout dans l'appartenance géographique de ceux qui la produisent et dans *leur mise en relation intellectuelle*.[102]

As is implied by the last phrase, the next prescription is that there should be an arena of free and frank discussion *between Africans*.[103] This is with a view to two main ends: first, to place the emphasis squarely on the development of philosophy within Africa, no longer to take Africa as a mere subject for discussion; secondly, to ensure that African philosophical texts are intended primarily for an African audience.

> Quel que soit l'objet spécifique de la philosophie, la première tâche des philosophes africains d'aujourd'hui, pour autant qu'ils souhaitent développer une authentique philosophie africaine, est de promouvoir et d'entretenir constamment en leur propre sein une libre discussion sur tous les problèmes relatifs à leur discipline, au lieu de se contenter du dialogue individuel et quelque peu abstrait de chacun d'eux avec le monde occidental. (p. 74)

This, it is hoped, would put an end to the 'polarisation dangereuse' which prevents a true exchange between African and European cultures by promoting an impoverished pluralism taking the form of

> l'alternative truquée entre "aliénation" culturelle (corrélat supposé d'une trahison politique) et nationalisme culturel (revers obligé, et parfois substitut dérisoire, du nationalisme politique). (p. 234)

African universities must cease their practice of ideological Africanism, which privileges above all discourses which take Africa as their subject, and thus runs the risk of creating a 'particularisme forcené'. Within the context of the colonial culture's false universalism, such strategies are useful resorts, and represent a legitimate attempt to come to terms with one's own origins and context. But the danger is that it will lead into a theoretical cul-de-sac where Africanism is perceived to be the only legitimate area of research for an African (p. 236).[104]

Once again, Hountondji emphasizes the active nature of philosophy: although it is important to archive oral texts before they disappear, philosophy cannot be a matter of collecting and compiling data from traditional African sources, as the ethnophilosophers would have it. No longer is it sufficient to attempt to describe

African philosophy, instead the discipline must be transformed from a simple collation of writings destined for non-African readers into a vehicle for free and rigorous discussion between African philosophers themselves. Hountondji claims that 'c'est seulement ainsi que cette littérature acquerra valeur universelle et pourra contribuer à enrichir l'héritage international de la pensée humaine' (p. 77).

He also recognizes how important it is for the African philosopher to be politically engaged, in order to protect the freedom of expression and association which guarantee a space in which philosophy can be developed:

> La responsabilité du philosophe africain […] déborde infiniment le cadre étroit de sa discipline, et […] il ne peut se payer le luxe d'un apolitisme satisfait, d'une complaisance tranquille à l'égard du désordre établi — à moins de se renier lui-même comme philosophe, et comme homme. En d'autres termes, la libération théorique du discours philosophique suppose une libération politique. (p. 37)

3.6 Conclusion

As laid out in the introduction to this chapter, we have followed the lines of inquiry that compose the main body of Hountondji's argumentation. With the first, he denounces the excessive emphasis that writers like Senghor place on the role and position of African culture(s), arguing that it serves only to obscure the actual political situations of African countries, to stall change, and to mask oppression. *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'* is a very careful text and Hountondji does not fail, as Senghor does, to confront the problematic notions of 'West' and 'non-West'. He rejects the assumption that the West is a vast, monolithic and uniform cultural group, and dismisses the notion as both scientifically and philosophically unsound. In so doing he also discredits the often opposed image of Africa as an equally homogeneous unit of humanity: his main arguments for this come from his idea of culture as a continuing process of conflict and internal contradictions, and the mainly geographical criteria of African identity.

Hountondji's critique of the concept of culture also enables him to deconstruct certain myths, such as the myth of unanimity, and the myth of cultural pluralism. He unmasks the apparently dynamic concept of a world civilization, and shows that it actually rests on a very static idea of regional cultures. Once we have accepted the innate heterogeneity and fluidity of the latter, the cultural essentialism which is a precondition for the 'Civilisation de l'Universel' becomes quite unthinkable. This position also leads Hountondji to question the assumption that colonization has been a time of deculturation, that African cultures are somehow being 'watered down' by excessive Western influence. On the contrary, he affirms that

> le pluralisme ne survient pas de l'extérieur à une société quelle qu'elle soit, mais qu'il lui est toujours déjà inhérent. La prétendue acculturation, la prétendue 'rencontre' de la civilisation africaine avec celle de l'Europe, n'est en fait qu'une mutation supplémentaire opérée par la civilisation africaine elle-même. (p. 233)

The second line of thought that we followed led to a general critique of ethnophilosophy, aiming to demystify a discipline which Hountondji believes is founded upon sleight-of-hand and the consistent failure to open one's theorizing to critical examination. In particular, he emphasizes the colonialist/anthropological origins of ethnophilosophy, its claims to reveal the 'mentality' of the 'native', and its unbending metaphysics, the latter being a key feature of Senghor's Négritude. The images that ethnophilosophy produces of Africans he sees as fetishizations of 'the' African which are produced for (and mostly by) Europeans. Unfortunately Africans, too, have in some instances come to accept and reproduce these images of themselves.

As a corrective for this situation, Hountondji proposes a different understanding of the concept of African philosophy. First, he hopes to expunge from the debate

the 'vulgar' sense of the term, according to which people can possess unconscious, implicit philosophies and whole societies can share a common philosophy or *Weltanschauung* (world-view). Next, he plainly states some of the criteria that he thinks should belong to a definition of philosophy: it is a rigorous academic discipline and cannot, therefore, consist in 'folk philosophy' or world-views; in a historical sense it is a progression of thought. This means that what matters in philosophy is not just the answer that is produced, but above all the path that is taken to get to the answer, i.e. the *development* of thought. This understanding of philosophy leads Hountondji to the conclusion that non-literate cultures are intrinsically unable to elaborate a philosophy, due to their tendency to preserve knowledge (as a collection of truth propositions) rather than the dialectical discontinuity which is the true heart of philosophy.

  In the end it seems that Hountondji is not as others have portrayed him, and that his emphasis on the universality of philosophy, its *univocalité*, stems from a determination to avoid the Eurocentric attitude which reserves philosophy as a serious discipline for Europe alone, while allotting Africa an impoverished 'mythologized' form. His position does not rule out sage philosophy on the grounds that it is not, or cannot be, philosophical, though he is represented as saying that it is only through writing that ideas can become philosophy.[105] This is not quite what he says, and we must refer once more to his idea of philosophy as a process. Non-literate systems, it is argued, are disadvantaged when it comes to an area of activity like philosophy because they tend not to preserve the long process of thought (creation as creat*ing*) in memory, but rather concentrate on remembering the finished article (creation as a creat*ed* product) and in philosophy it is not the finished article which counts or even, strictly speaking, exists, so

much as the whole process. So Hountondji's claim is that oral traditions are, practically speaking, incapable of holding and preserving philosophical texts, and this is because they are better suited to elements of culture which are less open and liable to change.

Finally, taking what precedes as justificatory basis, the text puts forward proposals for a new direction for an authentic African philosophy. In discussing what this might mean, Hountondji repeats that a key criterion is the *destination* of the discourse: a truly African discipline will evolve within Africa, amongst Africans, and address African problems. This is not to say that African philosophy must only concern itself with African themes, writers, and texts, for it is not the *content* of the discipline that must be fixed on Africa (as the Africanists hold), but the application.

Nevertheless, having said all this there are still certain questions which seem to linger, despite Hountondji's efforts to dispel their influence. These questions consist in problems of cultural identity and difference, and philosophy and value. In the final analysis, what is the difference between African and non-African philosophies? For Hountondji, it is nothing more than a difference in the 'appartenance géographique' of the authors. But this reply, as Appiah says, 'knowingly sidesteps what has been one of the cruces of philosophical debate in post-colonial black Africa' (*In My Father's House*, p. 135). It ignores the fact that Western writers can afford to gloss over or ignore their differences, that they have no pressing need to assert their identities because the latter are already protected, enshrined within the dominant culture. By contrast, the African writer must always be aware of his Africanity because, if it is not always seen as inferior, it is inevitably seen as a form of 'difference'.[106]

We might put the origin of this discrepancy down to a simple choice of subject, that Hountondji does not want to discuss African identity or assert cultural difference, whereas other authors do. But the fact that he reintroduces ethnicity into the 'geographical criterion' (see section 4.1 above) shows that there is more at issue than a simple matter of geography.

In connection with the last point is the concern that, although Hountondji's concept of philosophy as an abstract, value-free discipline is plausible in itself, it is out of line with the way philosophy is commonly regarded. However much we would like to isolate the discipline from the glamour which surrounds it, nevertheless, the statement that Africa has not, to date, had a philosophy to speak of is not of the same order as to say that Africa has not, to date, had tractors, algebra, or a school of linguistics. The latter may or may not have prestige, apart from their practical utility, but they have never been taken as the measure of humanity. Given the history of Africa's portrayal as the 'poor relation' or intellectual inferior vis-à-vis the 'West', admitting that Africa has no indigenous philosophy sounds dangerously like admitting that the racist distinction made by the historians, anthropologists and ethnologists of Europe was, in fact, correct. After all, according to the analysis we made of the aims of the Négritude movement, this was one of the principal reasons for Senghor's radical division of reason into 'black/sympathetic' and 'white/discursive'. In denying this split, Hountondji recognizes that he cannot make associated claims about the existence of African philosophies. Nor would he want to, since for him they clearly have not existed until recently, but he cannot detach this conclusion from the painful and destructive influence of the pre-Négritude Western concepts of Africa.

Hountondji accepts both that Africa did not have its own philosophy, in his sense of the word, and that this discipline is something valuable, yet he would deny that his view allows or promotes a reassertion of the typical notion of the West's superiority over African countries.

In conclusion, the most serious accusation that is levelled at Hountondji is one of complicity with the strain of European ethnocentric thought which refuses to believe that Africa is capable of philosophy.[107] Thus he is said to exclude traditional African thought from the concept of philosophy from the very beginning. In response we may say that Hountondji's critics confuse his unintentional exclusion of folk thought from philosophy, which is a consequence of the definition he adopts, with European colonial thought, which consciously *aimed* to do the same thing.

Or, for the sake of argument, let us allow that Hountondji is a westernized academic philosopher, and that the type of philosophy he is recommending Africans to engage in is basically Western philosophy. Why should this render what he says invalid? Is it sufficient to claim that a writer is westernized in order to discredit his discourse? Even if it is true that Hountondji is writing from a Western standpoint, it would be peculiar to criticize him on these grounds alone. For if it is not a good argument to say that a text is invalid because it is the work of an African, then surely it cannot be a good argument to say that a text is invalid because it is produced by a Westerner, or a westernized African.

It is also possible that we are witnessing what Eleni Coundouriotis identifies as 'a tendency to equate anticolonialism with an anti-Western […] attitude', the result of which is often that 'if we fail to identify an anti-Western attitude, we do not recognize the resistance against colonialism'.[108]

Nevertheless, although it cannot be labelled outright as a clear instance of eurocentrism, the fact that Hountondji ignores the real differences between African and European thought is at least highly worrying and might lead us to suspect that he is taking a (European) particular for a universal. The differences between African and European thought need not be essential differences, as Senghor tries to argue, it is enough that there exist between African and European societies structural differences which are sufficient to warrant a *mise en question* of the status and role of philosophy. In addition to this, there is the ever-present problem of the minor status of African sciences, the subordinate position they occupy with regard to the West, and above all, the unresolved issue of African reason, which, as Mudimbé says, 'd'habiles contempteurs mettent encore savamment et régulièrement en miettes au nom d'une raison et d'une science parfaitement au service de projets politiques' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 13). This last idea is the theme of the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Colonial Violence

4.1 Introduction

> Given the violence of Africa's encounter with Europe through which the
> 'dark' continent was introduced into the modern world, the question of
> violence should have a central importance for the discourse of contemporary
> African philosophy. And yet, to date, African philosophers have not
> properly dealt with or even engaged the question. (*The Hermeneutics of
> African Philosophy*, p. 55)

One of the criticisms that was common to our commentaries on both Senghor and

Hountondji was that neither writer appears to be able to engage fully with the

question of colonial violence because each one idealizes the concept of African

reason, the former by glossing over material inequalities with essentialist rhetoric,

the latter by not even acknowledging such a thing as an *African* reason.

The purpose of the present chapter is to re-examine the ground already covered

and the provisional conclusions we have reached, but in a new light, so as to

provide a deeper understanding of the issues involved. We shall begin by

summarizing the argumentation relating to Léopold Senghor and Paulin

Hountondji's conceptions of African philosophy and restating the major faults

that were found therein, this time with particular reference to the concept of

colonial violence. After this, we shall move on to discuss colonial violence as an

instance of the violence of political domination, and this will lead us to look at

minority discourse. Although this route may at first appear to be something of a

digression from the question initially proposed, *Qu'est-ce que la 'philosophie

africaine'?*, it will soon become clear that the texts we have studied so far share

several of the main concerns of minority discourse: for instance, the revaluation

of previously neglected and/or abused discourses, and the re-appropriation of

autonomous speech by marginalized subjects.

On the other hand, the recognition of the differences between the texts will bring into relief the ways and extent to which Hountondji's discourse is truly both an advancement on Négritude and a valuable alternative to other contemporary methods of conceptual decolonization.

In the last analytical section we inquire into the logic of racial terms and propose the hypothesis that the liberal goal of the complete eradication of racial violence presupposes that we supercede racial concepts themselves.

4.2 The Discussion So Far

4.2.1 Senghor

As we saw in chapter 2, Senghor's theory of 'African personality' is built around a series of oppositions based on putatively racial identities. First, he makes a hard distinction between *Nègres* and *Blancs* and rationalizes this division by portraying it as a segregation of objectively different types of 'soul'. The quite clinical, matter-of-fact, manner of the division is emphasized by the use of the singular definite article: '*le* Nègre' and '*le* Blanc', so it is clear that these are supposed to be two discrete, internally uniform categories.[109] He attributes specific characteristics to each so-called race: blacks use synthetic reason, and base their knowledge on 'concrete' *per*ception and 'sympathetic' participation in the world, whereas white reason is analytic and uses abstract *con*ception and detached observation of the object in order to construct knowledge.[110] The type of reason one has is supposed to be determined exclusively by the type of soul one possesses, the formula being quite straightforward: black soul, black reason; white soul, white reason. According to Senghor, the type of reason one possesses in turn

determines one's manner of cultural existence or, in the case of an entire people, civilization.

Thus, a hierarchy of concepts is established, ranked in pairs, and each with its opposite number. Consisting of a strict black/white distinction under the rubrics *race*, *reason*, *culture*, and *civilization*, the foundations of the edifice lie in the original racial distinction.[111]

Aside from this hierarchy of racializing concepts, there are other conceptual dichotomies to be found in Senghor. For instance, he repeatedly emphasizes the difference between Africa and Europe (which is also called 'the West' (*l'Occident*)) and moulds this distinction closely around the primary black/white split. In other words, he assumes that 'black' and 'African' are equivalent concepts: if you are one, you must also be the other, likewise for the terms 'white' and 'European'. Thus, when he comes to speak of Afro-Americans he treats them in just the same way as the Africans about whom he usually speaks; there is no salient distinction for Senghor because he sees them all as essentially black (*Liberté 1*, p. 217). Then there is the nature/technology divide, which is brought into play when it is said that 'le Nègre est l'homme de la nature' (p. 202). It is clearly understood that this characteristic is to be attributed to the African's immutable soul. Elsewhere, high technological and economical development are identified as the province of the white.[112]

From what has been said, it would appear that Senghor is reproducing and synthesizing a number of stereotypes traditionally used to the advantage of white identity, and to the detriment of blacks: whites being characterized as coolly rational, detached and of high technical skill; while blacks are portrayed as semi-rational, emotional beings, closer perhaps to animality than humanity.[113]

Yet despite the seeming imbalance of these views, Senghor is in fact preparing the terrain for a vigorous defence, and even an ecstatic celebration, of black cultural identity, civilization and values. As he develops his themes it becomes apparent that he views whiteness as in some way decadent and deficient, mainly through an overemphasis on analysis and abstraction. Blackness is portrayed as a complementary, indeed salutary, force in relation to whiteness.

> Mere discursive reason, the *reason which only sees* [is] inadequate to 'comprehend' the world, to gather it up and transform it. […It needs] the help of intuitive reason, *the reason which comes to grips*, which delves beneath the surface of facts and things. (p. 202, italics in original)

In the name of Négritude, Senghor assaults the myths of Western ideology, according to which the white is pre-eminently rational and civilized and the black abjectly sensual and savage. The first sentence of *L'Esthétique* runs as follows: 'le XXe siècle restera celui de la découverte de la Civilisation négro-africaine'; on the next page it is emphasized that 'le Nègre n'est pas dénué de raison […] mais sa raison n'est pas discursive; elle est synthétique' (*Liberté 1*, pp. 202-3). Within the first two pages of the essay Senghor presents the central claim of Négritude: that the African is fully the equal of the European.

Nevertheless, even as an equal, the African remains the European's opposite number. For both the form and the content of the traditional racial distinctions remain intact: the *black*/*white* divide is maintained, and with approximately the same symbolic content (blackness still connotes sensuousness). The difference now is that each side is assigned an independent and positive value. Senghor exploits the structure of the racist binary by subverting it from the inside; he does not reject, but instead transforms, the binary. It could be argued that, in performing this transformation, Senghor tries to disrupt the centrality of white reason by calling into question its effectiveness and promoting an equal and

complementary opposite. Yet there still remains the question of why he should choose to work within the terms of the colonialist discursive framework at all.[114]

For the moment I would like to focus on the fact that, while accepting the *blanc/nègre* divide, Senghor does reject the *civilized/savage* and the *rational/non-rational* (or *pre-rational*) distinctions mentioned above. While acknowledging the pertinence of Soyinka's critique, which accuses Senghor of accepting the 'racist syllogism',[115] there remains something to be said about the orientation and validity of Senghor's Négritude. As Abiola Irele writes:

> the concept of African personality and its more elaborate variant of négritude represented a genuine attempt to think through the tensions of an especially difficult historical experience to some form of balance. There is no question, therefore, that they were both necessary and valuable.[116]

For even if Senghor does accept the general framework of colonial discourse, it is clear that his project is progressive in its intention.[117] Within this accepted framework he focuses attention on the positive characteristics of African 'difference' from European forms, and it is this difference that Senghor charges with value: it is the complement to white existence, and it will occupy a special position in the 'Civilization of the Universal'.[118]

Nevertheless, even if his portrayal of Africans leaves room for hope, the critique Senghor makes of colonialism is hardly at all effective. Although he drops occasional remarks about the greed and exploitation inherent in the system, there is no attempt to link this abstract critique with particular countries, individuals, policies or historical facts.[119]

To highlight the ideality of these writings, their detachment from reality, it may help to relocate them in their proper historical setting. During the Second World War, it was common that black prisoners-of-war captured by Germans were separated from their white comrades and shot, the Geneva Convention

notwithstanding. In 1948 apartheid began in South Africa, with millions of black South-Africans forced into townships, and consequently almost irrevocable poverty. *L'Esthétique négro-africaine* was published in 1956 and *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la Politique Africaine* in 1962, which was also the final year of France's 'War of Peace' in Algeria. The Sharpeville massacre, with 69 dead, took place in 1960. Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was assassinated a year later. Across the ocean, in the home of the new world power, the lynching of African-Americans continued from the nineteenth century into the 1950s and 1960s. The American Civil Rights Act, which outlawed racial discrimination in America's institutions, was not created until 1964; while the Voting Rights Act, establishing suffrage for Afro-Americans, came the following year.[120]

Apart from his generally casual, abstract and un-contextualized reference to colonial exploitation, we may note at least two serious flaws in Senghor's theory. First, he neglects the factual reality of racially based oppression, of which the prime example is his referring to the use of black labour in America as if it were prized for its superior skill, not despised and used for its cheapness.[121] Senghor does not recognize that his vision is at quite a remove from the actual state of world affairs, and his failure to articulate the modes of oppression which continue to afflict Africans and their descendants constitutes a major lacuna in his polemical strategy.

Secondly, there is no attempt to come to terms with the problem of black reason. Senghor writes as if all that is required is a demonstration of the existence and modalities of black reason, not realizing, or appearing not to realize, that there are interests involved, which is to say that it is in the interests of certain individuals

and groups that black reason is denied or 'denigrated'. Given this fact, a simple description of black reason is bound to be ineffective so long as it is not accompanied by a profound critique of those structures which keep the African in the role of subaltern, and of those interests which originate and reinforce the structure of racist colonial discourse.

Moreover, Senghor is pre-occupied with describing the form of black reason, the *génie* of black civilization, and does not ever discuss the possibility that the former is not reason, and that the latter is not civilization, according to the accepted sense of the terms (See *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 61). Nor is it obvious that he is bringing about some sort of rupture within Western discourse, by using the same terms as colonial racism but in a new, subversive way (although that does not mean that this is not what he is doing).

But at least this much is certain: by contending that all blacks share a common substance, i.e. their 'blackness' or Négritude, Senghor admits the cogency of the colonial discourse, and inadvertently perpetuates the structures of domination. When he says *nègres* he does not seem to feel the need to justify his pronouncement. Indeed, this is understandable, for it is a category which by the time of Senghor's writings has already acquired a long history. The context in which he writes makes it seem uncontroversial to speak of *nègres* as a natural and homogeneous group, although, as we have seen, this is far from the case. The various contexts surrounding Senghor's utterance, colonialism, African nationalism, anthropological and ethnological discourses, etc., make this ellipsis possible. The same contexts also mask the fact that there actually is an omission. Although there is an explanatory gap there appears to be none, for the concepts which are in common currency make it possible to take the term *nègre* to

represent a natural category. It is not clear whether these contexts blind Senghor to his own free act of imagination, or whether he consciously recreates the *nègre/blanc* binary.

Ironically the mode of solidarity that he proposes through Négritude, while it may be unifying, is intrinsically oppressive. For his theory includes no concerted effort to understand and disempower the structures of domination, but is at bottom superbly idealistic. The supposedly imminent utopia that is described as a 'Civilization of the Universal' is a world where white and black people exist side by side and in perfect harmony; it is a world where white and black cultures have fused together in a mutually beneficial synthesis.[122] The saccharine sweetness of this vision disguises the bitter historical truth of continuing segregation, discrimination, harassment, oppression, and persecution on the grounds of race.

4.2.2 Hountondji

Contrary to his predecessor, Hountondji rejects the distinction between *Nègres* and *Blancs*, and *a fortiori* the notion of a specifically black reason, which he finds untenable, a vestige of colonial racism. The final chapter of *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'* includes a brief but compelling section in which it is argued that every civilization is essentially 'un choc permanent de décisions culturelles contradictoires' (p. 226). Not only would Hountondji agree with the post-colonial theorists who claim that the previously colonized peoples have diverse identities, which have consistently been overwritten through the use of simplified binaries like *civilized/savage*, but he shows no interest whatsoever in the concept of 'blackness'. Whether or not the term is supposed to indicate a uniform class, blackness simply is not a concept to which he assigns philosophical content. Instead, his position appears to consist in part in a form of nominalism about

Africanity, i.e. the term 'African' refers to the empirically and arbitrarily demarcated continent of Africa and its peoples; it does not denote a form or kind. Africanity, he argues, exists as a unity only when it is viewed from an external perspective, 'au sens d'une désignation externe et non d'une impossible caractérisation interne […] la seule unité réelle étant ici celle d'un continent' (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 227). This leads him to denounce the hypothesis of an essentially African culture, and an essentially European culture likewise. With such a perspective, Senghor's adoption of Teilhard de Chardin's 'Civilisation de l'Universel' becomes meaningless; for Hountondji, cultures are intrinsically heterogeneous, so it is impossible for there to be discrete and internally consistent cultures, and the latter are prerequisites for the form of cultural syncretism espoused by Senghor. Hountondji debunks Senghor's apparently pluralist cultural theory (i.e. that the many unique cultures will be subsumed in a single, global synthesis) by showing that this hypothesis in fact depends upon an untenable opposition:

> La conception apparemment dynamique de la civilisation mondiale, telle qu'elle est habituellement professée, repose donc en fait sur une conception statique des cultures régionales. […] La civilisation mondiale, telle qu'elle existe effectivement, est loin d'être une synthèse. C'est au contraire l'approfondissement des conflits culturels qui existaient jusque-là à l'intérieur de chaque société et la prise de conscience que ces conflits sont finalement les mêmes dans les diverses sociétés. (p. 235)

If Hountondji views African cultural identity as heterogeneous, he does not feel the same way about philosophy and reason. According to the ethnologists and the Négritudinists, Africans possess a different sort of reason from the Western kind and so produce a different philosophy. But Hountondji argues that if African philosophy is to be truly philosophical then it must fulfil the same criteria as Western philosophy. This does not come down to a question of Western

superiority, but to the fact that philosophy is a universal discipline. In Platonic language we would say that philosophy is an archetype which Western philosophical traditions strive to instantiate. It follows that Africans, if they are to produce a genuinely philosophical discourse, must do no less.

As well as emphasizing the unity of the discipline and, broadly speaking, its methodology,[123] Hountondji argues that philosophy is a dynamic process, a history of thinking and debate, and takes issue with those who believe that philosophy can exist 'subconsciously' or 'implicitly' in the cultural productions and customs of any people. Given his specific understanding of the role and sources of African philosophy, together with his concept of cultures as dynamic and internally contradictory, it follows that for Hountondji it must be a myth that there exists

> une philosophie africaine spécifique, une vision du monde commune à tous les Africains d'hier, d'aujourd'hui et de demain, un système de pensée collectif et immuable, éternellement opposable à celui de l'Europe. (p. 46)[124]

The basis of Hountondji's oppositional schema is the notion of 'authentic philosophy', which he characterizes as a rigorous, scientific, methodologically universal, ideologically neutral, and primarily academic discipline. On the other side of the divide he locates such things as the philosophy claimed to consist in the *Weltanschauungen* (world-views) of African peoples, and various forms of Africanist nationalist ideology, none of which, it is argued, are genuine philosophy.[125] We are given a working definition of philosophy, which is followed by an in-depth critique of the sources of a number of works, indeed a whole tradition (ethnology/ethnophilosophy), on the basis that they do not exhibit the specifically philosophical characteristics that he has outlined.

Hountondji criticizes ethnophilosophers because they imply that the type of discourse coming most easily to 'authentic' Africans is one of mythology and superstition, and not reason and argument (pp. 53-65). There is no question for Hountondji that African reason is capable of engaging in this universal philosophy, any more than there is such a question about Western reason, for in fact African and Western reason are one and the same. In other words, it is assumed that one's ability to produce works of philosophy, and the specific content of these works, does not depend upon one's ethnicity, but rather upon one's capacity for critical thinking, and the latter is itself independent of ethnicity.

So philosophy and reason are taken to be universals which transcend colour divides. Philosophically this presents few problems. Any would-be attacker of black intelligence would be hard-pressed to make a sound case for the view that blacks are not capable of reason because, in the first place, the term 'black' does not denote a well-defined category, in either biology or philosophy (see section 2.3).

However, this attitude is *politically* unsound because blackness is a real political category. Even if the category consists in nothing more substantial than a badly founded and badly reasoned racializing classification, nonetheless it is politically real because it is politically visible, and hence causally active. People discriminate against, abuse, attack, and kill each other on grounds of race, even without a clear understanding of what race might actually be. As Margaret A. Simmons comments: 'if racial differences are not cast in stone, they are nonetheless salient features of individual lives in a racist society'.[126] Racist ideologies still abound, according to which perceived colour is a faithful indicator of intellectual capabilities, so the conditions still exist which make it possible to say: 'In short,

this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid'.[127]

Consequently, even if we believe that reason is *in fact* universal, we must accept that not everyone will recognize this fact, with the result that what is in effect a nominally black reason (i.e. the exercise of reason by those perceived/classed as black) may be undermined by essentialist racist ideologies which represent blacks as *a priori* irrational, or at least imperfectly rational, beings. And ironically, racist practice such as racial discrimination and violence and the lack of equal opportunities within education and employment may well constitute a substantial obstacle to the full development of the (black) individual's intellectual potential.

In summary, it may be said that in some important respects Hountondji fails to commit himself to the problematic of black reason. His discourse is also idealistic in that its theoretical range is limited to the notion of a universal philosophy and so does not come to terms with the suppression of black reason, which is surely a feature closely connected to 'le maintien et l'épanouissement […], ou la réduction et la mort pure et simple' of African philosophy (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 11).

In other words, Hountondji neglects the honorific status of philosophy. By arguing that since there is no question of constructing an essentially African physics or algebra it is equally incoherent to speak of an essentially African philosophy, he may be missing a quite important aspect of the debate. For philosophy has been often been held up as the essence or defining characteristic of humanity, hence it is of signal importance. And yet, looking back over the first two chapters of our analysis it is apparent that, even without bringing about an in-depth critique of colonial violence, Hountondji's text fares rather better than Senghor's, and I would like to spend a little time discussing just why this is so.

First of all, the former's texts are obviously far closer to what one would expect to find in a Western philosophical text. The style is more analytical and less rhetorical, the arguments are more immediately convincing and do not require belief in non-observable entities like souls and racial essences. Of course, Hountondji also supplies a conceptual and historically informed analysis of Senghor's texts, contexts, sources and aims; thus his own theory surpasses his predecessor's by explaining it, recognizing its initial historical validity, but then arguing that the moment for Négritude is past (see *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 240).

Nevertheless, in the preceding chapter it was argued that there are many questions that Hountondji does not answer satisfactorily, including certain incongruities in his own definitions of Africanity and philosophy. More serious, though, is the possibility that, by returning to a Western notion of philosophy which automatically excludes pre-colonial African thought, he reproduces Eurocentric attitudes within his analyses. This is serious because it means that his position coincides, albeit accidentally, with the prejudice that before the advent of colonization Africa was unable to produce thinkers with philosophical capabilities. As Fanon says, 'the history of the conquest, the historic development of the colonization [… is] substituted for the real time of the exploited' (*Towards an African Revolution*, p. 158).

It is hard to bring to a definitive resolution the question of whether Hountondji's universalism is emancipatory, by virtue of avoiding the particularism inspired and justified by colonial discourse, or is simply a recurrence of the ethnocentric viewpoint that sets up the particularities of the colonial culture as what is universal and necessary. But what I wish to avoid doing is reading Hountondji in

a favourable light simply because his text is not so unfamiliar as Senghor's (in the sense described above). Until we are in a position to review the situation, perhaps with fresh arguments, we shall abstain from further comment.

To these ends, the discussion will now take something of a detour, as we turn to look at minority discourse. The most obvious, and most relevant, characteristic of this type of discourse is that it takes the violence of marginalization as a given and tries to articulate a critique of this violence, while simultaneously bringing into question the status of the categories of the rational and the universal.

4.3 Colonial Violence I

4.3.1 Minority Discourse[128]

> By 'minority discourse', we mean a theoretical articulation of the political and cultural structures that connect different minority cultures in their subjugation and opposition to the dominant culture. (*The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, p. ix)

Here we see the relevance that minority discourse bears to our problem, as this short quotation contains all the major elements which characterize colonial violence: difference, minority, subjugation and opposition.

In a sense, minority discourse can be said to work towards goals similar to Senghor's, most notably the reordering of values based on a recentring, a refocusing on marginal values. However, minority discourse also tries to show the diversity of marginal voices and attacks the 'dominant' discourse which represents them as an indiscriminate negation of the Western norms of positivity. According to JanMohamed and Lloyd, the uniting factor of marginalized groups is the common oppression they face: 'different minority groups, despite all the

diversity and specificity of their cultures, share the common experience of domination and exclusion by the majority (p. ix).

In the article, 'Rethinking Modernism', Nancy Hartsock considers whether it is possible to build a general theory in order to analyse this common oppression, while doing justice to the range of different voices that speak from minority perspectives.[129] If such a theory can be constructed it must pay attention to the specificities of each group in order to avoid the sort of false universalism that plagues the dominant discourse. Wondering what sort of common claims can be made and by whom, she asks whether it is legitimate to presuppose general categories, such as 'woman' (or, by the same token, 'black', etc.). In a tone that is reminiscent of the debate provoked by Négritude's extreme particularism, Hartsock queries whether 'theories produced by "minorities" [should] rest on different epistemologies than those of the "majority"' (ibid., p. 19). How can it be possible to give an account of the many and varied experiences of minority groups from within the canonical discourse of the centre which dominates them? As Mudimbé says:

> L'ordre du discours occidental, espace parfaitement délimité, fonction d'une structure socio-économique et d'une archéologie culturelle, ne rend et ne pourrait rendre compte d'autres cultures ou d'autres systèmes que par référence à lui-même et point, me semble-t-il, dans la spécificité d'une experience qui lui serait irréductible. (*L'Odeur du Père*, pp. 44-45)

We have said that minority discourse and Négritude have certain shared goals. On the other hand, the complacent acceptance of colonial ideology which in Senghor's texts occasionally verges on fawning admiration, marks a large difference from those of minority discourse. [130] The latter are strongly critical of the dominant culture, and in contrast to the very cautious way in which she

addresses the issue of the diversity of minority identities, with complete ease Hartsock names the opposite number, the oppressor. Her critique focuses on

> a way of looking at the world, characteristic of the dominant white, male, Eurocentric ruling class, a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the centre and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities. (p. 22)

The 'omnipotent subject' is the 'dominant white, male, Eurocentric ruling class' of the Western world. The foundations of Western discourse, a discourse which represents itself as pre-eminently rational, civilized and developed, are said to be set in an array of binary oppositions which assert the superiority of the ideal subject (the rational, civilized, developed being), in counter-balance with the inferiority of the other (the irrational, savage, under-developed element). The identity of the occupants of this other space varies between non-white racial types, women, colonized peoples, lower classes, and other minority or marginalized groups.[131]

The construction and maintenance of these radical dichotomies originates in the dominant culture's need for self-definition. Hartsock cites Beauvoir, who writes that 'au moment où l'homme s'affirme comme sujet et liberté, l'idée d'Autre se médiatise'.[132] The exalted liberty, humanity and intelligence of Western man is contrasted with the abject determinism, animal-like existence and debased rationality of the Other. According to Hartsock, this conceptual device evolves from thoroughly political motives: 'radical dichotomy […] functions to maintain a certain kind of order' (p. 25). Thus, the nineteenth and twentieth century Europe that sends hordes of missionaries into the colonies with the express purpose of converting the indigenous population, justifies itself by claiming that it is done in order to save their souls or to 'conduire les nègres vers une véritable civilisation bantoue'.[133] This violence, both physical and conceptual, is theorized and justified

by a discourse which represents itself as rational and just, but whose structures are shot through with the desire for domination and self-exaltation.[134]

Already it is noticeable that there is a group of terms which are roughly interchangeable and which recur throughout this critique, namely, terms such as 'majority', 'hegemonic', 'Western', 'dominant', and so on. It appears that the uniform identity of this category is assumed without question: the majority consists of the dominating hegemonic West, more specifically, it is the white, middle-class male population of the West who are the 'centre'.

It is interesting to note that, while so much is made of the diversity of minority cultures, it is still possible to assume the cogency of terms like 'the West' and 'dominant', when these are understood to refer to unitary categories. Even after we have diversified the conventionally minor side of the dichotomy — e.g. 'African', 'black', 'female' — by recognizing its plurality and heterogeneity, we are left with a remainder which resists fragmentation.

Yet the dominant culture is not single and monolithic. Just as black identity really consists in diverse black identit*ies*, the same can be said of any grouping. As Hountondji comments:

> La culture européenne est elle-même pluraliste, traversée par les tendances et les courants les plus divers […] lorsque nous parlons de 'la' civilisation occidentale au singulier, nous ne savons peut-être pas bien de quoi nous parlons. Nous supposons peut-être à tort une identité de sens entre des courants opposés et inconciliables. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 220)

One of the reasons for this strategy lies in an attempt to identify the 'enemy', as is apparent from Hartsock's use of an 'Us and Them' language:

> It is clear who 'they' are, the 'we' refers to a 'we' who are not and never will be a unitary 'we', a 'we" artificially constructed by the totalizing, Eurocentric, masculine discourse of the Enlightenment.[135]

The consequences of this are quite serious: first, the radical dichotomy *West/Other* is maintained. Though the previously marginalized side is now positively identified, diversified and given a voice, it is assumed that the representation of the West as uniform and homogeneous has some degree of accuracy. Secondly, Hartsock does not take into account the fact that the oppressed can also be oppressors, as the distinction she makes is disjunctive: *either* dominant *or* dominated, indeed the term 'minority' is defined through reference to relations of domination. Thirdly, it is implied that oppressed subjects cannot collude in their own oppression: there are some who do the talking (the dominant subjects) and others who are talked about (the minority subjects). Thus being 'minor' is supposed to consist in being *acted upon*, having something done to oneself: the role is intrinsically passive.[136]

What can be said about this? We have already noted that the claim of uniformity is no more defensible with respect to the West than it is with respect to Africa. The view that the oppressed cannot be oppressors is obviously false: even within the minority discourse framework that we have set up, a black man, oppressed by white society, may oppress the women in his circle; similarly, a white woman, oppressed by a patriarchal society, may oppress the blacks with whom she enters into contact. But then, who in these cases is the oppressor and who the oppressed? (Who is the 'we' and who the 'they'?) Lastly, Fanon and Memmi have already taught us in what ways the colonial subject is often *instrumental* in her/his oppression.[137]

Furthermore, by committing herself to a hard distinction between 'major' and 'minor', 'central' and 'marginal', etc., but defining the 'minor/marginal' term as subjugation to the dominant culture, through *being oppressed*, Hartsock petrifies

the concept of minorities in a form of passivity and thus erases all mention of the historical agency of marginalized groups. For there are obviously people who might be said to come from a 'minority' background and who have come to occupy positions of power. Insofar as such people are then part of the system of domination they can no longer be conceived as minor, as their minority consisted in the purely relational fact of their being dominated, and this relation no longer obtains. But there are also people who, although in relatively empowered positions, are complicit in their own domination: let us take Senghor as an example, for he finds a place from which to speak *within* the dominant discourse, yet continues to emit a text which reinforces the bonds of colonial racism. Therefore, he is at once victim and oppressor because both of these roles are relational and he stands in both relations. In other words, he occupies a dominant role because he stands in a certain relation to others through participating in the dominant discourse. At the same time he is dominated because the dominant discourse in which he participates establishes the same dominating relation towards himself. But when the categories of marginality and centrality are mutually exclusive, how can one person be both at once?[138]

This problem only arises so long as we believe that one's marginal status is constructed through the activity (i.e. oppression) of the dominant party. If we were to recognize that every person exists within a network of social forces, many of them highly ambiguous in nature and open to various interpretations, then we would be able to reintroduce the notion of individual agency. But as soon as we do this the categories upon which the minority discourse critique is based appear to dissolve, because one's being dominated is not enough to establish that one is marginal, and likewise one's dominance over (some) others is not enough to

establish that one is dominant (in the sense that excludes being simultaneously marginal). In other words, we might say that these criteria for minority and majority status, as given by Hartsock, are at best *necessary* but not *sufficient*. Thus, it is impossible to say with any certainty that 'it is clear who "they" are', and nor is it clear who the opposing 'we' might be.

Given that at least part of 'the dominant culture's' pre-eminence and ability to relegate other cultures to a negative status derives from the very myth of a united, dominant West, any critique of 'the centre' cannot afford to reinscribe the same delusory representation of centrality. Unless we can find a more plausible way of theorizing the violence of marginalization, it does not appear that we can say much about it at all.

4.3.2 Another Definition of Marginal Status

Kobena Mercer gives a useful explanation of marginalization:

> It is the problematic of enunciation that circumscribes the marginalized positions of subjects historically misrepresented or underrepresented in the dominant culture, for to be marginalized is to have no place from which to speak.[139]

To be marginalized is to have no place from which to speak. And the other side of the equation is that if you have no place from which to speak, it is quite likely that other people will take it upon themselves to speak for you. Thus Placide Tempels, the Belgian ethnologist and missionary, sets himself the task to describe to the world (the European, colonial world, that is) the details of Bantu metaphysics, details which are so esoteric that even the Bantu themselves cannot explain them:

> C'est nous qui pourrons leur dire, d'une façon précise, quel est le contenu de leur conception des êtres, de telle sorte qu'ils se reconnaîtront dans nos

paroles et acquiesceront en disant: 'Tu nous as compris, tu nous connais à présent complètement'. (*La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 24)

As we have seen, such arrogating paternalism is not the only way in which Africans have been affected by colonialism. In addition to asking who is allowed to speak, Mercer also mentions two specific forms of marginalization, which take effect when one has lost the power of speech: misrepresentation and under-representation. These forms, too, we have already discussed, the latter in the way that disciplines like ethnology grant themselves the licence to talk *about* other cultures, without expecting the objects of their studies to 'speak back', the former in the way that European control over Africanist discourse, even when it is in the mouths of Africans, has tended to reproduce unfavourable and inaccurate portrayals of Africans.

This is all very well, but there is another problem with the concept of marginalization that we have not yet confronted. Supposing that marginalization is indeed 'to have no place from which to speak', the question that should follow is: 'to speak to whom?'. In other words, perhaps the notion of having a 'place from which to speak' leads to a rather unhelpful oversimplification, for surely everyone who has any position at all in a culture has a place from which to speak? Without further precision, it sounds as if Mercer is simply claiming the right for minorities (e.g. blacks) to address the dominant (i.e. white) audience. Clearly this is a problem, both in a general and a specific sense: generally, the idea is problematic because it refocuses attention on the centre and suggests that this is the only important audience; more specifically, it is in direct contradiction with Hountondji's quite legitimate complaint that the extraversion of African philosophy, the performance to a foreign audience, is a major obstacle to authentic development of the discipline.

The fact is that where there are marginal cultures (and we must wonder what it is for an entire culture to be 'marginal') there will be voices and places to speak within those cultures. What is often claimed by marginal speakers is the right to *empower* one's speech, in such a way as to make it a discourse that can compete with dominant voices. The question then becomes twofold: first, how can one's voice be empowered (how can one gain voting rights, for example), and secondly, to whom can one speak (e.g. if one is prohibited from disseminating information)? The converse, therefore, the luxury that dominant elements — individuals, organizations, and cultures — enjoy is adequate representation within structures and systems of power, and the right and ability to speak to whom one chooses. If marginal subjects were to find a place from which to speak, they would be able to represent and to revalue their diverse difference from the dominant culture:

> The contestation of marginality […] inevitably brings the issue of authorship back into play, not as the centered origin that determines or guarantees the aesthetic and political value of a text, but as a vital question about agency in cultural struggles to 'find a voice' and 'give voice' to subordinate experiences, identities and subjectivities. (p. 194)

But still, even a marginalized audience is still an audience: why is being unheard within the dominant culture described as being 'unheard' *tout court*? Is this a recurrence of the problem of false universalization? For if it is imperative to relativize and contextualize (to de-centre) speakers, it seems just as important to do the same for audiences. But then it would be possible to claim that, relative to a particular audience, say a predominantly black neighbourhood, Western white middle-class voices (i.e. the traditionally 'dominant') were marginalized or silenced. So does it all come down to the same thing in the end?

No, there are certain obvious differences. There are real disparities in economic and socio-political standing between groups, differences that may be said to make

the West a dominant centre in a way that many other cultures cannot be, and the same may be said for individuals. For those Western middle-class white voices have considerable power over how the predominantly black neighbourhoods are managed, how they are policed, how their children are educated, and so on. As Mercer comments:

> In social, economic and political terms, black men in the United States today constitute one of the 'lowest' social classes: disenfranchised, disadvantaged and disempowered as a distinct collective subject in the late capitalist underclass. (p. 200)

But he also says this:

> In the contemporary situation, the essentialist rhetoric of categorical identity politics threatens to erase the connectedness of our different struggles. At its worst, such forms of identity politics play into the hands of the Right, as the fundamentalist belief in an essential and immutable identity keeps us locked in the prisonhouse of marginality in which oppressions of race, class, and gender would have us live. (p.218)

But I wonder whether it is consistent to reject 'categorical identity politics' and yet to preserve the solidarity of a diversity of minorities. While seeking to create allegiances among all kinds of minority subjects in order to subvert the dominance of the canonical, Eurocentric, text and to undermine the hegemony which threatens one's freedom of expression, is it still possible to articulate a notion of identity that is sufficiently fluid? For even in mentioning such a thing as a 'canon', a 'dominant culture', or a 'centre', it seems that we are instantly committed to presupposing the existence of at least one categorical identity, which is precisely the object of our critique.

4.3.3 True Interests

Let us return to the quotation at the top of the last section:

It is the problematic of enunciation that circumscribes the marginalized positions of subjects historically misrepresented or underrepresented in the dominant culture.[140]

What is meant here by 'misrepresented' and 'underrepresented'? To be represented is to have one's views and interests represented. If a group is represented (or misrepresented, or underrepresented) then the group's interests, i.e. their *common* interests, are represented (or misrepresented, or underrepresented). Now we may ask whether sets of interests pick out minority groups with any degree of accuracy. Of course they do: for example, it was in the interests of black Americans to obtain the vote, to be paid as much as whites, not to suffer physical or mental abuse, and so on. But did *all* black Americans want such things? Even if they did, let us suppose that just one individual from that group did not share those interests, let us say that for some reason s/he was indifferent to them.[141] We would probably want to say that this person did not recognize his *true* interests, that s/he was mistaken, that s/he missed something important. I think that this is the case, but I wonder what it is that tells us so. Historical context usually guarantees a commonality of interests by creating a common destiny, but it is possible for someone to fail to perceive this commonality, or just not be interested in it. There must be some kind of objective criterion by which we can determine common interests and against which such abnormal attitudes can be measured. There must be some way of distinguishing between what a person feels to be her/his interests (i.e. whatever it is that s/he finds to be her/his interests) and her/his *true* interests (i.e. whatever is best for her/him).

The point of all this is not to argue that minority/marginal status cannot be explained by reference to representation, but to show that this explanation cannot

function without appealing to some notion of interests. The next step is to argue for a distinction between perceived interests and true interests, because one does not cease to be minor/marginal simply because one is indifferent or insensitive to one's fate. If one's true interests are not straightforwardly those interests that one would assign to oneself, there must be some objective criteria which determine one's true interests. But those objective criteria cannot consist in an essence, as it was part of our hypothesis that minority status had nothing to do with essence, and we cannot appeal to the notion of the group because it is precisely this notion that we are trying to define (by determining 'common true interests').

Let us take another definition of minority provided by Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd:

> Becoming 'minor' is not a question of essence […] but a question of position: a subject-position that in the final analysis can be defined only in 'political' terms — that is, in terms of the effects of economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, social manipulation, and ideological domination in the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses. (*The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, p. 9)

Becoming minor is not a question of essence, that is, it is not a matter of *being* black, female, gay, Jewish, etc., what is crucial is one's position. But this formulation does not actually remove the problem of essence, but only pushes it a step further away, for we may now ask: are minor 'positions' essentially minor or not? The reply will probably be an affirmation: positions such as being exploited, disenfranchised, manipulated or dominated are all instances of essentially minor positions.

Yet many people, especially in the West, ignore things like voting rights — they simply do not care about their suffrage, hence they do not vote. Should we say that they are deliberately marginalizing themselves? Perhaps we do not need to answer that question, for we can refer to the vast majority of people who are not

indifferent to such things as voting. So on this view being deprived of one's voting rights is marginalizing because the majority of people, society in general, believe that having a vote is a crucial element of being represented.

But then what about the groups we have been discussing over the course of the last two chapters, i.e. the Africanists and ethnophilosophers on one side, and the professional philosophers on the other? These two groups have greatly diverging views on what it is to occupy a marginal position. Hountondji believes that it is using Western notions of race and culture, and conforming to colonialist expectations that African philosophy is no more than an unconscious world-view. For him, the ethnophilosophers accept a minor position insofar as they do not raise their thinking to the level of the universal but remain trapped in colonial discourse. Yet for the defenders of ethnophilosophy and sage philosophy, it is Hountondji who is complicit with Western marginalization of Africa, by accepting the Western notion of philosophy and insisting that African philosophy conform to this standard as if it were a universal.

So once more we are faced with the question of how we can distinguish, objectively, between true and false interests. If this cannot be done, and generally speaking this is the state of affairs in the argument that continues to rage over African philosophy, then there is no chance of prescribing a genuine future for Africa, because it is impossible to decide on the continent's true interests.

We shall leave this subject now, and take it up again in chapter 6.

4.4 Colonial Violence II

It seems that we are faced with a dilemma: if, like Senghor, we do not make a concerted effort to interrogate the discourses of colonialism and Eurocentric Western philosophy then it may be said that we allow the processes of

marginalization and oppression to continue without challenge. If, on the other hand, we do challenge Western discourses on the basis that they are totalizing, marginalizing and rely on a false universality, we lay ourselves open to exactly the same charge because on inspection it becomes obvious that our own critical discourse relies on the very concepts for which Western discourses are criticized.

In what follows we shall focus on the issue of racial violence in order to explore the paradoxical nature of racializing language then we shall apply our findings to the specific instance of African philosophy, as it has been discussed so far.

4.4.1 The Paradox of Racial Violence

The thesis we shall consider may be expressed thus:

> If we continue to represent the violence of racism, in all its forms (race-crime, racist ideology, segregation, etc.), *as* racist violence then we perpetuate and substantiate the basis for that violence.[142]

The violence which is the object of our discussion consists partly in the violence of racial terms like 'black' and 'white', which purport to denote categories that do not, in fact, exist (see section 2.3). The conceptual segregation of individuals into discrete races also carries a rationale which may be utilized for actual segregation, and for the reification and classification of people in general. The idea, then, is that racializing attitudes, even when apparently innocuous, are inherently suspect since they support a manner of thinking and acting which makes actual racial violence possible.[143]

Let us take a concrete example in order to work through this idea. Imagine a criminal attack whose sole motive is based on racializing thought and prejudice: the assailant does not know the victim, cannot bear him any specific ill-will, and

has not been threatened. The victim is perceived as a member of the hated race, and it is this fact alone which leads the racist attacker to commit the crime.

The violence of the event is manifest in several ways, the most obvious of which is the actual physical or verbal violence inflicted on the victim. Anterior to this there is the conceptual (discursive) process by which the attacker comes to justify his malevolent inclinations on the grounds of race. But prior even to this act of justification there is an original violence, namely, the concept of race itself.

When the crime is reported by the media or by witnesses, and if the facts of the case, including intentions and motives, have become known, then the event will accurately be represented and referred to as a 'race-crime'. In other words, the motive for the attack will be said to have arisen wholly (or principally, or partly) from malevolent racist beliefs, and this is in line with our initial hypothesis, which *stated* the existence of that motive and those beliefs.

Yet, in another sense, the attitude of those reporting the affair will be mistaken. After all, as we discussed in the chapter on Senghor, races do not really exist — at least, not as neat categories. So in a manner of speaking, although the attacker thought he was perpetrating a race-based act, he was mistaken: in truth he committed a crime that was based on a set of poorly-defined beliefs which do not objectively refer to anything. Although it is true that we require the notion of race in order to make sense of the attack, i.e. to understand the attacker's subjectivity, we are also bound to ask ourselves whether *making sense* of such an action is really what is called for.[144] By reporting the crime as a race-crime, we are unwittingly privileging a certain way of looking at the world, which is in fact the attacker's point of view. How ironic that in representing and condemning his actions we should help to make sense of them!

Let us change the example and imagine that, instead of racial motivations, it turns out that the perpetrator of the attack undertakes the violence on the unique basis that the victim is considerably taller than average. Instantly, the thought-experiment seems absurd, and we should say that the attacker is not quite sane, no matter what reasons he might adduce in justification. The unreason and immorality of violence is one thing, but the notion of attacking another purely on account of his height seems ridiculous. Tallness just is not a good reason for attacking someone else, even when backed up by a whole series of rationally derived explanations. We may also express this by saying that there does not appear to be anything seriously *at stake* in the matter of tallness, a property which could be offensive only to a quite unbalanced individual.

But by adding a little historical background to our story it will start to gain substance. In the not so distant past, systems of socio-political oppression have been constructed on the basis of height discrimination, perhaps with eugenic inspiration, in order to breed taller, stronger humans. Smaller people were systematically excluded from positions of importance, discouraged from procreating, and, in short, were subject to all manner of violence. After a period of struggle, the oppressed section of society were given back their rights and freedoms, and by the time of the attack that we are imagining the society is considered by most people to be more or less just. What difference would these details make to our example?

Well, instead of the attack appearing transparently absurd, there is now a background, a context within which sentiments of resentment and vengeance gain a more natural colour. It is because the victim is perceived as a member of the hated class that the violence takes place. Clearly, tallness would still not be a good

reason for attacking another person, for the simple fact of one's being tall implies strictly nothing about one's other characteristics, such as one's fairness, respect for others, lawfulness, love for one's parents, and so on. But on the other hand, body-size is now a sufficiently meaningful explanation for us to have a historical understanding of the attack.

Essentially, what we are saying is here that the property of tallness in our example, and signs of ethnicity in the real world, are important *symbols*. Being symbols, they may *con*note (i.e. through association they invoke other thoughts and feelings), but they do not *de*note (tallness does not mean anything at all, it is plainly non-intentional), and moreover they do not reliably indicate anything about a person's character. Physical features as symbols connote other characteristics which are more important to us than the symbols themselves, but there is in fact no objective connection between the symbols and their field of reference. Within the context of our imaginary history of height-based discrimination, the factor of height takes on a symbolic meaning which enables us to understand a situation that is and remains absurd. The fact that we can come a little closer to an understanding of the attacker does not make his action any more reasonable, but rather allows us to explain his unreason, so to speak.

And the conclusion will be no different when the focus is shifted onto race-crimes. By admitting that an act is comprehensible as a race-crime, even while lamenting its inhumanity and repugnance, we support the very framework within which such events take place, a framework which is *necessary* for those events *to be able* to take place. In effect this is nothing more than the truism that if there were no concept of race, then race-crimes could not exist *qua* race-crimes. For a crime to exist as a *race-crime* the notion of race must make sense.

Against this background, racial violence is understandable because racial categories are understandable, it makes no difference that the violence is wrong (either because racial difference is not a good reason for violence, or because violence is just wrong). Ironically, it is the racial element of racial violence that is more understandable than the violence itself; hence people say 'I don't understand why these people hate and attack others *just because* of the colour of their skin!' It is not the racialization which is incomprehensible, but the causal link between racialization and violence.

But there are two dangers here. The first is that, if racial categories are considered really to exist the fact that we no longer assign positive and negative values to these categories is a merely fortuitous circumstance and susceptible to reversal.[145] Moreover, there is always the possibility of introducing pertinent 'exceptions' to otherwise universalizing moral codes. Hence Mill portrays slavery and colonization as an unfortunate and painful, but sadly necessary phase of history, in order to enable 'less developed' peoples to profit from the tutelage of their more advanced masters, the scandal here consisting not only in the subversion and betrayal of humanist ethics in order to justify colonial violence, but in the daring hypothesis that it is actually for the good of the *colonized*.[146]

But it is the second danger that we are really interested in. This is that racial terms form part of a structure of understanding which makes sense of the perception of individuals as instances of a kind. While they may be used to reinforce liberal moral codes (e.g. 'it is wrong to discriminate against people on racial grounds', 'all people are morally equal, regardless of race', etc.) they also provide a meaningful classification of individuals which allows or facilitates the violation of these same universal codes. By 'allows or facilitates', I mean that if

the terms were incomprehensible then race-crimes would also be incomprehensible, whether in the form of single instances, or as general movements and institutions. This is not to say that the mere use of racial terms is sufficient for (physical) racial violence, but it does mean that such a use comprises a *conceptual* racial violence (as defined at the beginning of this subsection), and it also means that we cannot hope to supercede racism entirely so long as we continue to use racializing language.

Yet in some ways we do need to retain the language of race. Without it we would be unable to understand or report to any great degree of accuracy the reality of racism (for though race is not real, racism certainly is). Unprovoked attacks on ethnically distinct individuals (who, depending on the circumstances, can be anyone) and which are motivated by ethnic distinctness, are obviously instances of racial violence. So there would appear to be another dilemma, analogous to the one described at the beginning of the section: either to continue the discursive violence of racialization, and hence to continue to make racism thinkable (and so possible), or to give up the ability to speak about racial violence, which seems tantamount to pretending that it does not exist.

Any liberal theorist for whom the elimination of racism is an imperative must begin to feel anxious at this point, for there is something real at stake. As we remarked, racism is a reality, and for most people an undesirable one, so giving up all critique of racism does not seem to be a conscionable option.

Fortunately, the dilemma is not inevitable, but the strategy of neutralizing, rather than fighting racial violence requires the skills of a polyglot. No longer can we be content to speak either the subjective language of racial facts or the objective language of race-less humanity. It is necessary at once to recognize the

subjective reality of race — the beliefs, desires, motivations and prejudices which can provoke, enable, and also overwhelm the experiencing subject — as well as the objective fictionality of the concept.

Thus, the paradox is that it appears that in order to reach the liberal goal of zero racial violence it is necessary to give up our attachment to this goal (at least, as it is described in the current form). Striving for racial harmony only suspends racial discord, which is but a momentary respite: the cycle does not end.

Yet by working for the dissolution of racialization, and thus foregoing harmony, racial discord becomes unthinkable. And this is not a case of thinking away racial violence, or calling it by another name and then concluding that it no longer exists: that would be mere wishful thinking. Believing that we can all live in harmony is wishful thinking: we probably cannot, but perhaps we can choose the terms on which to disagree.

As R. Radhakrishnan writes:

> The momentous undertaking that radical ethnicity is entrusted with is the creation of a future where oppression will not just be immoral or unconscionable, but virtually 'unthinkable'.[147]

4.4.2 African Philosophy

From the foregoing discussion we can give a new interpretation to Hountondji's work and read him as trying to remove the concept of Africanity from the picture altogether, and in so doing, to escape the vicious circle. This also gives us a new way of understanding what was termed the 'ideality' of his discourse. (His discourse was supposedly idealizing because it seems to assume that there is no longer a challenge to the existence or status of African reason, when this is clearly an unwarranted optimism.) It was argued that Senghor's discourse was ideal because, even while accepting racial distinctions, he ignored the real oppressive

effect to which these distinctions were being put at the time of his writing. Now if Hountondji does not even recognize racial categories, if he wants to remove philosophy from any racializing environment whatsoever, then it may be that what at first sight appears to be a silence with respect to the inequalities faced by African reason, is actually an ongoing effort to make racial violence against the concept of African philosophy unthinkable.

But that is only half the story, as Hountondji also refrains from essentializing the idea of the West, consequently he is unable to articulate in general terms a critique of the West's domination of Africa. Yet this is no bad thing, as it facilitates a dispassionate and measured assessment of the modalities of African dependence on the West, while maintaining an awareness of the imperfections of the terms that are in use.

This reading is supported by the text:

> L'enjeu de cette critique pourrait ne pas apparaître d'emblée. Du point de vue qui nous intéresse ici, elle a pour effet de relativiser les idées d'africanité, d'occidentalité, etc., en en faisant de purs concepts formels dont le contenu, loin de pouvoir se déterminer une fois pour toutes, est par essence ouvert, plurivoque, contradictoire. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 249)

For Fanon, the black subject, as a subject, faces the dilemma 'se blanchir ou disparaître'(*Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 80). Perhaps from our new perspective emancipation would render such a dilemma obsolete. Instead, we could invert the proposition: true emancipation would make blackness as invisible as whiteness (for where currently the white exists primarily as a human being, the black is always seen as a *black* human being).

4.5 Conclusion

The point of departure for this chapter was our dissatisfaction with both Senghor and Hountondji's treatment of the subject of colonial violence. It was observed that Senghor's celebratory essentialism and optimistic expectation of a *Civilisation de l'Universel*, in which humanity would eventually come to live in harmony, prevented his truly engaging the question of violence. Rather than face up to the real inequalities and problems confronting Africans in the world as it is today, he chooses to focus on the exposition of a mythical essence in order to explain the perceived differences between African and European societies.

On the other hand, Hountondji appears to be unable to articulate a critique of colonial violence, simply because he eschews the use of categories like 'the West', or at least he relativizes them to the point where they can no longer be utilized for a strong critique of the enduring structures of colonialism.

Given their common failing, we expressed concern for the relative attractiveness of Hountondji's position in comparison with Senghor's, and wondered whether this could not be due to the fact that Hountondji, as a professional philosopher, treats the subject of African philosophy with an approach that may be instantly recognized as philosophy, whereas the techniques of Senghor and the ethnologists and ethnophilosophers with whom he is associated seem far less consonant with the discipline as it is conventionally known in the West. One of the aims of this chapter was, therefore, to ensure that our own viewpoint is not unduly influenced by the relative distance between ourselves and the texts.

In order to do this, and also to see whether it is possible to set in motion a strong, general critique of colonial discourse, we looked at some of the texts of minority discourse. In the course of that study we discovered that even when

conventionally minor identities are represented in all their diversity, unless the same is done for the so-called dominant centre, we inadvertently continue to support the predominance of the centre. Minorities are still positioned by relation to the majority, and their minority status is secured by the active oppression of the majority. However, even then the falsity of the terms 'major' and 'minor' cannot help but show through, for the dichotomy leaves us unable to theorize the ambiguities and finer details of social oppression.

On looking at different formulations of minority/marginal status, based on the criteria of representation and social position, we realized that we were unable to approach these criteria in an objective fashion. This was not taken as a refutation of the criteria, but as an indication that we need to be more aware of the effect of our environment upon our own discourse, in order to ensure that our own reason is not tainted by bad empirical reality. The development of this theme has been deferred until chapter 6.

Finally, we discussed the problem of the use of racial terms to talk about racial violence. Even if we use the terms to condemn acts of racial violence, we are helping to maintain an order where such violence makes sense, although widely seen as reprehensible. If we truly aim at an end to racial violence then we have to project to go beyond racializing language, to attempt a new sort of discourse which is based on the knowledge of the objective unreality of races, while recognizing their relevance within the field of experience.

The application of this to the field of African philosophy is that it enables us to reconstrue Hountondji's near silence about the issue of colonial violence. He recognizes that to operate with ideas like 'centre', 'dominant', and 'Western', and to use them as if to refer to real entities, we accomplish little more than follow in

the tracks of the colonial discourse, which has already appropriated the terms of our opposition. In the words of Valentin Mudimbé:

> Pour l'Afrique, échapper réellement à l'Occident suppose d'apprécier exactement ce qu'il en coûte de se détacher de lui; cela suppose de savoir jusqu'où l'Occident, insidieusement peut-être, s'est approché de nous; cela suppose de savoir, dans ce qui nous permet de penser contre l'Occident, ce qui est encore occidental; et de mesurer en quoi notre recours contre lui est encore peut-être une ruse qu'il nous oppose et au terme de laquelle il nous attend, immobile et ailleurs. (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 13)

We shall now move on to discuss how this might be so, and what Mudimbé suggests should be done to remedy the situation.

Chapter 5: Mudimbé's *L'Odeur du Père*

5.1 Introduction

The first chapter of analysis dealt with the work of Léopold Senghor, a founding member of the Négritude movement who wrote extensively on the essential characteristics of *la culture négro-africaine* and hence African philosophy. In the next chapter we examined the work of the 'professional philosopher', Paulin Hountondji, who strongly criticized all such attempts to reduce African life in general and African philosophy in particular to a collection of exoticized tropes. Hountondji's critique centres on the exteriority of Africanist discourses and the cultural and philosophical inauthenticity of what is known as 'ethnophilosophy' — a discipline seeking to 'reconstruct' African philosophies from their sources in indigenous knowledge (usually communicated orally) and to promote these 'world-views' (*Weltanschauungen*) as alternatives, or complements, to existing Western philosophical systems. Hountondji charges the ethnophilosophers with being prone to undue Western influence (i.e. African inauthenticity) and failing to respect the true meaning of 'philosophy' in the strict sense (philosophical inauthenticity).[148]

  In the course of that chapter it became clear that even though Hountondji positions himself in direct opposition to the ethnological tradition of much Africanist discourse, it may be said that he faces similar problems. For example, he accuses Africanists of inauthenticity, of producing putatively African philosophical texts which are in fact neither African nor philosophical, of reproducing Western stereotypical images of Africa, and of unwittingly replicating the discursive structures inherent to colonial power. Yet critics of

Hountondji have levelled the same criticisms at his own position. They accuse him of working exclusively with a European conception of philosophy, such that he discards out of hand all indigenous African thought as fundamentally 'unphilosophical'.[149] In this way he supposedly betrays both the African culture and the open-minded impartiality that should characterize the philosopher. By his adherence to so-called Western notions of reason and philosophy he is said to perpetuate the structures of power which have legitimized colonialism and objectified Africans in the Western consciousness. Thus far, it remains unclear whether Hountondji's problems go deeper than his simply being accused of these faults. From the evidence we have considered it does not seem possible to determine whether or not his discourse does in fact 'silently depend on a Western episteme'.[150]

In chapter 4 these problems acquired greater dimension and complexity as we considered the shortcomings inherent in any discourse which deliberately sets up rigid conceptual oppositions. Quite consistent with this line of thought, although giving the impression of being a curiously disabling sort of conclusion, was the argument that even to criticize (i.e. to oppose) opposition will lead us into this sort of trap: what is required is emancipation from oppositional forms of thought altogether. We also looked at the problems that arise when common concepts depart from empirical reality. Thus the notion of *race* is sufficiently imprecise, misleading and unscientific to warrant its expulsion from our vocabulary, all the more so because the continued use of racial concepts, even to denounce racism, contributes to the perpetuation of a logic through which racism can meaningfully exist. (See 1.3 and 4.4 of this thesis.) Yet for all that, 'race' is still a word on everybody's lips, and it still refers to a politically meaningful category.[151] Given

this fact, and given that, as politically interested individuals, we want to be able to comment on and theorize those events in our societies which are understood through the concept of race, we appear to be in something of a quandary: faced with two competing, rational, and seemingly irreconcilable languages, how can we speak at all?

And so, by starting from a fairly clear basis then proceeding to doubt the truth of that basis, and then to doubt our very doubting, we have come almost full circle, soon to arrive back where we began, but this time with far fewer easy answers and many more difficult questions. What exactly can be said about the texts we have considered, without wrapping them or ourselves in some inextricable web of 'traps and reversibilities'?[152] Any adequate treatment of this subject should deal with, and ideally provide some way of understanding, three main areas: the notion of *authenticity*, with reference to African philosophy, such that it can be determined who speaks authentically and who does not; the corresponding, contrasting notion of *Eurocentricity*: who is being Eurocentric and how; and the enduring problems of (neo)colonialism.

These issues will be addressed in the course of the present chapter, which will focus on the work of another African philosopher, Valentin Yves Mudimbé, whose writings have been cited in previous sections. Originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and having studied and taught extensively in Africa, Europe and the United States, Mudimbé is described as 'surtout un représentant de cette minorité intellectuelle qui […] ressent avec acuité l'aliénation néocoloniale'.[153]

Mudimbé's text, which claims to deal with 'des limites de la science et de la vie en Afrique Noire', provides a new framework within which the problems

developed in this thesis might be rethought and possibly resolved. The structure of this chapter may at times be somewhat erratic, due both to the fugitive, non-linear nature of the texts in question and the multiple complexities of the subject itself.[154] But these confusions should be resolved, and order restored, by the conclusions that will be drawn at the end.

The chapter takes an overview of Mudimbé's work, looking mainly at the essays contained in his *L´Odeur du Père* (1982), but also *L'Autre Face du Royaume* (1974), and making additional reference to his other critical works as the occasion arises. We shall work through two key themes: first, the theme of (residual) colonial presence in post-colonial Africa, and secondly, that of the possibility of Africa's escape from Western discourse. The former idea is most noticeably and most evocatively expressed by the eponymous phrase, *l´Odeur du Père*; the latter finds expression through the ideas of *l'écart* and *la ruse*. These metaphors are extremely fecund and may help us to understand the debate to a greater depth and with greater clarity. The first phrase will be our point of departure in section 5.3. But first, an exegesis of the broad lines of Mudimbé's work.

5.2 Exegesis

5.2.1 Mudimbé's Analysis

The initial commentary that Mudimbé makes upon the situation in post-colonial African social and academic life seems, despite his determination not to provide a 'voie de lecture' which would 's'imposer comme unique', also to pick up the principal threads which run the length of his work. The following points are

emphasized: complexity, dependence, violence and alienness, *étreinte* or *étouffement*, and the *enjeu*.[155] We shall outline some of these interlinked elements.

Throughout *L'Odeur du Père*, Mudimbé draws attention to the fundamental complexity of the post-colonial/neo-colonial situation and the fact of Africa's multiform dependence on external entities. The extent and consequences of this dependence are considerable, consisting in:

> [des] liens complexes qui, aujourd'hui, plus fortement qu'hier, *arriment* l'Afrique à l'Occident, *déterminant* ainsi non seulement les attitudes d'être mais aussi l'exercice de la pensée, les pratiques de connaissance et les manières de vivre. (pp. 11-12, italics added)[156]

In this first section he makes reference to economic, ideological, scientific, academic and social forms of dependence; some of these references are developed straightaway and some later in the book. Briefly, the most obvious mode of Africa's dependence on the West is in the domain of economy, where not only are African countries obliged to take part in a global trade market in which they are vastly and increasingly disadvantaged, but are also compromised by the fiscal 'aid' granted them by richer Western countries, aid which, because strongly linked to normative directives, '[sert] remarquablement bien à la recolonisation'.[157] The other elements are referred to in passing (and dealt with separately later on) through the idea that, in some subtly pervasive and deeply-rooted way, the West is almost inextricably present in the theoretical traditions, educational systems and even the cultures of Africa. In some instances this is due to Western pre-eminence in a particular area, and in others to the fact that Africans have effectively taken over, and made their own, certain Western discourses.[158]

But African dependence is also a matter of something altogether more insidious. Somehow, even in thinking *against* the West, the African theorist is liable to find

her/his own words turning back on her/him and once again declaring Western omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience. In commenting on *L'Odeur du Père*, Manthia Diawara writes:

> A problem concerning traps and reversibilities arises whenever an African theorist uses the dominant canon to represent African realities […] African theorists who assume a violence towards the West run the risk of unwittingly reasserting the superiority of the Western notion of rationality. (*Dangerous Liaisons*, p. 457)

Although by now Mudimbé's text may appear to be a tract on anti-Westernism, in fact he is far from seeking to prove that Western culture or influence is intrinsically vicious. Nor is it a feature of his programme, as was the case with Négritude and other black consciousness or nationalist movements, to glorify Africa by negation or vilification of its Other. On the contrary, Mudimbé is well aware of the shortcomings and the restricted life-span of such a narcissism.[159] Nevertheless, he continues to emphasize the dangers inherent in the surrender of, or the failure to reclaim, Africa's autonomy from the West. It may be recalled that Senghor, whose audience was largely European, theorized on African subjects while professing his concern to guide the attention of 'certains intellectuels d'Europe', so that they might better appreciate African arts and culture. For Senghor, and probably as a function of the climate in which he found himself, the matter of key importance was that Africa should be valued, or indeed *re*valued. Since it did not seem possible to do this through traditional Western ideals, he attempted to effect the change through an exaltation of the antithesis, and hence extreme difference. For Mudimbé, however, not only is such a procedure doomed to failure, but also:

> il est sans utilité de nous dépenser, comme certains de nos aînés, à vouloir 'prouver' notre humanité où l'intelligence qui nous furent longtemps refusées. (p. 13)[160]

There are several reasons for this contrast with Senghor. Mudimbé expresses the concern that, even when poised in an attitude of charity, the Western gaze may constitute a violence towards African life, if only through the ever-present potential for manipulation. Western culture and influence, while not intrinsically vicious, are all the same intrinsically *dangerous* for the African theorist, who must find a way not to fall into the traps which objectify Africa and thus deny its reality as a region of activity and authentic production.

The West also represents a danger for African existence in general, thus: 'L'Occident qui nous étreint […] pourrait nous étouffer'.[161] Three ideas may be present here: first, and again in contrast with Senghor, that the popularity (in the West) of African arts, cultures, crafts, music, literature, cuisine, and so on, is no guarantee that African people are fundamentally any better off in real terms.[162] The West can very easily accept the values of an African aesthetic while leaving all material factors unchanged. Secondly, even if relations between Africa and Eur-America are presently characterized by an air of indulgence and respect, so long as Africans do not control their own fate this eventuality is not guaranteed but remains contingent upon the goodwill of the dominant party. Thirdly, recalling Hountondji, it is quite possible, through the valorization of an exoticized and essentialized difference, by making one's culture a product to be consumed — commercially, as the exotic 'other' culture; intellectually, as the object of scientific study — that finally one achieves nothing more than the petrifaction of one's culture in the strata of self-imposed stereotypes (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 43-44). The difficulties and dangers inherent in this situation necessitate:

> une compréhension rigoureuse des modalités actuelles de notre intégration [des Africains] dans les mythes de l'Occident

and

> questions explicites qui nous permettraient d'être sincèrement critiques face
> à ces 'corpus' (p. 13)

One of the questions that Mudimbé asks, and a key term in the text we are considering, may be understood through the notion of the *enjeu*, or what is at stake in this process of self-determination. Although other writers have dealt with the themes of the loss and possible recuperation of African 'authenticity', often this issue has been reduced to the question of how to recover from the loss of self suffered through colonialism. Mudimbé, too, speaks of a 'réadaptation de notre psychisme après les violences subies' (ibid.), but he resolutely refuses to theorize colonialism as a 'parenthesis' in African history, a period when Africans simply lost control of their selves and their future.[163] The *enjeu*, for Mudimbé, is a matter of 'le maintien et l'épanouissement par l'adaptation, ou la réduction et la mort pure et simple d'expériences socio-historiques singulières' (p. 11). He does indeed wish to protect Africanity, but it is also possible to read him as suggesting that the very attempt to determine the exact content of such a concept, and in particular trying to fix any particular elements as the essence of African history, is precisely one of the dangers that continues to menace African existence. (We may note the correspondence here with the theme of complexity: it is implied that simplicity leads to, or is identifiable with, loss; while success and continuation necessarily involve the maintenance and respect of multiplicity.)

Mudimbé condemns the temptation to take refuge in stylized essentialisms and featureless universalisms which are not answerable to the facts of individuals' experience. If the trophies to be won, or retained, in the fight to protect African cultures are plurality and specificity ('expériences socio-historique singulières'), these are also the means by which Africans can emerge victorious, through 'un

retour constant sur ce que nous sommes avec une ferveur et une attention particulières, accordées à notre milieu archéologique' (p. 14). This last idea, of the importance of one's own environment or socio-historical and epistemological contexts, represents the element which, for Mudimbé, both enables and explains our discourse, and it is to this factor that we shall now turn.

5.2.2 Particularism and Universalism

As we have seen, Mudimbé emphasizes the complexity of post-colonial situations in Africa, to such an extent that he virtually identifies simplicity (i.e. over-simplification) with the death of local (i.e. non-global, non-homogenized) culture. He also applies such a mode of thought to his own work, rigorously abstaining from bringing a single, linear interpretation to bear on his critique. Hence the opening sentence:

> L'Odeur du Père…On l'entendra comme on le voudra. Et s'il me fallait, en liminaire aux textes que je livre, tracer une voie de lecture, je me demanderais si elle doit, en vérité, s'imposer comme unique. (p.14)

In this statement one might hear echoes of the voice of Frantz Fanon: 'je n'arrive point armé de vérités décisives' (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 5). And just as the latter declares, 'Ma conscience n'est pas traversée de fulgurances essentielles', Mudimbé also expresses a pressing concern to maintain the particularity of his perspective: 'Je pars du fait que ma conscience et mon effort sont d'un lieu, d'un espace et d'un moment donnés' (p. 13).[164] Aware of the need to account for this extreme particularism, he cites a passage from Aimé Césaire:

> Il y a deux manières de se perdre: par ségrégation murée dans le particulier ou par dilution dans l'universel. Ma conception de l'universel est celle d'un universel riche de tout le particulier, riche de tous les particuliers, approfondissement et coexistence de tous les particuliers.[165]

Perhaps in this reference we can see a clue to Mudimbé's strategy: he will tentatively steer a course between Scylla and Charybdis — on the one side essentializing particularisms (e.g. Négritude), and on the other abstract universalisms (e.g. 'universal' philosophy). This is not to say that he simply eschews all forms of universalism, on the contrary. But in contrast to the traditional Western (Platonic) idea of the universal as an ideal form empty of all particular elements, where the universal is that which inhabits or informs each particular, Mudimbé posits a universal which only exists by virtue of its thorough multiplicity. So a discourse which aims to be truly universal must itself be grounded in particularity: 'l'universalité ne peut exister qu'à partir d'une expérience critique et permanente d'une authenticité singulière …'[166] In the rest of this chapter, and throughout the following one, we shall see just how close Mudimbé's idea of universality comes to that expressed by Césaire.

The notion of particularity, especially in terms of one's own critical background and positioning, forms a recurrent theme in Mudimbé's work, one might say the keystone of his discourse, for the 'milieu archéologique' seems to be for him that which ultimately determines the pertinence of any discourse. One of the most important expressions of this particularity consists in the idea of the reciprocity between one's discourse and one's environment. What he calls the 'conditions de possibilité' of our speech also recur *within* our discourse. We may understand 'conditions de possibilité' in two distinct ways: first, the factors which can permit (or prohibit) and regulate the manner of production and formulation of a discourse, e.g. cultural particularities, laws, social rules, institutions, disciplinary structures, and other *formal* conditions;[167] secondly, the specific historical and theoretical contexts which surround, inspire, incite, or nourish a discourse. By

examining the circumstances giving rise to a text, we can explain not only its origins but also, to some extent, the signification of what is said: 'ce milieu qui, s'il permet nos prises de parole, les explique aussi' (p. 14).[168] Often it is only by examining historical circumstances that we can divine those elements which, conventionally, are not mentioned within formal academic texts, but which are nevertheless inherent to their structure and argument. In particular, this formula is applicable to texts like philosophical arguments, and extra-textual elements like personal and political history, biases, interests and so on, for the latter are traditionally excluded, suppressed, or silenced by the former.

Bearing in mind the idea of 'conditions de possibilité', it is possible to give another explanation of what went wrong with Senghor's project: by failing to investigate the context which gave rise to Négritude, he also failed to see how that same context permeated the substance of his discourse. The result is the paradox of a discourse which proclaims to reveal the essence, i.e. the *interior*, of the African soul, yet which is fundamentally *exterior* to its subject. So the major failing of Négritude consists not so much in its European sources, its eurocentricity, or its not telling the truth about Africa and Africans, but rather in the fact that it surreptitiously elides the truth about its own essence, and covers over this lacuna with claims to universality and abstract truth, which are themselves borrowings from the West:

> La Négritude, dans son projet comme dans sa signification, fut et est encore, forme vibrante et paradoxale de la culture contre laquelle il s'élève. (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 137)

For Mudimbé, the denial or misrepresentation of one's discursive origins leads both to a grave loss of potency and to a very serious sort of instability — what

could have been the foundational stone of a thought system becomes instead a shifting sand that undermines the superstructure.

Of course, these remarks are also pertinent to the Western texts that influenced Senghor, and another of Mudimbé's aims appears to be to show that those discourses which have been promoted as perfectly abstract, disinterested and universal are often far from such. This objection is raised explicitly in reference to ethnology and anthropology, both of which are subjected to incisive criticism in *L'Odeur du Père* and *L'Autre Face du Royaume*. However, the tenor of the discussion applies equally to all the social sciences, and no less to the domain of philosophy.[169] Essentially, the claim is that the humanities and social sciences can but approximate the rigour and precision of the natural sciences, and that, regardless of their claims or concerns, they inevitably consist in particular forms of thought having precise historical and textual roots, causes and conditions, all of which shape and direct the path of their development. Importantly, not only do these factors have an influence on the form of a discourse, but also on its content, for the factors themselves are reproduced within the discourse: 'l'ethnologie […] est, en effet, [un] discours englué dans un ordre qui la fonde et l'explique' (*L'Autre face du royaume*, p. 9). Hountondji gives a suitable example, speaking of the missionary ethnologists who abounded during the first half of the twentieth century:

> Double problématique de la 'mission civilisatrice' et du 'supplément d'âme': l'une ne va pas sans l'autre. Le colonisateur 'civilise', mais ne peut le faire qu'à condition de se réhumaniser lui-même, de retrouver son âme. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 42)

Both Hountondji and Mudimbé criticize the foundations of ethnology, grounded in the gratuitous distinction between the civilized subject (i.e. the European) and the savage object (e.g. the African) of the discourse:

> L'ethnologie … repose […] sur un fondement idéologique [… et] présuppose toujours ce qui est à démontrer: la distinction réelle entre son objet et celui de la sociologie en général, la différence de nature entre les sociétés 'primitives' […] et les autres sociétés. Dans le même temps, par contre, elle prétend faire abstraction du rapport des forces réel entre ces sociétés et les 'autres', c'est-à-dire, tout simplement, de l'impérialisme. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 16)

Yet how could it be possible truly to abstract from the very conditions which permit one's discourse — the ideological and material violence intrinsic to colonialism? Ethnology is an 'encultured' discipline which claims to produce a text that will order and theorize information about other cultures, but it is based on a series of positions which simply would not be thinkable without the advent of colonialism. It is not only that the subject/object (mind/world, reason/passion) relation that typically characterizes the position of the Western ethnologist vis-à-vis the colonized would be impossible in the absence of a system of radical inequities. But it is also possible to imagine that in a world of equal exchange, mutual respect and true multiplicity, the desire to emit an ethnological discourse upon other peoples might well come to be perceived as a freakish and alien impulse, if it did not disappear altogether.

In addition, we may wonder 'quelle justifications scientifiques donner à la coexistence de la sociologie et de l'ethnologie, mis à part le fait de la vocation impériale de l'Occident' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 52). Conventionally, the tacit assumption is that there is some salient logic in the distinction between the study of communities based on rational motivations (sociology) and the study of those based on traditional motivations (ethnology). But does this distinction reveal more about the state of the European psyche than it does about real differences in the world?

As is the case with all sciences, even the natural ones, the objectivity of the ethnological text is brought into question by the thesis that, fundamentally,

observation is not neutral with respect to that which is observed. The case in point is further complicated by the fact that both the authors and the subjects of such studies are historical beings who are already in interaction both within and without the ethnological text. The scientificity of ethnology, therefore, suffers from the nature of the unspoken relation between the subjects and the authors of the project, a relation which is itself loaded with ideology and political interests:

> Les Occidentaux, à l'instar des adultes vis-à-vis des enfants, des psychiatres vis-à-vis des malades, ont 'imposé' aux non-Occidentaux, selon un modèle spécifique, des manières aberrantes d'être des non-Occidentaux; ils ont ensuite donné le nom de 'ethno-x' à l'étude des *produits* de ce 'x' artificiellement provoqué. (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 27)

Hountondji argues that even the conversion to structuralism, when ethnologists saw the light in cultural relativism and tried to re-evaluate the similarities and differences between cultures, to allow space for *other* values, this movement was occasioned by a need internal to the Western scientific culture:

> Puis [l'Européen, ci-devant colonisateur] avait fini, dans un geste de repentir, ou plutôt pour résoudre sa propre crise interne, par valoriser cette différence même. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 34)

First and foremost, Mudimbé argues, such currents of thought could only be a further evolution of the Western *ratio*. While representing a moment of 'infidelity' with respect to the preceding dominant theory, and even though disclaiming the universality that had always been the hub of Western discourse, these developments were nevertheless none other than the latest form of a history of metamorphoses proper to a particular culture. According to Diawara,

> what is feared most in the West is not the emergence of the discourses of Foucault, Marx, Freud, or Nietzsche, which are always already appropriated; what is feared is the emergence of (an)other discourse, one that excludes the Western *ratio*. (*Dangerous Liaisons*, p. 462)

The type of subversive Western discourse which disclaims the old totalities in fact comprises a new totality, allowing marginal subjects to delimit, denounce and reject Western colonialism, but not, of course, to find a way out of the new phase of Western discourse that enables their limited resistance.[170] Evidently, this paradoxical situation is far from reassuring for the African theorist. It means that problems of Western colonial influence seem to recur persistently in every area of discourse that we have considered: African essentialism, professional philosophy, minority discourse, cultural relativism, and so on. At this point it becomes imperative to determine exactly who and what is the real enemy of the African theorist who desires to enounce an authentic statement. And so we turn to the eponymous phrase: *l'Odeur du Père*.

5.3 L'Odeur

5.3.1 Smells

The title of the book and arguably the central and unifying theme of this collection of essays is *L'Odeur du Père*. The first question to pose must of course be how we should understand the phrase. Although it is fairly obvious that the key concept is that of a smell, or the experience of a smell, it would be inaccurate to translate *odeur* as either 'smell' or 'odour' (the French *odeur* is a quite neutral term, without the unpleasant connotations of either of the English words).[171]

So if we cannot translate the phrase simply and directly, let us try to approach it in a more roundabout way. The concept of 'the father' connotes quite strongly a sense of authority. In the particular context of post-colonialism the most obvious interpretation of the word *Père* is that it indicates some manifestation of colonialism or colonial power in general, and more specifically, that it refers to a

particular colonial event, i.e. the Western colonization of African countries.[172]

Thus far then, the phrase *l'odeur du Père* would seem to denote a lingering, perceptible trace of this colonial presence. This interpretation is supported by the text:

> En somme, il nous faudrait nous défaire de 'l'odeur' d'un père abusif: l'odeur d'un ordre, d'une région essentielle, particulière à une culture. (p. 35)

> ce père qu'incarnait le colonisateur, mais aussi la puissance métropolitaine. (p. 143)

In the first quotation above 'un ordre' refers to a particular external system of constraints which operates upon Africa. So Mudimbé claims that something, namely a colonial power, has in the past invaded the African space[173] and that there remains a post-colonial presence which has considerable control over what happens in Africa today in the form of '[des] liens complexes qui […] arriment l'Afrique à l'Occident' (pp. 11-12). But why does Mudimbé choose an image evoking the faculty of smell to refer to this concept?[174] Why not *l'ombre du Père*, or *l'écho du Père*? In fact, this idea of the sense of smell is the most apt for teasing out the complexities of the relations characterizing post-colonial African thought, which are also, I shall argue, at the root of many of the problems we encountered in the preceding chapters.

The image of this presence consisting in an *odeur* suggests what some of its characteristics may be: first, it is a trace of something else, something more substantial which may no longer be present, that is, the *Père* himself. Secondly, smells are phenomena whose exact locations are often very difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint; even though we can sense them, we often cannot measure them accurately because smells are diffuse and pervasive.

The way in which smells relate us to the objective contents of the world forms a strong disanalogy with, say, visual stimuli. Generally speaking, if we *receive* visual stimuli, then we *see* the object from which the stimuli originate. Now, there are some smells which seem to refer to or to indicate their object: the smell of a rose, for example, which 'refers' to the flower from which it emanates (i.e. the smell and the rose are in a genitive relation, it is the smell *of* the rose) But there are other smells which seem to 'refer' only to themselves, such as a smell of gas. More importantly, there seems to be a certain rupture or distance between olefactory stimuli and their objects (or, alternatively, olefactory data are 'opaque' whereas visual data are 'transparent'): we do not claim to 'see' light-waves — we see objects by virtue of our *receiving* or *picking-up* light-waves — but surely we smell smells? Often a smell may linger on, without perceptible diminution, even when there is no other trace of its object in the vicinity.

Also, smells seem to be subject to a large degree of relativity: odours are often experienced differently by different people, simultaneously or over a period of time, and may even be different for the same person at different times. Now pleasant, now repellent, now strong, now faint; one can grow used to an unpleasant odour and after a while no longer notice it. Yet smells can be very powerful, and subtle, evoking memories of other experiences without appealing to the conscious intellect. For what is more unsettling, more alienating than a strange, lingering odour, perhaps not even any odour in particular, nothing we can trace to a precise origin or cause, but simply a sign of something that does not belong?

Finally, one of the corollaries of all these considerations — vagueness, relativity, subjectivity, derivative existence — is that there is room for

disagreement that there is any smell at all. And if the smell itself is vague, diffuse and relative to the perceiver, what about the object from which it emanates?

5.3.2 The Relation with Past Problems and Texts

Having discussed the implications of the phenomenology of smell experience, let us go on to apply these notions to the rather less abstract situation of African colonial experience. Recalling that the notion of the *odeur* is meant to indicate a trace of colonial presence, we may ask whether it is a trace that recreates (simulates) or only refers to the object, whether the experience refers objectively to what it represents, and how different perceivers understand and identify the *odeur*.

   Let us take some examples. First, Senghor's treatment of African art. A number of essays set out a quasi-philosophical exposition of what we might term 'the African aesthetic'.[175] Directly linking the particular forms of real, physical artifacts produced by Africans to an essential African psyche, Senghor intends to explain to the Western amateur of 'exotic' art all the glorious differences that define his culture.

   This might be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it may be said that Senghor sacrifices purity and soundness of method (by including objects and practices whose primary purposes may not be artistic) in order to expound what is basically ideology, and that in so doing he manoeuvres African artifacts into a rigid and perhaps ill-fitting definition of art. (Here we notice the parallel with Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy.) Therefore, the *odeur du Père* pervades Senghor's text insofar as the theses it expresses are complicit with colonial discourses and lack methodological rigour, and all for the sake of a politicized posturing.

On the other hand, it might be argued that what is actually underway is a subversion of the Western category of art, which (unsurprisingly) has been controlled mainly through Western theory and practice, and hence that Senghor is distorting the category in order to force it to take account of African realities. Diawara illustrates this possibility:

> With poets such as Senghor, we face a reverse exoticism: the 'barbarian' assumes the position of the writer and defamiliarizes the French language for French readers. Thus the newness of the writings: the négritude poems are 'authentic' and 'unmediated' because they represent the primitive's own subjectivity. (*Dangerous Liaisons*, p. 458)

Senghor is thus working from inside Western patterns of thought, but manipulating them into unstable and uncomfortable shapes in order to necessitate the recognition of another reality. This brings us back to the conclusion of Kobena Mercer's critique of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic work:

> The subaltern black social subject who was historically excluded from dominant regimes of representation […] is made visible within the codes and conventions of the dominant culture whose ethnocentrism is thereby exposed as a result. (*Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 200)

So, the fact that instances of African 'art' fit imperfectly within the category of art is only a sign that the concept itself must be expanded in order to take into account other forms of life.

Of course, there is also the counter-criticism that Senghor has 'pris simplement et fidèlement catégories, concepts, schèmes et systèmes occidentaux pour y couler des 'entités' africaines' (p. 43).[176] For example, it is not clear that all of the activities cited by Senghor as instances of African art really do serve that purpose in their 'proper', that is to say original environments. A term like 'art' inevitably carries with it a whole series of connotations that are particular to the societies which have elaborated it, which have lived it. Nevertheless, on this second

interpretation, we may say that the *odeur* certainly does not pervade Senghor's texts.

A second case: the work of the ethnologists, ethnophilosophers and Africanists. On the one hand, they may be accused of distorting concepts like 'philosophy' in their haste to prove that Africans, too, possess a capacity for and history of this kind of critical thinking. The consequences of this distortion include an impoverishment of the notion of philosophy (such that any system of thought or implicit cultural consciousness will do) and a manipulation of African data in order to maintain the thesis of alternative world-views. Here the *odeur* would once again consist in the subordination of African realities to the political needs of Western colonial societies. Marcien Towa goes further and identifies a rather insidious 'master-text' to the anthropological discourse:

> Les ethnophilosophes rétro-jettent dans la tradition africaine les dogmes chrétiens ou musulmans […] Il s'agit […] d'une stratégie pour mieux inculquer aux Africains le message évangélique. ('Conditions d'une affirmation … , p. 343)

Thus, Africans who take part are either duped by or implicated in the tradition which spawned the evangelizing mission.

On the other hand, we might agree with Owomoyela that the real aim of Africanist studies is to replace the emphasis on genuine African realities, and that:

> A true African philosophy would aim at reconciling Africans to Africaness [sic], not at advocating dissolution in a European cultural mélange. (*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 178)

Or take N'Daw, who argues that:

> La réflexion philosophique africaine … ne sera pas seulement restitution, ni répétition d'une tradition figée, mais création à partir d'un fondement authentique, … la tentative de donner un fondement conceptuel à la vision de la réalité propre aux peuples d'Afrique.[177]

Ethnology and ethnophilosophy would therefore be a means of realizing a truly African philosophy and ensuring the survival and the prosperity of the diverse particularity that Mudimbé, among others, cherishes. In this case, the *odeur* must be elsewhere.

As a third example let us take the work of writers such as Paulin Hountondji, who flatly disowns the tradition of ethnophilosophy, instead asserting that Africans should engage in the sort of analytical philosophy that characterizes the history of this discipline in the West. On the one hand, Hountondji represents himself as liberating African thought from the need to reconstruct itself in the form of a mythical past, an undertaking which limits African philosophy to a rather nostalgic archeological reconstruction of traditional modes of thought. On the other hand, some critics accuse him of trying to force modern African culture and thought into ill-fitting Western forms, and of denigrating the values of traditional African culture. Hence Marcien Towa's view that:

> Le courant de pensée représenté par P. Hountondji n'occulte pas la pensée africaine, il l'écarte ouvertement, au nom de la scientificité, comme non pertinente. […] Hountondji nous semble […] prisonnier du préjugé d'une Afrique primitive à mentalité purement mythique. ('Conditions d'une affirmation d'une pensée philosophique africaine moderne', pp. 344-5)

The *odeur* in this case inheres quite straightforwardly in the uncritical and ethnocentric acceptance of categories like 'philosophy', in the demand that African research follow the trends and developments of the Western academy, and in the envisioning of a single, Westernized, future for Africa.

With all these different interpretations it now becomes increasingly difficult to determine which is correct. Does it finally come down to anything other than a more or less arbitrary decision? Would such a decision be anything but an expression of one's own theoretical background and political convictions? Once

the idea of an *odeur* is accepted as common currency, it remains to be seen how much closer we are to a clear understanding of what it actually is, where it exists, and how it may be eradicated. To facilitate this, we shall return to Mudimbé's texts and then, in the following section, introduce a further device which will enable us to understand the source of this pervasive *odeur*.

5.3.3 Application to Mudimbé's Text

So, how does all this speculation help us to understand any better Mudimbé's text and the problems with which it is concerned? Let us draw a few comparisons. In the same way that a smell may linger long after the object from which it originates has disappeared, Mudimbé's phrase implies that even when the *Père*, i.e. colonial power, is no longer physically present in Africa his *odeur*, a trace of his presence, remains. So the fact that there exists an *odeur du Père* does not mean that he is still present, or even that he still exists.[178] At the same time there is clearly some remnant of his presence, but, insubstantial as this is, it may consist in many disparate elements, not all clearly discernible and liable to be located in a variety of spaces according to different observers.

Indeed, Mudimbé seems to go further, with the opening remark: 'L'Odeur du Père … on l'entendra comme on le voudra' (p. 11). The phrase is ambiguous, but it would appear to mean at least two things: first, that the *odeur* is multiple, i.e. the presence of the West may be perceived in various phenomena; secondly and more importantly, that its identity depends in a key way on its observers, and may at bottom be a matter of volition (hence *voudra*). Compare the following statement:

> le père à tuer ou à célébrer, lorsqu'il paraît, n'est plus le même au Sénégal,
> au Congo ou à Madagascar… (p. 143)

The remainder of the paragraph makes reference to the 'contexte social' of post-colonial countries, so we know that Mudimbé is merely claiming that there are differences in the social structures of such countries, and that these differences render the issue of neo-colonialism thoroughly heterogeneous — an important but not astounding observation.

On the other hand, the opening comment cited above would seem to locate one of the reasons for the multiplicity of the *odeur* in the actual will of the observer/perceiver. By implication, then, one would see the West where one wishes to see it? Thus, Hountondji sees it in ethnology and ethnophilosophy, which he sees as falsely African discourses, whilst ethnologists and Negritudinists, etc., see it in people like Hountondji, who are (said to be) producing non-African or even anti-African texts. But this would appear to render the concept of the *odeur* as subjective and ultimately vacuous as the *grammaire africaine* criticized by Barthes:

> Le vocabulaire officiel des affaires africaines est … purement axiomatique. C'est dire qu'il n'a aucune valeur de communication, mais seulement d'intimidation.[179]

> Il suffit de lire […] *authentique* […] pour flairer là le creux de la rhétorique. (p. 134)

Evidently this conclusion will not do: whether or not it is true that the *odeur* is no more substantial than a waft of air, it is clear that a large number of African writers, Mudimbé included, give credence to this notion or something like it. This fact alone necessitates our engaging with the issue.

So far, the analysis of the phrase *l'odeur du Père* has been rather speculative: we have not analyzed an argument, but rather tried to make explicit what may lie implicitly within the phrase, given a certain context. And there is no reason to think that all of the peculiarities of olefactory experiences are relevant to the

concept of *l'odeur du Père*. But there is further evidence within the text that points to the conclusion that what has been discussed above is indeed what Mudimbé is trying to say. (The remainder of this chapter and the following one work out the details of this correspondence.) Furthermore, it does provide us with a starting point from which we may hope to reach understanding of those key issues which were outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Those were: authenticity; Eurocentricity; colonialism and neo-colonialism; and the future of African philosophy.

The metaphor of the *odeur* is useful because it works in analogy with the notions of 'inauthenticity', colonial influence', 'Eurocentricity', etc. Indeed, we might propose these concepts as *partial* translations of Mudimbé's term. But the concept of the *odeur* takes us beyond the reach of the others and, though vague (or perhaps *because* it is vague), it encourages us to re-examine the context of our judgements. Of course, one of the most obvious differences between the concept of the *odeur* and the other concepts is that the former introduces the element of relativity: it is easy to think that authenticity, for instance, could be defined through the way a discourse *is* and not necessarily the way it *appears*, but an *odeur* obviously demands a 'phenomenology'.

Both Senghor and Hountondji seem to assume that African authenticity is a fairly clear-cut affair (for Senghor it is the embodiment of the African essence; Hountondji renders it sometimes as a fairly dry geographical criterion, sometimes as the commitment to create a dialogue between Africans). But Mudimbé encourages us to rethink these propositions, and instead to see authenticity as something far less tangible than we had imagined; multiple in nature and location, liable to metamorphose at any moment. Likewise, the concept of inauthenticity is

not limited to an oppositional role, and refers to a mode of experience more than a particular object.

In the next section it will be argued that the economy of this reasoning is best served by giving up the search for a substantial *odeur*.

5.4 *L'Odeur* and Beetles in Boxes: Towards a (Dis)solution of our Problems

5.4.1 Insubstantiality

> Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a 'beetle'. No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. — Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.[180]

In this famous passage from the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein is commenting on the practical impossibility of comparing one's own physical pain (i.e. the sensation, or experience) with someone else's. The illustration of the 'beetle in the box' shows that the pain itself cannot be treated as anything substantial: 'No one can "divide through" by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.' And he continues: '… if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of "object and designation" the object drops out of the consideration as irrelevant.' It is important to note that Wittgenstein is not claiming that there is no such thing as pain, nor is it immediately obvious that he is proposing to reduce privately experienced pain to public symptoms like bodily changes or behaviour. The claim so far consists in nothing more than the proposition that pain cannot be treated as a substantial object without leading to serious and telling difficulties.

Wittgenstein argues that to treat pains as objects that we can label, words here functioning as 'pointers', is to incur a suite of problems, deriving mainly from the

fact that pains just do not have the same properties as the things we usually think of as objects. So it is not that pains do not exist, but that we should not talk about them as if they were of the same category of things as the contents of one's pockets. It is not possible, except in metaphor, to turn out one's pains for all to see. To return to the image of the beetle in the box, there is nothing that could count as publicly opening all boxes — there is no way of accessing a deeper reality that will settle questions such as who carries the biggest, ugliest beetle.

It was argued above that no single answer to the problem of the *odeur du Père* finds satisfaction with all parties. To utilize the language of the beetle in the box, it is impossible to specify some final position which would count as having opened the box, and so definitively revealing the identity and nature of colonial presence (accessing the deeper reality). Moreover, when a writer claims to do just that, i.e. to reveal colonial influence, the very same move is seen by another as one more instance of the noxious *odeur*.

The conclusion to be drawn is analogous to Wittgenstein's: it is not that there is no such thing as a colonial trace, but the trace must not be treated as anything substantial. If we construe the grammar of this problem on the model of 'object and designation', the object drops out of the consideration as irrelevant (because it is possible that everyone is referring to something different, and even to many different things over time). Since it is clear that the 'object' — the Father's presence — is far from irrelevant, we must revise our grammar.

5.4.2 Beetles-in-Boxes and the *Odeur*

There may be several sorts of neo-colonial presence existing in Africa today, all capable of having a direct influence on African lives and thinking. One sort is fairly easy to spot: for example, the disproportionate strength of European

languages with respect to indigenous ones, while the prospect of a less alien *lingua franca* occupies a still-distant and possibly utopian horizon. There are also the Eur-American economic and cultural invasions which are facilitated by the multiple networks of trade, finance and basic monetary aid which strongly link modern-day Africa to the West.[181]

But the manifestation of neo-colonial presence which is especially relevant to the problems encountered in any enquiry into the nature of African philosophy is more insidious and subject to argument over exactly what it is and where it lies. The notion of *odeur* with which we have been working would seem to indicate an indistinct and hard to define, though generally perceived, phenomenon. No-one can, to everyone else's satisfaction, describe the nature or workings of this *odeur*; it is a trace of something undesirable, and that is all that can be said for sure. This is why it is unhelpful to treat the *odeur* as something substantial, something that can be clearly and neatly defined in order to facilitate a complete excision, once and for all.[182] For if the location and modes of Western influence in Africa were as easy to determine as, say, networks of stocks and shares, then we should be able to cite clear and uncontroversial instances of such influence. But we have already seen that charges of African inauthenticity abound on all sides, and are largely based on identical criteria, so a definitive and impartial account is not to be hoped for.

It is also worth noting that it tends to be at the level of ideas that concepts like the *odeur* come into play. Following the demise of actual physical colonization (which may be seen as the most conspicuous, though not the unique, phase of colonialism) and with the advent of independent African states, African writers seem to be preoccupied with the question of how one's ideas may be infiltrated

and manoeuvred by colonial influences. This sort of anxiety is truly epidemic insofar as any theory which, in the search for an African 'identity', makes use of a concept like 'authenticity', must by its nature repose, implicitly or explicitly, on an assumption that there can be such a thing as 'inauthenticity'. Such a theory insinuates, implies, or denounces outright the effects of neocolonial influence as inauthenticity. Dualisms like this are inevitable so long as concepts like 'authenticity' function in binary opposition with concepts like 'colonial influence'.

Initially there are at least two problems raised by this sort of opposition. First: by claiming, or even proving, that an African text is undeniably linked to and dependent on Western texts nothing immediately follows as to the degree of veracity or utility of that text. Indeed, when a discipline or practice is foreign to a culture (which, according to Hountondji, is true of philosophy in African contexts) any contribution to the discipline is likely to take a fundamentally derivative form.

Nor is it clear why the simple presence of Western ideas in a text should necessarily be harmful. Senghor often made much of the argument that it was through assimilating and advancing the culture, civilization and intellectual prowess of the classical Greeks and Romans that Europe became great. Indeed, a large proportion of Western literary and philosophical works are only meaningful in relation to the life, practices and heritage of the ancient world, and it is well-known that the Greeks themselves imported and adapted elements from African, Palestinian and Babylonian cultures, among others.[183] So it is not immediately clear what should be so objectionable about an African text containing 'exogenous' material.

Senghor willingly admits not only that Europeans are technologically and academically superior to Africans, but also that they provide the latter with a vital link to their past. After all, it was through anthropological and ethnological work initiated and developed by Europeans that so much was learnt about African culture which would otherwise have been ignored or forgotten. One might even go further and say that without the timely introduction of cultural relativist theses into Western discourses, the well-entrenched prejudices of colonial ideology would have continued to obstruct the paths to African emancipation. Talking of the generation of (European) Africanists responsible for these developments, Senghor puts it thus: 'ceux-ci furent nos ancêtres, qui nous sauvèrent du désespoir en nous révélant nos propres richesses.'[184]

It may be said that even Hountondji agrees with the assimilationist trajectory of Senghor's ideas:

> Ce n'est pas en contournant et encore moins en ignorant l'héritage philosophique international que nous philosopherons vraiment, c'est au contraire en l'assimilant pour mieux le dépasser. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 82)[185]

So although terms like 'Western influence' and '(neo-)colonial influence' are often used interchangeably, and although the presence of one or the other is often taken as proof of inauthenticity, there are further questions as to whether, even if these terms are legitimate synonyms, we are yet in a position to say something interesting about the truth or usefulness of authentic African discourses as such.[186]

5.4.3 The Desire for Truth and the *Ruse*

As we noted above, what is viewed by one author as the unmasking of colonial presence is often reconstrued by another as merely an additional instance of colonial influence. Is it possible to explain this apparent contradiction by

interpreting the desire to locate the *odeur*, to give a final definitive account of its existence and modalities, as a desire to impose one's own perspective? If such is the case, then what is at issue is not the truth of the matter, but a series of competing interests: it is in effect a very politically-interested manoeuvring which is represented as an attempt to preserve what is truly African.

For example, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu makes the, by now familiar, distinction between 'those who see African philosophy as coterminous with philosophical investigations having a special relevance to Africa and those of a "universalist" outlook' (*Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 149). He goes on to argue that

> the contemporary African philosophers who look askance at the 'universalist' predilections of the last-named group tend to regard philosophical work as not having special links with Africa […] as a dabbling in foreign philosophy, quite forgetting that the same work can, for reasons of history, come to belong to two traditions at once. (ibid.)

Yet it may be more reasonable to suppose that it is not just the positive contents of the professional philosophers' discourse which causes Africanists and ethnophilosophers such consternation, but instead the worryingly aggressive subtexts which underlie, in the form of prescription and proscription.

By way of illustration, take this remark that Wiredu makes shortly afterwards: 'any unexamined use of a foreign language in philosophical work is a mark of the colonial mentality' (p. 153). I do not wish to assign this phrase more attention than it deserves, but it may help to enumerate the more obvious and serious of the numerous errors that lead Wiredu to make what may rightly be seen as a highly contestable statement. First, Wiredu leaves totally unexamined the notion of foreignness: he fails to consider whether this property is categorical or permits of degrees, and whether it is relative to one's place birth, parentage, nationality,

place of education, etc. He also ignores the fact of the convergence and intermingling of cultures, instead assuming that cultural resistance is the only justifiable norm. So there is no space devoted to discussion of what makes a language foreign. Is it when it is not one's first language, or when it is not the language of one's ancestors? Chinua Achebe also wonders what answers to give to these simple questions:

> But what is a *non-African* language? English and French certainly. But what about Arabic? What about Swahili even? Is it then a question of how long the language has been present on African soil? If so, how many years should constitute *effective occupation*? For me it is a pragmatic matter. A language spoken by Africans on African soil, a language in which Africans write, justifies itself. (*Morning Yet on Creation Day*, p. 83)[187]

Mudimbé, too, doubts the security that indigenous languages are assumed to provide:

> s'il est utile, il n'est toutefois pas essentiel de savoir en quelle langue se fera le véritable discours culturel africain, car même une langue nationale peut fort bien être un véhicule et un instrument de l'aliénation … (p. 96)

But Wiredu does not question the mode and sense of the division between African and non-African, instead assuming that separating African from Western, authentic from derivative, independent from colonial, is as mechanical a process as sifting the wheat from the chaff.[188] He is silent about the link between the 'foreignness' of a language and the 'colonialness' of the mentality that uses it; meanwhile, the pejorative tone of the term 'mentality' is far from tacit (and is reminiscent of Lévy-Bruhl's concept of 'prelogical mentality').[189]

So what is being suggested is that the attempt to prefigure the essence of neo-colonialism may itself be seen as a manifestation of colonial thought, because the desire to locate and control the *odeur* stems from the anxiety to have definitive and foundational knowledge of Africa, and this is a characteristic element which recurs throughout the development of Western Africanist discourses. The desire

to be able to 'say' the Other (i.e. to give a definitive, objective reduction) has not disappeared but simply changed form, and the determination to describe the locus of Africa's post-colonial malaise in fact proceeds from and presupposes the previous colonial desire to know the African essence. The fact that today it is often Africans who make use of this type of critique is, as always, both a superficial encouragment and a cause for deeper concern.

Thus, the compulsion to isolate and eradicate neo-colonial presence is itself a symptom of colonial thought — the *odeur* folds in on itself. One may view the history of Africanist discourse as a series of developments in Western thought that began with the desire to have knowledge of essential African types; now, in a moment of reflexive critique, it progresses to the desire to have knowledge of colonial presence.

There is another way in which the attempt to delimit neo-colonial presence is itself part of the problem of neo-colonialism, and this is more complicated, consisting in the possibility that the West has already theorized its own undoing. That certain modern writers in the West have attempted to re-evaluate Western culture and to locate and eliminate the prejudices which infect Western discourse is certainly a good thing. But the purported end of this enterprise, a completely non-ethnocentric discourse, is not merely utopian but clearly inherently contradictory, as it is impossible to speak from a culturally neutral position (cf. *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 22). Furthermore, to conceive of Westerners creating a non-Western discourse is to assume the same sort of discursive essentialism that has plagued discussions on African philosophy.

In analogy with the tendency to delineate racial categories along a colourless/coloured (i.e. white/non-white) cleavage, in the case of these self-

critical discourses abstraction is again mistaken for neutrality, and what results is merely a 'critique interne' and not a 'mise en perspective'.[190] The best that can be achieved is to purge some of the excesses and arrive at a more rational view of the world; as Mudimbé writes:

> que l'on ait pu, au sujet du structuralisme, parler d'une 'désoccidentalisation du savoir scientifique' pour contrer notamment la générosité de certains concepts, tel celui de 'pensée sauvage', est un signe (p. 84).

But through trying to 'de-westernize' a discourse, at worst we may find ourselves once again parading a single culture's particularities under the banners of universal truth and humanity in the abstract.[191]

In the following section we shall recall what might be termed the political aims of Mudimbé's discourse, particularly the notion of the distance or rupture which he believes Africans must bring into effect in order to avoid just this sort of eurocentrism.

5.5 *La Ruse du Père*

5.5.1 Thinking Away from the West

In the foreword to *L'Odeur du Père* it is stated that one of the principal activities of Mudimbé's text is the juxtaposition of 'questions susceptibles d'éclairer les liens complexes qui … arriment l'Afrique à l'Occident' (p. 11). He adds 'dans une certaine mesure, [les textes réunis ici] expriment mes propres contradictions d'universitaire africain' (p. 14). Some of these contradictions have already been mentioned: Willame regards the author as

> surtout un représentant de cette minorité intellectuelle qui […] ressent avec acuité l'aliénation néocoloniale … [et qui] a été formée par des maîtres admirables, certes, mais qui appartient [au] royaume européen … ('L'Autre face du royaume ou le meurtre du père', p. 90)

The status of 'universitaire africain' is fraught with tension, for 'une analyse même distraite des universités africaines montrerait que, malgré des aménagements parfois importants, ces universités sont calquées sur des 'universités-mères' occidentales'.[192] Furthermore, despite the apparent 'africanization' or 'deoccidentalization' of African universities: processes consisting in a restructuring of syllabi, the 'creolization' of disciplines (e.g. ethnophilosophy, Africanist studies, etc.), the revision of entry requirements, and the re-management of quotas, it is still unclear whether the final product is anything more than 'une simple enclave d'influence culturelle occidentale composée d'Européens à peau noire, que la société environnante mépriserait comme des intrus'.[193] This must give us pause, recalling the modesty of Hountondji's initial criteria for authentic African philosophy — texts written by Africans and qualified by their authors as 'philosophical'. According to Hountondji, the simple criterion of nationality guarantees the Africanness of their texts; but Mudimbé invites us to consider the limitations of the criterion of nationality, by emphasizing the fact that the official forms of education and research in Africa are radically alien to anything that might be termed 'African culture'.[194]

The interference of particularist or universalist ideologies in this context is a complete red herring. For Mudimbé, the future for African scholars, if they are to be truly authentic (αυθεντησ, i.e. 'one who acts independently'), cannot consist in a pure and simple commitment to neutral scientific abstraction ('dilution dans l'universel'), any more than in an essentialist immersion in all things African ('ségrégation murée dans le particulier'). Besides, as we have seen, so many of the essentialisms which have attracted our attention have not even been proper to

African cultures, and what is said to be neutral and universal is often 'un ordre, …
une région essentielle, particulière à une culture, mais qui se donne et se vit
paradoxalement comme fondamentale à toute l'humanité' (p. 35). Instead,
Mudimbé sees the problem to be far less straightforward, far more anguished than
do his counterparts. For example, he rejects the too-easy targetting of
predecessors like Senghor and Kagamé:

> Les critiques adressées à ces initiateurs de nos sciences sociales et humaines
> africaines sont généralement ou mal émises ou mal fondées: elles élident
> trop facilement une question majeure, celle du sens de l'écart à prendre à
> l'égard de l'Occident et ce qu'il en coûte vraiment d'assumer cet écart. (p.
> 44)

   Here is the crux of the matter. The central questions which arise for anyone
writing in post-colonial African studies are to what extent, in what manner and for
what reasons Africa should dissociate itself from the West. The following section
considers three of the answers that are conventionally proposed.

5.5.2 Association, Assimilation, Revolt

One possible response available to the African in the grip of Western domination
is to attempt some sort of reconciliation with that order, and this is possible at
several levels. For example, Diawara represents Senghor as recommending that
Africans assimilate those cultures which have dominated them because 'to
become uncolonizable, Africans must first assimilate that which would enable
them to be as educated as their colonizers' (*Dangerous Liaisons*, p. 460). Indeed,
Senghor goes further than this and actually posits assimilation as the road to
freedom:

> la colonisation, économie dirigée, a pour seul but d'enrichir le Colonisateur.
> On comprend, dès lors, que l'assimilation, qui implique une certaine
> émancipation intellectuelle et politique, apparaisse comme la grande
> ennemie. (*Liberté 1*, p. 44)

He emphasizes that this possibility of independence requires not only technological but, vitally, linguistic prowess, in order to grant Africans 'les qualités les plus essentiellement françaises — clarté, ordre, harmonie'. Once again, the models are taken from within the dominant culture, for French writers are not only 'des maîtres à penser', but also 'des maîtres à écrire'(ibid., p. 65).[195]

Mastery of the colonial culture's scientific techniques can also bring Africans to self-knowledge and thus provide them with an authentic basis:

> Les professeurs d'Ethnologie compléteraient ainsi l'expérience personnelle qu'a chaque élève de l'Afrique en l'éclairant à la lumière d'autres expériences. (p. 66)

In this sense Hountondji seems also to propose something which follows, or maps onto, the lines of cultural assimilation:

> l'appropriation méthodique de l'héritage philosophique international … est la condition absolue de toute réappropriation de notre passé philosophique, de toute reconstitution de notre histoire théorique. (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 136)

Of course, Hountondji and Africa's other 'professional philosophers' (Towa, Wiredu and Bodunrin, among others) regard this as the appropriation of a universal and culturally neutral discourse. [196]

By contrast, Hountondji calls ethnophilosophy 'une prise en charge massive, par les Africains eux-mêmes, d'un discours sur l'Afrique initialement produit en Europe, […] une extraversion artificielle, réplique scientifique de l'extraversion de nos économies dominées. ('Occidentalisme, élitisme: réponse à deux critiques', p. 63). And yet, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o argues persuasively that:

> All societies develop under conditions of external contact with other societies at the economic, political and cultural levels. Under 'normal' circumstances, a given society is able to absorb whatever it borrows from other contacts, digest it and make it its own. But under conditions of external domination, conquest for instance, the changes are not as a result of the working out of conflicts and tensions within, and do not arise out of the

organic development of that society, but are forced upon it externally.
(*Moving the Centre*, p. xv-xvi)

In which case it would appear that any sort of development in Africa, and *a fortiori* any assimilation of disciplines developed in the West (even those of a 'universal' nature) is inevitably born of external constraint. So one might wonder why Hountondji believes that his own methodology guards against this danger. For without thoroughgoing political, economic and cultural emancipation, any decision can be seen as inauthentic and any protest is immediately open to recuperation by colonial logic.[197]

Another possible response is to strive for *association*, which entails the free interaction of independent states. Given the demise of actual physical colonization it would appear likely that such a mode of engagement would prevail and that it should be the most desirable state of affairs since 'les indépendances politiques semblent être le garant de l'affirmation de la différence …' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 95).

But Mudimbé questions the reality of this 'prise de pouvoir et de parole', likening the place of African cultures in the European perspective to that of folklore, a relic and remnant of the past, a scientific and cultural curiosity. He continues

il en sera malheureusement ainsi tant que la culture africaine sera comprise
et définie en référence au passé de l'Afrique, à la tradition africaine. (p. 96)

The third way that is often put forward is to organize a revolt against the order which maintains Western hegemony, what Serequeberhan terms 'emancipatory counter-violence' (*The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, p. 10).[198] According to Memmi, the path of violence is 'la seule issue à la situation coloniale, qui ne soit pas un trompe-l'oeil' (*Portrait du colonisé*, p. 143). The danger here is that

the new authority will simply take the place of the one that has been deposed, resulting in the same old problems with new faces. At best, it may be hoped that the new power will redefine itself in light of the flaws of the former one.

But a simple revolt does not free Africans from the logic of Western discourse, and in the mythology of this latter it is the Oedipal son who, through deposing his father, inherits his mantle. Hence the Sophoclean epigraph with which *L'Odeur du Père* opens: 'La génération qui monte n'en délivre point la race' — the line of descent is continued and inevitably leads 'dans la folie des mots et en une frénésie vengeresse'.[199]

Whichever way to independence is chosen, whether that of assimilation, association or revolt, the key problem is that one's action is always limited to and lived essentially as a reaction. The colonial factor is in each case the archetype which determines how the colonized, or the formerly colonized, will live; it functions as the decisive point in African history, the measure of authenticity, and reconstructs the West as the standard. Memmi writes that, 'en pleine révolte, le colonisé continue à penser, sentir et vivre contre et donc par rapport au colonisateur et à la colonisation' (p. 153).

It is for this reason that Mudimbé believes that it is only by foregoing or rejecting the Western heritage that Africans can ever find their own voice. In the words of Jean-Claude Willame:

> il doit faire face à une tentative qui est toujours étrangère et d'autant plus 'subversive' qu'elle se présente comme à contre-courant de la science occidentale établie. […] le critère de la scientificité ici importe peu; [...] cette prise de position, ce témoignage lui apparaît indispensable pour mettre un terme à l'aliénation coloniale et néo-coloniale. (p. 93)

In the following sections we shall move on to consider the possible form of this attempt.

5.5.3 Christianity and Science — *L'Écart*

In *L'Odeur du Père*, Mudimbé reopens the debate on Christianity in Africa (chapter 4, part I). Apart from further criticism of the role and significance of the Christian missionary in Africa, towards the end of the chapter we find a very interesting section which appears to resolve in a rather dramatic and conclusive way the old dilemma which asks: what is it to be, a Christianized Africa, or an Africanized Christianity? We shall lay out the lines of this argument and, by proposing a substitution of the principal terms, see where it takes us.[200]

   Mudimbé's argument starts from the premise of 'true faith' as a universal. He continues: if we accept that Christianity and true faith are not associated by any necessity, but instead by historical contingency, and further admit that, in its themes as in its historical development, the evolution of Christianity does not necessarily coincide with the axioms of faith, then why should Africans bother to burden themselves with the baggage of *Western* Christianity? Indeed, in order to formulate the basic principles of the Word, they need do no more than go straight to the earliest Apocryphal texts and sources. Simultaneously, by looking at African traditions in a new way they could open up 'des étendues différentes dans lesquelles la vérité de Dieu pourrait être … l'explosion de Jésus-Christ' (p. 69). This would give the Gospels a new visibility, an independence and an autonomy from Church commentaries, but equally from the strategic directives issued by the Roman Catholic Church. It would also give space to appreciate the 'états ininterrompus de la maturité réligieuse des peuples africains qui témoigne, en des dérivations archéologiques propres et originales, d'un Dieu unique et universel' (ibid.). Given this position, sooner or later we would find ourselves asking why Africans should need the relay or mediation of Christianity at all, if the God of

African religions is the True, Unique, Universal, Creator of Heaven and Earth, Master of Life, Death and the Universe. On the other hand, we may refuse to countenance the dissociation of Christianity, as it has developed historically, and the true faith; it may be argued that the two are a dialectical unity, whose cultural sign resides in their complementary role in the exercise of discursive teachings embodied by the Western tradition. We may admit their theoretical separation uniquely for the purposes of conceptual analysis, sometimes in order to account for the one or the other, or to determine the modes which ensure their coherence or govern their enunciation, or in order to understand their practical applications in a given field, or the regularity of correspondences with other orders or types of explanation, other modes of thought, schemes of action, etc.

In this case, the africanization of Christianity is nonsense, unless it is conceived in the manner of a rational prescription, an opportunist adaptation. Commercial objects such as cars, radio or television sets, medical packaging and so on, can be africanized in this way, with a view to maintain their financial viability:

> on conditionne ainsi certaines de leurs structures afin de rendre ces objets 'adaptés' au climat et à l'ambiance des Tropiques, mais on ne les modifie point fondamentalement.

So the dilemma is posed thus: either we accept a thoroughly africanized faith, which need not recognize even the core of Christianity, or we follow Towa, for whom the efforts to africanize Christianity are merely 'cosmetic' attempts to clear the evangelical path of culturally specific obstacles ('Conditions d'une affirmation …', p. 343). Either way, the result is that 'le missionnaire … n'a strictement rien à dire au païen' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 71). This, then, may be taken as an instance of a post-colonial situation which requires some sort of

rupture, for a dehistorized Christianity loses its core strength, and an 'africanized' Christianity is denounced as a cynical ploy for power.

Further on, Mudimbé notes that 'l'Occident cultivait une autre Foi, celle justement qui est transmise et inculquée par l'éducation: la Foi en la Science, la Scientificité, la Raison …' (p. 79). Suppose we re-run the above argument with Western scientific tradition in the place of Christianity, and the true or ideal scientific discourse in the place of religious faith?

On the one hand, we may believe that Western scientific traditions and the ideals of a true, universal scientific discourse are not linked necessarily, but only (if at all) by historical contingency. Furthermore, the developments of the former do not necessarily coincide with the demands of the latter, so why should Africans be bound to follow the same route as Western researchers? Indeed, they do not need to rely on the systematized, hierarchicized interpretations of Western science, but can go straight to (1) the field of data and (2) disciplinary foundations in order to elaborate sciences which reflect African cultures and traditions. This would give Africans a freedom from the influence of particular Western theses, but also from the successive tides of theoretical 'revolutions' that at present inundate them. It would also give space to appreciate the rationality of African modes of knowledge, given the facts of African environments. Sooner or later it would be possible to dismantle African reliance on the prophets and preachings of Western science.

On the other hand, we may refuse to countenance the dissociation of Western techniques from the true scientific discourse, seeing the history of Western scientific tradition as a story of the ever-closer approximation of the truth. We may admit that they are separable only in concept, but that the West is ultimately

the cradle of Science and responsible for its elaboration. In this case africanizing the sciences is a nonsense, except in terms of ergonomics — the sciences are 'conditioned' in order to be innocuous or even favourable in a particular climate, but their essences are fundamentally unchanged.

Conceived in this way, not only is an africanization of the sciences a debased and debasing excercise in mercantilism, but also something of a mystification. For as far as the natural sciences are concerned, we may agree with Memmi that 'il n'y a que deux manières de couler le béton, la bonne et la mauvaise' (p. 163). (Although, of course, the ways of scientific development, the reasons for favouring one direction rather than another and the rules and givens governing the domain of natural science are still likely be culture-specific.)

In the case of the humanities and social sciences, however, the same cannot be said, not least because of the ever-questionable scientificity of these modes of discourse.

> les sciences humaines et sociales, à l'exemple des idéologies, ne disent pas 'un même' inoffensif dans ses variables expressions, qui serait fidèle à lui-même — à l'instar de celui des systèmes logiques. (p. 14)

This leads to just the sort of situation that Mudimbé describes in *L'Autre Face du Royaume* (1974), when, using the metaphor of the *ascenseur*, he laments that in post-colonial Africa the progress of African theorists is always relative to, and in a strong sense dependent on, the major currents of Western discourses. It is as if the African were perpetually enclosed in a lift whose movement and function are controlled by Western *savants*. Intermittently, the doors open and close, people enter and exit the lift, and the eternal inhabitant snatches glimpses of the world beyond. But all the theories that s/he is able to construct must be relative to the information s/he is *given* from outside:

> Coupé de la réalité concrète qui devrait nourrir et vivifier sa pensée, l'exercice de sa liberté se limite ainsi au développement soit d'un discours pour ou contre les modèles conçus hors de son champ d'observation, soit d'une parole narcissique tournant et retournant ses rêves pour les intégrer au monde clos et dérisoire de sa cabine. (*L'Autre Face du Royaume*, p. 102-3)

Perhaps the most discouraging irony of all is that even 'la démystification des sciences coloniales en Afrique n'est pas l'oeuvre des Africains eux-mêmes'.[201]

If we credit this metaphor of the *ascenseur*, then we also follow Mudimbé in thinking that true science is not possible in such circumstances: it is actually further from the spirit of science as a system of independent and unbiased investigation for the African theorist to remain in her/his present situation of subordination to Western scientific practice.[202] And Mudimbé takes this line of thought right to the very limit:

> il nous faudrait […] par rapport à cette culture, afin de nous accomplir, nous mettre en état d'excommunication majeure, prendre la parole et produire 'différemment'. (p. 35)

What may be the reasons for the extremity of this position? I suggest that the first is the dissatisfaction inherent in being delivered from the clutches of Western colonial thought by a new revolution of Western thought. The genesis and manifestations of this dissatisfaction have already been described by Fanon, who, referring to the abolition of slavery, says:

> Le bouleversement a atteint le Noir de l'extérieur. Le Noir a été agi. […] L'ancien esclave exige qu'on lui conteste son humanité, il souhaite une lutte, une bagarre. Mais trop tard. (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, pp. 178-9)

Mudimbé regards the sort of cultural relativism that Lévi-Strauss deploys as 'la continuation infidèle peut-être mais réelle, de l'ancienne pratique coloniale' (*L'Autre Face du Royaume*, p. 119). The continuation is 'infidèle' in that it negates or reverses the content of colonial thought; but it is nevertheless a continuation because it carries the same form, i.e. an external discourse about

Africa, and occupies the same space — that of an all-seeing, all-knowing, all-saying science — within the same scientific tradition.

The second reason for Mudimbé's call for an 'excommunication majeure' is that, by ascribing to this new revolution of Western thought, Africans surrender the sovereignty of their own thought and are thus open to the risk of a new attack on their rationality at the hands of 'l'ethnologie qui peut, au gré des idéologies ambiantes en Occident, privilégier tour à tour ou simultanément la thèse du relativisme culturel ou son contraire' (ibid., p. 99).

Thirdly, the material problems faced by Africans are left unresolved: a Western capitulation to cultural relativism or acknowledgement of local nationalisms (whatever the reasons, noble or otherwise) allows us to exchange one list of names and propositions for another — nothing need change 'in the field', for the changes are brought about in the academic intellect. As Memmi writes, 'le fait colonial n'est pas une pure idée. […] Il n'est pas si facile de s'évader, par l'esprit, d'une situation concrète, d'en refuser l'idéologie tout en continuant à en vivre les relations objectives' (*Portrait du colonisé*, pp. 47-8).

But a true emancipation of African thought will work through material conditions first, largely because we just cannot anticipate the true needs of an emancipated society *before* it has truly been emancipated. And this is a truth about Africans as much as anyone else: as we noted at the end of chapter 4, there is a sense in which none of us can know what is best for herself. As Marcuse notes: 'individuals raised to be integrated into the antagonistic labor process cannot be judges of their own happiness. They have been prevented from knowing their true interest'.[203]

5.5.4 The *Ruse*

So in order to escape neo-colonial discourse and not merely to effect a reversal or negation (which is always contingent), Africans must assume a rupture or 'écart'. The rupture that Mudimbé wants to effect is supposed to take the radical form of an *excommunication majeure*, though the details of this possibile emancipation are not particularly clear in the text.

One of the more obvious elements to Mudimbé's strategy consists in the fact that he wants to address the post-colonial problem, but as far as possible without using Western discursive tools. For there is a problem implicated in the attempt to escape the permanence of the West in African thought. This is one of the manifestations of the *ruse*:

> Pour l'Afrique, échapper réellement à l'Occident suppose d'apprécier exactement ce qu'il en coûte de se détacher de lui; cela suppose de savoir jusqu'où l'Occident, insidieusement peut-être, s'est approché de nous; cela suppose de savoir, dans ce qui nous permet de penser contre l'Occident, ce qui est encore occidental; et de mesurer en quoi notre recours contre lui est encore peut-être une ruse qu'il nous oppose et au terme de laquelle il nous attend, immobile et ailleurs. (p. 13)

It is claimed that the totalizing power of Western thought is such that any critical response is always already anticipated: every revolution merely serves to further entrench, validate and justify its logic. The discourses which may permit Africans to take stock of their position, and try to open up a new space in which to operate, originate within and re-assert the power of Western culture:

> C'est que situés dans l'espace critique d'un champ épistémologique, même apparemment érigés en contre-discours … ils sont sous le signe d'une totalité, d'un ordre de discours qu'ils reflètent et débordent à la fois. (p. 45)

Hence the need for an 'écart', but all the while guarding against the possibility that the paths of African revolution may already be inscribed within the Western canon, and that an apparent autonomy can in fact constitute a veritable return to

the Father's fold. The conditions of possibility which permit and facilitate our discourse also recur within it: thus Africans who are educated by the West, or who make use of Western critical materials, may find themselves duplicating Western thought. Diawara writes that:

> Because Western man has been creating and re-creating his positivity through discourse, a problem concerning traps and reversibilities arises whenever an African theorist uses the dominant canon to represent African realities. Paradoxically, then, African theorists who assume a violence towards the West run the risk of unwittingly reasserting the superiority of the Western notion of rationality if they lose themselves in a discourse derived from Western ethnocentric canons. (*Dangerous Liaisons*, p. 457)

Before we move on to examine this final problem in the next chapter, let us take stock of the situation, and in particular look at how we have addressed those key notions outlined at the beginning of this chapter, and what may be said about the relation between the concepts of universality and authenticity.

5.6 Conclusion

It was stated at the beginning of this chapter that any adequate treatment of this subject should deal with, and ideally provide some way of understanding, three main areas: the notion of *authenticity*, with reference to African philosophy, such that it can be determined who speaks authentically and who does not; the corresponding, contrasting notion of *Eurocentricity*: who is being Eurocentric and how; the enduring problems of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

We shall now consider how each of these areas has been addressed, and what conclusions may be drawn, however tentatively.

5.6.1 Authenticity & Eurocentricity

From what has gone before it appears that authenticity is as much a ghostly ideal as the *odeur* is an intangible bugbear. Through our readings and appositions of the

various texts considered, both of these themes appear to function in a multitude of senses and with a minimum of objectivity. Nevertheless, they are genuine reflections of people's experience and, as such, command our attention and a serious attempt to account for them.

Authenticity is a valuable concept; it enables us to utilize a therapeutic approach to the various forms of alienation which abound in African academic practice in general and African philosophy in particular (the latter involving an especially antagonistic relation between, on the one hand, the ideals and mandates of reason and, on the other, a continent which has been repeatedly and unforgettably theorized as purest un-reason). But authenticity is only valuable as something like a 'regulatory' concept, for as soon as we take it to be a real property, that may be absent from or present in a text and can somehow inhere in a discourse, then it becomes possible to criticize and stigmatize others simply because they are not in line with one's own criteria for authenticity. This is not to say that we should not criticize others by our own criteria (whose else would we use?), but that, in the case of this particular term, to do so is to commit a very dangerous error. For there is never any point in one's analysis at which it is correct to say that we have truly reached the source of the problem. There is no end point in the quest for (in)authenticity: even when we think we have found it, there is much to say about the fact that *we* think we have found it, and so on.

This is why authenticity must be conceived as belonging to a totally different order. If textual content can be seen as (in)authentic then we burden ourselves with something like a Senghorian essentialism; if it is the form of a discourse which is susceptible to be (in)authentic then we accept the elitist overtones of a Hountondji. I suggest that in order to operate with a thorough understanding and

proper use of the concept of authenticity we are required to take it as a something akin to a moral concept — something which stimulates and guides our act of writing; an end (τελοσ), but not an end point which submits to intellectual analysis. So authenticity consists neither in form nor content, but it is still an operative concept, for, as a regulatory ideal, it guides the practices which themselves construct form and content.

Without this approach, any use of the concept of authenticity entails problems of reversibilities which are far more than sleight of hand, and result in an interminable and fruitless game of opposites. It is a reflection of the real situation in Africa today where, following decolonization, it is no longer obvious who or what is the neo-colonizing force (if there be such a thing); it is no longer possible to state without equivocation and with confidence which ideologies support (neo-)colonial influences and which are forces for African emancipation. Indeed, we might even go so far as to say that, henceforth, there is no question of occupying a position that one terms postcolonial while also ruling out the possibility that this one's position does not derive from, or could not migrate to, the neocolonial. The situation is such that any position or discourse can be subverted. Not to recognize this betrays a lack of awareness of the realities of the post-colonial environment, but it is also a remnant of a very European mythology — that a discourse (e.g. the 'rational' discourse) can be truly, totally free. This seems to be the direction in which Mudimbé's thought takes us.

Thus, in a strange recovery of the term's etymology, authenticity comes to represent the condition and the sign of one's liberation. Mudimbé's 'retour constant sur ce que nous sommes' is not a guarantee of fidelity, truth or authenticity in themselves, but rather a commitment to transparency, an openness

to critique and discussion, and an awareness of the conditions of possibility which to a greater or lesser extent determine one's discourse, thus constituting an attempt to orient oneself along the trajectories of these ideals (i.e. fidelity, truth and authenticity).

5.6.2 (Neo)colonialism

Paradoxically, we cannot treat the *odeur* as a substantial object at the level of ideas, for this leads us to all the problems we have outlined; yet, on the other hand, it is the real objective facts of colonial situations that perpetuate the colonialist discourse whatever we may say.[204]

If the colonial period is posited as a period of inauthenticity or unreality then post-colonial Africans, in order to realize their authentic character, cannot express themselves in relation to colonialism, rather they must refer to pre-colonial Africanity in their search for history. But this history is one divorced from the present African 'psychisme' and can, in principle, serve as nothing but a mode of mystification and nostalgia.[205]

On the other hand, locating colonial presence is not really a matter of pinning down any *thing*, and critiques which try to identify particular instances are only obsessed with particular symptoms; it is a matter of a history. In fact, contrary to our preliminary assumptions, the *odeur* does not consist in a *presence*, insofar as the notion of a presence implies some kind of object (albeit an immaterial one).

If the *odeur* were truly a singular presence then it would be possible to demarcate its existence within African societies; it would then be possible to say what is truly African and what non-African (or, in this case, Western). But this too clearly involves a recurrence of the familiar theme of African/Western essences, a tangled web we tried so hard to think our way out of.

It is possible to reconceive this chapter and Mudimbé's work by asking in what ways African depends on the West, what consequences issue from these modes of dependence, and how Africans may act in face of, and ultimately against, this network of dependence. The final analytical chapter will address these questions.

Chapter 6: *Langages en folie*, *L'Ecart*, and The Invention of Africa

6.1 Introduction

This final analytical chapter will continue the work of the previous one, by deepening and refining our study of Mudimbé's texts, of which the most important element is the theme of the *écart*. Mudimbé hopes that Africans will detach their scientific theory and practice from the Western scientific heritage, in order to regain their independence and create an authentic context within which they will be able to redescribe their experience and reformulate their sciences in 'their own terms'. By explaining in greater detail Mudimbé's idea of the *écart*, we will also clarify his prescriptions for the future direction(s) of African humanities and social sciences, so it is to this end that the present chapter is oriented.

First of all, the following section deals with some of the elements that are conventionally associated with philosophy itself and we discuss whether these ideas yield a workable concept of the discipline.

Next, we look at the idea of *modernity* and its intrinsic Eurocentricity; we distinguish three senses of the term and ask whether any of these senses may be of use. An example of the term in use is taken from Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, and the subsequent critique demonstrates its complex and problematic nature. The conclusion reached in this sub-section, that the term 'modern' as it stands may not be useful for African theorists, is then applied to Hountondji's claim that African philosophy should be conceived as a form of (universal) philosophy under the management of Africans. The argument unfolds by looking specifically at the stipulation of literacy as a criterion for philosophy.

The fourth section deals with Mudimbé's radical diagnosis for Africa. With him, we ask what framework could support authentic African activity. Using a second reading of the notion of 'langages en folie' we examine Mudimbé's treatment of the subject of creativity.

In conclusion, the final section looks to the possible futures that may await African philosophy, and considers these latter in the light of the overall progress of this thesis.

6.2 Philosophy, Neutrality & Truth

In this section we shall take a further look at how the term 'philosophy' is used in general and specifically by the authors who address the issue of postcolonial African philosophy. In particular, we shall focus on themes such as neutrality, partiality, universality, and philosophical foundations.

6.2.1 Foundations

Philosophy, by its nature, is supposed to address that which is common across individuals and cultures, that which is universal to human existence. Hence, there are discourses like metaphysics to determine the basic units of existence, epistemology to understand what knowledge is and how we acquire it, ethics to separate right from wrong, logic to analyse the essence of argumentation … the list continues. Of course, when attempting to address human questions in a way that is universally valid it will probably occur to us that in fact we speak from a singular socio-historical perspective and that our discourse is, as it were, both particular and 'encultured' (cf. *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 22). Furthermore, as finite, imperfect beings, we are prone to error, bias, and the vagaries of the phenomenal world.

One sort of response to this anxiety, exemplified by foundationalist epistemologies such as we find in the Cartesian *Médiations*, is to abstract from all contingent factors, to bracket off the mundane and thus to raise one's thinking above the merely regional. Having done this, we can be confident that our knowledge is sure: a product of pure ratiocination starting from self-evident axioms and proceeding by strict logical argument.[206]

In the quest for ideal objectivity, a further important distinction may be made between the faculty of reason and the passions. In this case it is again a matter of sifting the particular from the universal, as Senghor remarks:

> Si Descartes écarte les *passions*, plus précisément s'il les veut vaincre ou diriger par 'des jugements fermes et déterminés touchant la connaissance du bien et du mal', c'est-à-dire par la *raison*, c'est qu'au fond, il les tient pour moins essentielles à la nature humaine. […] Car, tandis que les passions sont diverses chez les différents hommes, la raison est partout identique à elle-même. (*Liberté 1*, p. 41)[207]

In order to criticize a philosophical argument originating within a system like this, one may attack the logic, arguing that it is flawed, or does not accurately represent the full argument; or attack the premises, arguing that they are false, or unsuitable for/irrelevant to the argument; and one may also disagree about the equivalence of terms, perhaps suggesting that the author slides from one sense or definition to another.

There is another way to attack this style of argumentation, which is to take issue with the 'intuitive reasoning', the 'givens', or the 'self-evident' propositions upon which it is based. Such is the Nietzschean reply to Descartes' *cogito* when the former says 'notions such as "unmediated certainty", "absolute knowledge" or "thing in itself" contain a *contradictio in adjecto*'.[208] But if Nietzsche is right, and every proposition already includes a judgement, and a non-necessary judgement

at that, then how is it possible to start to philosophize in a way that is itself philosophical (i.e. independent of subjective judgement)?[209]

Let us approach the matter from a different angle. What is at issue is how to define the boundaries of philosophical problems in a philosophically justifiable way, and what we are faced with is the familiar problem of vicious regress. As the archetypal totalizing discourse, philosophy requires that our every step be philosophical: once sceptical arguments bring into doubt the value and security of our knowledge, everything becomes subject to questioning (especially our own questioning). But since we always bring into philosophical discourse pre-philosophical elements — intuitions, customs, prejudices, opinions, tastes, etc. — how can we ensure its purity? And how can we distinguish between an *a priori* foundation, which would guarantee at least one basic truth and provide a starting point, and a mere pre-philosophical prejudice?[210]

The classical response (if ever there was such a question in classical philosophy) is that philosophy is part of our nature, and it is usually positioned in counterbalance to some non-rational, sensuous, animal side. Therefore the rational discourse is an *expression* of something we all carry inside — an essence, a soul, or suchlike. Not only is reason a part of us, according to classical thought, it is also the best part of us: the element which escapes contingency and causation, the expression not only of our nature but of the divine nature, of truth itself.[211]

Yet the idea of philosophy to which we have become accustomed today is very different from the classical formulation; today it is considered to be a discipline or a discourse, something that people do or create. Ever since the doctrine of the substantial self was brought into terminal disrepute, it is no longer appropriate to conceive of philosophy as the exercise of a genuine universal faculty.[212]

Philosophy consists of a series of culturally and politically situated texts, and philosophers are obliged to come to terms with the fact that the former distinction between the necessary truths of reason and the philosophically articulated realm of empirical (contingent) truths is no longer easily defensible.[213] Thus the pre-theoretical foundation of philosophy are also inevitably pre-philosophical, and this is essentially problematic for the validity of philosophical discourse in the light of the methodological constraints it imposes upon itself.

Let us take the example of ethical dilemmas. Using a single philosophical method we may come to different conclusions depending on which facts we see (or choose to see?) as pertinent. Then the question arises as to how it is possible to decide which facts are pertinent. The discipline demands that we include or exclude them according to philosophical criteria and argument, but in order to argue for the value of a particular fact, in the absence of a self-evident proposition, it will of course be necessary to introduce other, supporting facts. At this point the vicious regress initiates as it becomes apparent that these new facts must be supported, in order to guarantee their pertinence. The problems multiply exponentially if we take into account that there may be more than one philosophical method that may be used to control these debates. Hence the repeated attempts to find rational (a priori or 'intuitively' self-evident) foundations.

Consider the case of lying. Deontological systems of ethics, such as Kant's, ascribe objective moral values to acts (or rather, in the Kantian system, to the agent's 'will' or motive), irrespective of circumstances. So according to Kant, the decision to lie is immoral regardless of what else might be going on around the moral agent. This particular system establishes a realism about moral virtues (i.e.

some things are just good and some just bad) and then, to construct moral directives, brackets off all irrelevant factors, like consequences.[214]

The typical contrast to deontological ethics is consequentialist ethics, of which the standard example is utilitarianism, and here we are granted the possibility of trade-offs, for in the utilitarian vista acts are morally good only insofar as they maximize some end which is good in itself, e.g. happiness. Thus the act of lying, *per se*, is neither good nor bad, for an act's morality depends on its consequences. Since moral value accrues only by convergence with the ultimate end, the description of an isolated act, including the motives for the act, does not allow us to arrive at a moral judgement: the *relevant* facts are those which pertain to the act's consequences.[215]

How may we arbitrate between these two competing theories, which both seem to respond to certain common moral convictions? Kant's system is inspired by Christian ethics; in a rather spiritual bent, it is the good will which is paramount, thus capturing an important factor of our moral thinking. Excuses like 'he meant well', 'it's the thought that counts', 'I didn't *mean* to do it', and so on, indicate just this sort of concern: that morality essentially devolves upon the motivations and intentions of the agent. There is a difference between premeditated and instantaneous actions, as there is a difference between intentional and unintentional actions. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, shows more secular, juridical concerns. Here the consequences of our actions are crucial, for sometimes at least ethics is about *praxis*, and getting the best result is the ultimate aim.

So the geneses of the two forms of thought are fundamentally different, and they each enshrine different, but co-existent, principles of our moral history and

conventions. More importantly, what are we to think when, faced with the inconclusivity of purely logical analysis, the only way of deciding between these different systems comes down to something like the extent to which the conclusions tally with our conventional thoughts about morality?[216] For it simply is not true that philosophical ethics is based solely on rational arbitration, or through consideration of features such as systemic consistency. When a philosopher starts from fairly uncontroversial premises, uses logical argument and arrives at outlandish and generally repugnant conclusions, the fact is that we do think that the philosopher still has some work to do in order to justify her/his position, and this will usually be done by some appeal to another of our deeply grounded moral convictions. Indeed, philosophical ethics seems to be largely inconsequential except insofar as it asserts conclusions that find ready sympathy within our current moral climate.[217]

There is also an equal and opposite problem: how do we justify our reactions before ethical commentaries which attempt to explain, describe and rationalize our everyday morality (i.e. the majority of philosophical ethical commentaries), as opposed to those which are revolutionary in scope and aim to change everything (e.g. Nietzschean 'super-ethics')? If convention usually forms our arbitrative base, then when it is brought into question there seems to be little left that should incline us to either a *yea* or a *nay*.

As we move further away from the conception of philosophy as an activity which originates in something in our nature or the nature around us (i.e. as we take leave of the notion of there being real, eternal and immutable philosophical foundations) it becomes more incumbent on us to accept that the historical circumstances which surround our discourse are unquestionably influential,

perhaps to a thoroughly irrational and philosophically indefensible degree. The pre-philosophical elements of our thinking justify, ratify and correct the ways we do philosophy, especially in branches like ethics, but the only way these elements could themselves be philosophically justifiable would be if they were somehow expressions of rationality itself, rather than mere historical contingencies (such as interests and desires) and arbitrary conventions (like morals and taboos).

As we saw in the previous chapter, for Mudimbé, this confrontation with historical contingency is ultimately a fruitful and necessary part of one's discourse. In the words of Tsenay Serequeberhan:

> the locus of philosophic reflection and activity is the concrete actuality and the phenomenal historicity of lived existence. (*The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, p. 6)

But the other side of the coin is not so bright. For once it is admitted that philosophy is not, and cannot be, self-supporting, we may begin to notice that the foundations of the discourse often lie in grounds that are far from neutral, disinterested objectivity. Thus, Michel Foucault writes:

> si le discours vrai n'est plus, en effet, depuis les Grecs, celui qui répond au désir ou celui qui exerce le pouvoir, dans la volonté de vérité, dans la volonté de le dire, ce discours vrai, qu'est-ce donc qui est en jeu, sinon le désir et le pouvoir?[218]

So the upshot of all this is that it is hard to see how philosophical discourse in general could have a genuine philosophical genesis, which should make us question the reality of another of the elements conventionally associated with philosophy: neutrality.

6.2.2 Neutrality

> Political 'neutrality' in philosophy, as in most other things, is at best a 'harmless' naiveté, and at worst a pernicious subterfuge for hidden agendas. (*The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, p. 4)

The above citation shows the polemical orientation of this subsection and the one that follows. What I want to argue is that philosophical discourses derive a large part of their credibility from a still-propagated, though discredited, image of neutrality. For example, Marcien Towa claims that it is philosophers' intellectual independence which enables them to approach the truth without ceding to the pull of opinion, prejudice or dogma because

> la philosophie est avant tout refus du principe d'autorité dans quelque domaine que ce soit et exigence de rationalité (*L'Idée d'une philosophie négro-africaine*, p. 11)

Towa's remark points to two finalities conventionally attributed to philosophy's thoroughgoing neutrality: freedom and truth. On this view, philosophy is a discipline or a methodical enquiry whose principal concern starts and ends with the search for an unmediated universal truth. This apocalyptic role has often led philosophy into opposition with religion, tradition and other 'non-rational' discourses, whose authority it does not recognize, and whose central tenets it brings into question. Neutrality thus appears as the criterion which secures philosophy's status as a free and true discourse: free, because it is not subject to opinion, training, or authority; true, because it is innocent of bias and its conclusions are eminently scientific.[219]

One of the first remarks we can make about this claim to neutrality, absence of bias and irrational influence, is that it is itself a political stance. Modern philosophy defines itself positively as an objective, truth-producing (or maybe truth-revealing) discourse; but *negatively*, it is defined by contrast with these 'non-rational' discourses. The negative definition is effectively a badge of authority: philosophy approaches the truth by virtue of its neutral, disinterested approach and the fact that an approach is truly philosophical is, to an extent, a

guarantee of its good faith. Moreover, the philosophical method has always been taken to be a more efficacious way of deducing the truth; Plato argued:

> For true opinions also, so long as they abide by us, are valuable goods: but they are not disposed to abide with us a long time; for they soon slip away out of our souls, and become fugitives. Hence they are of small value to a man, until he has fastened and bound them down, by deducing them rationally from their cause.[220]

Of course, Platonic rationality requires a focus on essentials, an abstraction from the haze of multiplicity which blurs one's perspective. Yet, as is in evidence from the arguments of the previous section, there is no zero point from which to start, and if neutrality entails complete abstraction from inessential conditions and contexts, we are stuck with the seemingly insoluble problem of (philosophically) separating the essential from the inessential (a problem usually avoided by reducing essence to a mere common denominator). If it is indeed true that 'reflection [i.e., philosophy] is the courage to make the truth of our own presuppositions and the realm of our own goals into the things that move deserve to be called in question', then the fact of the influence of our own cultural and personal specificities should not go unchallenged.[221]

But there is a further problem in the notion of neutrality, again tightly linked to the mechanism of abstracting from particular details. It is assumed that in order to be neutral, and hence to produce a fair and true discourse, it suffices to write descriptively and without value-judgements. Contrary to this prejudice, it is often through the apparent omission of judgement that one's influences and allegiances are most telling. What follows departs from the discussion of philosophy, but is intended to show how what appears to be entirely neutral, descriptive language can, through suppression or ignorance of a critical voice, disguise a highly

political basis, even unbeknownst to the author. An article in *El País*, May 2002, comments on Paul O'Neill's fact-finding visit to Africa:

> In September, O'Neill will publish his criteria for governing the so-called Millenium Fund, recently set up by Washington in order to allocate funds to those poor countries having a suitable administration.[222]

Even on a first reading, the neo-colonial trajectory of the Fund's policy is unmistakeable: it is not the first time that Western governments take more than a passing interest in the 'suitability' of Third World governments.[223] Mr. O'Neill describes the Millenium Fund project as 'an historic mission' and the commentator adds that it has purpose of 'saving Africa from the abyss'.[224] The abyss in question may be material ruin, widespread poverty and sickness, and social collapse — the author is not clear about this. Yet we may fairly assume that it is only those countries with a suitable administration which will deserve to be rescued from the abysmal catastrophe of post-colonial 'independence'.

But it is not these issues, themselves more than worthy of critique, to which I wish to draw attention, for the assumptions and prejudices at work at this level of the text are rather obvious. Instead, I wish to focus on a less conspicuous phrase towards the beginning of the article, where the author describes Africa as 'the poorest continent'.[225] Now this phrase is hardly controversial: for decades Western Europe has been inundated with images of sickness and starvation in Africa. There have been many high-profile popular events and charities which have highlighted the plight of African peoples: Band Aid, Live Aid, Red Nose Day, Oxfam, to name but a few. (Indeed, the images used, over-used and abused, were so powerful that in common language 'Ethiopia' and its cognates can now be used to make an instantly recognizable allusion to starvation, or as hyperbole for thinness.) More recently we have started to talk of the waves of epidemics, in

particular AIDS, which sweep the continent, and there has been growing unease throughout the wealthier European countries about the hordes of illegal African refugees which supposedly inundate Europe daily. So to say that Africa is the *poorest* continent does not seem to say very much, and certainly does not seem to constitute a bold and objectionable statement, indeed, it is hardly noticeable.

Confronted with the generosity of this massive understatement, the question I want to ask is simply this: if Africa is poor, in what terms is it poor? The abject material poverty of many Africans cannot be denied, the political corruption and atrocious human rights records of many African countries are denounced by a growing number of people, Africans and non-Africans alike, but is it these things that make this continent the poorest?

Let us approach from the opposite direction — what was it that ever made Africa, the poorest continent, worth colonizing? How is it that even today multinational companies like Shell find it worth their while to invest in the exploitation of this, the poorest continent? And as soon as the question is framed in these terms, it is immediately recalled that, contrary to appearances, Africa has great natural wealth (including gold, oil, diamonds, etc.) and great agricultural capacities (e.g. for growing coffee, tea, cotton, maize, etc.). Europe's natural landscapes having been decimated by the implacable onslaught of the Industrial Revolution, Western environmentalists now fear for the future of the vast expanses of tropical rainforest which adorn the 'Third World', yet which are increasingly considered to be *global* resources (how else could Westerners have the right to demand their preservation?) and under threat by the need of 'Third World' countries to industrialize. Then there is the substantial material and scientific wealth in terms of the quantity and variety of plant and animal life

which survives in Africa, the still considerable (though ever diminishing) ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of African peoples, the largely untapped resources of traditional medecine, and the unique archeological worth inherent in the continent that was the cradle of humankind.

Now, it may be countered that such a diatribe is hardly to the point: all the author of the article implies is that Africans are generally very poor. Granted. My contention is not that this is not true (though I am not sure it is), nor that it is evidence of anything like a 'colonizing mentality' on the part of *El País*'s writer. Instead, my argument is that there is something underhand going on here, on two levels, firstly through a sort of selective amnesia, and secondly in the way of a mythical cultural construction. The first, destructive, phase allows us to overwrite the hardly distant history of colonial exploitation, and so elide the very historical, economic, and human reasons for African poverty. Instead, the latter is portrayed as something normal, and Africa is reduced to a metaphor for destitution, corruption, sickness, and famine. Then comes the second, constructive, phase: once the argument has been sterilized of traces of (Western) culpability, the image of the West may safely be allowed to enter, this time as the rational benefactor who will disinterestedly diagnose the causes of, and try his very best to alleviate, the terrible suffering of his unfortunate neighbour.

The irony is not, I think, misplaced, and it does not imply that Africans have no responsibility for the state of their countries and peoples, but emphasizes that to maintain silence with respect to Western involvement is to renounce intellectual honesty and political transparency. On challenging the qualifier 'poorest' as a given, and returning it to its genuine, interpretative role, we are effectively reminding ourselves that Africa is in fact a part of the world that is rich in

resources. When we remember this, yet are still faced with images and testimonies of famine, pestilence and generally widespread poverty, the question naturally arises: why are Africans still so poor? And from this point we are led to question our own historical involvement with the continent.

So there are two elements to be retained from this part of the discussion, the first of which is summarized by Hountondji when he writes:

> Le tiers monde n'est sous-développé qu'en proportion de son intégration au système capitaliste mondial, système où il demeure condamné à une situation de dépendance.[226]

And the second, related point is that this economical 'under-development' is reflected in theory, leading to a 'réplique scientifique de l'extraversion de nos économies dominées'.[227] The overarching theme is that neutrality, as a principle of justice, cannot consist in the abstraction from (and hence silencing of) the particularities of context (i.e. difference). For this reason we shall move on to look at the contrary idea of partiality.

6.2.3 Partiality

In this sub-section it will be suggested how the concept of neutrality might be reconstrued or possibly replaced. For while the concept, or the common usage of the concept, may be objectionable, there are reasons for recuperating it.

We have already discussed some of the problems that arise from equating neutrality, and hence fairness, with abstraction from specificities. It is also instructive to consider that this rendering of neutrality is itself a culturally specific device. An alternative type of neutrality may be seen in Senghor's biography, which shows that, in accordance with his cultural heritage, the first president of Senegal continually emphasized the importance of compromise, negotiation and

inclusion, as opposed to a majority rule tending to the exclusion of minorities (a claim supported by the assimilationist tendencies of Senghor's own texts, if sometimes belied by the actual history of his political career).[228]

Kwasi Wiredu also contrasts the Western tendency to abstract from marginal perspectives, a practice demonstrating the peculiar belief that the majority is somehow representative, or that a middle ground will satisfy all, with a traditional African politics, which is said to privilege the inclusion of all views.[229] Wiredu points to a certain unity of approach among traditional African governments which 'consisted in the insistence on consensus as the basis of political decision-making' (p. 143). The interests of individual clans are represented by spokespeople who participate in councils where 'the representative status of a member is rendered vacuous in any decision in which s/he does not have an impact or involvement'. It follows from this that to marginalize a representative by eliminating her/his importance through majority vote is to nullify the claims of the represented groups, which, Wiredu argues, is effectively a violation of their rights as human beings. Whether or not this is the case, here we are given a fresh concept of political neutrality that presents an image of the just society which is substantially different from that enshrined in most Western countries.

Furthermore, these examples show the direction of the argument to follow — the idea of the complete inclusion of particulars. For neutrality as the elision of difference can be a pure fudge: in a world where difference breeds inequality, not to represent this difference becomes in itself a partiality because it represents a refusal to theorize inequality (especially insofar as silence is assent). So again, the problem lies not in neutrality itself, but in a false neutrality.

Now, it may be argued that this construal is nothing more than the view 'in which justice turns out to reside, unexcitingly, in the institutionalization of pluralism'.[230] Indeed, not only is such a conclusion unexciting, it is also untenable since it resurrects the old dilemma of how inclusive liberalism should deal with proponents of exclusion: whether to include them and thus legitimate a discourse which promotes intolerance and exclusion, or to exclude them and thus, though remaining faithful to its political aims, prove that truly universal inclusion is an impossible ideal.

But this is not the point of my argument, which is in fact analogous to Nancy Hartsock's critique of Richard Rorty. The latter dismisses the Enlightenment tradition that aims at producing a comprehensive and coherent account of truth and reality, instead recharacterizing philosophy as a discontinuous conversational practice of hermeneutics. Hartsock rejects Rorty's position because, in order not to reconstruct institutionalized prejudices ('Renaissance' concepts such as the omniscient trascendental subject, an idealized reason, etc.) he recommends a form of discourse which is discontinuous and marginal, a series of conversations rather than claims to truth. But this, she argues, inevitably ignores the fact of existent material inequalities. To the extent that Rorty's project disrupts the centrality of dominant discourses it can be viewed as subversive and progressive, but with respect to subjects who *already* occupy marginal positions, whose voices are *already* brought into systematic doubt, it becomes a new form of exclusion.[231]

6.3 Philosophy and Modernity

Basically this section applies some of the conclusions of the preceding pages. It discusses the usage of the term 'modern' and the implications of this usage.

6.3.1 A Neutral Definition of Modernity?

The term 'modern' appears to have at least three meanings which, for all their distinctness, overlap in their usage: the first, an imperfect synonym of 'contemporary'; the second, a reference to those things which characterize the modern period; the third, a reference to a phase of development.

In the first sense, which attempts no more than a chronological reference, a country is described as 'modern' simply because it is part of the modern world, so the term is synonymous with 'modern-day'. The argument is something like: if 'modern' means 'contemporary', then the whole world is modern right now, since 'contemporary' means no more than how something is *right now*.

The second sense is apparently innocuous, referring only to the particular developments of a historical period. Of course, if it is used to mean the period from the end of the Middle Ages to the present day, it is wholly Eurocentric, referring explicitly to a division of European history, which may or may not be applicable to, or meaningful for, histories outside Europe. Thus, to speak of a 'modern' Africa may be to make a category mistake, deriving from an assumption that a particular history has universal relevance (like looking for a Greek Renaissance, for example). But this objection will not arise so long as the term is not stretched beyond its true extension.

The third sense is often used to make a socio-cultural distinction, either synchronically, between different co-existing cultures, or diachronically, with respect to a single culture over time. So it is possible to talk of 'traditional' or 'feudal' Europe as opposed to 'modern' Europe (diachronic use). On the other hand, it is not uncommon to find a distinction made between the *modern* world and the *developing* world, i.e. the Third World (synchronic use). In fact this third

sense is no more than an extrapolation of the second, the content of the latter being extended by some ethnocentric assumptions about single and universal paths of 'development'.

Bearing in mind these different uses of the term 'modern', let us turn to a passage from Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, where he appears to address the central problem that occupies Mudimbé, namely, what strategy Africans are to adopt for the future of their societies. He writes the following:

> For the African intellectual, of course, the problem is whether — and, if so, how — our cultures are to *become* modern. What is for the West a *fait accompli* — indeed we might define modernity as the characteristic intellectual and social formation of the industrialised world — offers most Africans at best vistas of hope, at worst prospects to fear. (*In My Father's House*, p. 172)[232]

Now, I do not wish to attack Appiah over his use of the term 'modern': the point is not to show that he is inauthentic, Westernized, Eurocentric, or otherwise unfaithful to Africa. But it will be useful to consider how the term is used, in this instance and in general, and what might be the consequences of that use.

First, I want to consider which sense of 'modern' Appiah is using here. Evidently it is not the first sense, synonymous with 'contemporary', for he draws a distinction between Africa and the West: the West is modern, Africa is not (but may become) modern. As was observed, if any country is modern (sense 1) then every country is modern (sense 1) for we are talking about global contemporaneity. What we are left with are two uses which, I contend, are actually a single sense in two different contexts: one historical and the other ideological. The former use, more ingenuous, indicates a meaningful division within European history; the latter suggests something like a universal historical essence. This is the idea that there is a single, linear course of historical development and that each country's position can be plotted along the course, so

that we may distinguish modern *simpliciter* from, for example, traditional *simpliciter*. In other words, there are certain artefacts, practices, ideas, and so forth, which are essentially modern or essentially traditional. This sort of idea will be familiar from the ethnological texts to which we have already referred (see section 3.3).

Appiah has good reasons for using 'modernity' and its cognates thus: he wants to denote real structural differences between distinct societies, and he wants to discuss whether it is desirable, and if so how it is possible, to shift one sort of society (Africa) in the direction of the other (the modern world). So it is not that Appiah is using the term in contrast with any notion of backwardwardness, or that he is making a moral judgement; certainly it cannot be said that he neglects to consider his own *conditions de possibilité*, or that he is unaware of the perils of colonial influence (see *In My Father's House*, pp. 135-220).

Nevertheless, his use of the term 'modern' leads to some unfortunate consequences, which he may not be willing to accept. The least of these problems is the rich ambiguity of the word itself, which connotes so many things, yet denotes few with any clarity. Also fairly minor is the worry that in using the concept of modernity we inevitably, and possibly unwittingly, set up an ideal which discourages reflection upon facts, but instead constructs reality through pure theory. The (tendencious) proposition that the West is the epitome of modernity becomes axiomatic and analytic: forgetting that the concept must have a content which represents the empirical world, we stop questioning whether Western countries really do incarnate all the prestigious characteristics of modernity. The Eurocentric alignment of this position cannot be mistaken.

But the principal objection to this terminology is that it is based on wholly specious logic. To begin this critique, let us raise the ghost of a suspicion: why should we even start to talk about a thing which is *intended* from the very beginning as some quintessence of Westernism? Even the germ of such a proposal can only be a remnant of cultural imperialism. If the concept of modernity is something that perfectly characterizes the West alone, then perhaps it is too parochial and too narrow a concept to be applied to cultures across the whole world, even in terms of 'possible development' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 43). In fact, we are not looking at modernity *simpliciter* at all (which would be a universal), but the modern age of a particular culture or group of cultures.

It is also important to bear in mind the disparity between philosophical language and concepts, and everyday language and concepts. Philosophy, by its nature, attempts to function with a rarified, abstract language in order to do justice to the precision of its argumentation. But how might it be possible to arrive at a non-historical, neutral understanding of a 'loaded' concept like that of modernity? By its nature it refers to historical development (both as the development *of* history and *in* history). Appiah says, 'indeed we might define modernity as the characteristic intellectual and social formation of the industrialised world (p. 172), yet he fails to remark upon the fact (although he must surely be aware of it) that this 'intellectual and social formation' *already* presents Africa's inferiority, both in its concepts and in tangible relations. As we have seen, many of the elements which reflect or construct the modern Western psyche (rationalism, civilization, social and political freedom, high economic and technological development, etc.) depend upon the existence of a savage other, who is maintained in (the image of) savagery precisely to protect (the image of) Western civilization.

And this is not only a matter of representation: Western social formations also depend historically on the subjugation and exploitation of other nations. The most obvious, and yet most often ignored, example of this is the Americas, particularly North America — the continent which is now home to the most powerful nation on earth, whose entire history of 'discovery' and colonization is inextricably linked to the destruction of indigenous cultures, and whose rapid industrial and technological development was dependent on the savage violence of slavery. As Ngugi Wa Thiong'o argues, 'slavery, colonialism, and the whole web of neo-colonial relationships […] were as much a part of the emergence of the modern West as they were of modern Africa'.[233]

But this is also true in terms of the more 'civilized' materialism that governs the world today: economic relations which maintain Third World countries in an unnatural, yet strangely normalized, poverty, while simultaneously propelling the industrialized countries into a frenetic over-development which seems doomed to autophagy.

As with the extract from *El Pais* in the section on neutrality above, once we have overcome the amnesia that allows us to think quite comfortably that African under-development is the result of something particular in the African essence, rather than global history, it is clear that the culture which is seen as the quintessence of modernity is fundamentally (both materially and ideologically) dependent on its antithesis.

Despite all this, let us, for the sake of argument, suppose that the West really is the epitome of this modern age. But then we must ask: what of the links, often fundamental, that the West maintains with the non-Western world? For we cannot avoid the fact that the two are linked in very basic ways: economically

(international loans), agriculturally (the production of cash crops for export), industrially (the exploitation of mineral resources, arms sales), socio-politically (charitable aid). Add to this list what are perceived as global interests in the Third World — the manufacture and/or use of nuclear power and/or weaponry, the preservation of rainforests, and so on — as well as the West's history of political intervention in Africa, even since independence, and it seems that African and Western identities are closely intertwined. It is not just that they are linked through trade relations, but that they are actually constructed through each other, both materially and ideologically. As Serequeberhan says, 'interior to the essential constitution of European modernity is the relation with its Other — the colonized non-European world (*The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, pp. 56-7). So if all of these elements are constitutive of the identity of Western countries, to deny or reject their importance could mark a re-emergence of the famous preoccupation with cultural essences, that is to say, we abstract from the 'fringe' or 'unrepresentative' aspects of our lives in order to distil an essence of what the West is 'really'. But protests about exploitation of sugar/coffee/tea growers, the relatively low price of Western luxury goods, demonstrations about Shell involvement in Nigeria, growing dissatisfaction with capitalism and commercialism, and so on, are true and important aspects of our culture. They partly define who we are, who we think we are, and what role we believe ourselves to play in the world.

On the other hand, if these elements are really not the sort of thing we mean when we say 'modernity' then the West cannot, after all, be the epitome of modernity. To continue to claim that it *is* so is to fix the argument in advance, to beg the question. This objection may be summarized in the following way: the

West is fundamentally and inextricably linked to the non-West, such that any precise division is ultimately artificial and even unreal; now, to assign precise properties to unreal objects, to pretend that they exist in a way that they do not and cannot, is intellectually dishonest.

It seems that the decision to characterize the West as pre-eminently modern stems from a desire to talk about the West *en soi*, to consider its essence. Without even considering all the problems associated with cultural essentialism, we may dismiss this move as an attempt to fix the outcome. If the West is the epitome of modernity then the links which connect it to the non-Western world must also be seen as part of modernity, and those parts of the world must be taken into account when we talk of modernity. (Could it be that we do not, after all, know quite what modernity is?)

Therefore, either the West is no more modern than its counterpart, or they are both as modern as each other. Again, this is the view held by Ngugi: 'The cultures of Africa, Asia and South America, as much as those of Europe, are an integral part of the modern world' (p. 10). So the West is not the embodiment of the spirit of modernity, and so we must question the nature of this modernity itself.

6.3.2 And Philosophy … ?

The same may be said for philosophy: why should Africans play this game at all? Why should they be concerned about whether traditional African discourses are philosophical in the conventional, 'strict' or 'universal' sense of the term? Essentially, these questions presuppose another, more pointed: why should African philosophy be predicated on, or develop in accordance with Western standards? If it is replied that what is at issue is the continuation of a philosophy which abstracts from cultural particulars and is thus truly universal, then we are

still free to ask whether it is not a universalization of a particular strain of abstract thinking made from a singular perspective, and from what perspective the abstraction has been made, i.e. in whose eyes it is neutral. As we have seen, silencing voices which represent difference and inequality does not lead unfailingly to neutrality, and even the expression of the supposedly a priori basis of one's reasoning may well bear the inflections of context, as well as the deeper marks of one's interests and desires.

To deal with a specific instance, we may take Hountondji's contention that philosophy can in principle develop only in literate cultures and that, since pre-colonial Africa was not literate, there could not have existed a pre-colonial African philosophy, in the strict sense. The conclusions he wishes to draw include the outright repudiation of all efforts to 'reconstruct' traditional African philosophical systems (because it is impossible to reconstruct that which never existed) and that the only path for the future development of African philosophy is the path of … universal philosophy.[234]

The premises are based on Hountondji's particular conception of philosophy as a continually developing system of thought, such that 'l'absence de transcription n'enlève certes rien à la valeur intrinsèque d'un discours philosophique, […] elle l'empêche cependant de s'intégrer à une tradition théorique collective' (*Sur la philosophie africaine*, p. 135). Philosophy is supposed to be a critical discourse which is able to recuperate its past, constantly to re-evaluate what has gone before, and it does this by striving to achieve the universal truth that Hountondji posits as the ideal, but always inachievable end (τελοσ) of philosophical discourse.[235] Consequently, even instances of traditional 'sage' philosophy are not

really philosophy because they claim to enounce eternal and unquestionable truths.[236]

Universal philosophy, on the other hand, is not just a composite of propositional conclusions, but consists also in the dialectical route that is followed to reach those conclusions, all the more so because the latter must be available for repeated verification and reinterpretation. These processes require literacy because

> la tradition orale aurait plutôt tendance à favoriser la consolidation du savoir en un système dogmatique et intangible, tandis que la transmission par voie d'archive rendrait davantage possible, d'un individu à l'autre, d'une génération à l'autre, la critique du savoir. (p. 131)

Oral traditions are based on recital, for fear of losing the precious knowledge that has been gained. By contrast, the practice of writing liberates thinkers from the need to recall and allows them to devote themselves to interpretation and critique. Since traditional (pre-colonial) African culture is illiterate it cannot have produced philosophy, though it may have produced philosophers who had philosophical thoughts.[237] But to produce philosophical ideas is not to engage in a philosophical tradition, for that discourse inheres in a history and not a collection of ideas: it is a dialectical process of inquiry and not a blank repetition of traditional dogma.

That, at least, is Hountondji's argument. So what can be said in response? Mudimbé remarks:

> il me semble important de noter que la 'leçon d'écriture' que l'on invoque de plus en plus fréquemment pour différencier les traditions africaines et européennes est un critère, pour le moins, contestable. (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 193)

First, let us ask with Mudimbé what exactly writing is: what makes a society (il)literate? Ancient Greece, for example, must have been fairly widely literate since there were instances of writing in public, which were obviously meant to be

read by the public (e.g. inscriptions on gravestones, posted laws, etc.), but this is generally limited to a quite basic level of language use. Were the majority of Greeks able to engage with written philosophical texts, or was philosophy, as seems to be indicated by the presence of people like the Sophists, still very much a spoken art?

It is also worth noting that the literacy criterion can function as a kind of replacement for the more overt notions of savagery that were formerly in use in ethnology. This is related to the notion of having a history, of being a historical subject, able to recall the past and to orient oneself in the present in order to determine the future. Thus, Claude Lévi-Strauss writes:

> Après avoir éliminé tous les critères proposés pour distinguer la barbarie de la civilisation, on aimerait au moins retenir celui-là: peuples avec ou sans écriture, les uns capables de cumuler les acquisitions anciennes et progressant de plus en plus vite vers le but qu'ils se sont assigné, tandis que les autres, impuissants à retenir le passé au-delà de cette frange que la mémoire individuelle suffit à fixer, resteraient prisonniers d'une histoire fluctuante à laquelle manquerait toujours une origine et la conscience durable du projet. (*Tristes Tropiques*, p. 353)

Yet the flaws of this conception are many, as Lévi-Strauss goes on to admit: some of the most important developments in human history, including the invention of agriculture and the domestication of animals, took place long before the advent of scriptural recording and representation; the architectural achievements of the unlettered Incas and Mayas are fully the equal of the literate Egyptians and Sumerians.[238] Indeed, it is even questionable to what extent writing has actually favoured the progress upon which the Western world prides itself, for 'depuis l'invention de l'écriture jusqu'à la naissance de la science moderne, le monde occidental a vécu quelques cinq mille années pendant lesquelles ses connaissances ont fluctué plus qu'elles ne se sont accrues' (Ibid., p. 353).

On the other hand, the coercive potential bestowed on authorities by a banalized literacy is unmistakable. Lévi-Strauss identifies city and empire building as the only phenomenon which has, throughout world history, consistently accompanied the initiation of generalized scriptural competency. Thus, writing seems to 'favoriser l'exploitation des hommes avant leur illumination' (p. 354).[239]

Other criticisms that might be raised include the fact that it seems plainly bizarre to say that societies can produce philosophical thoughts and even philosophers who have those thoughts, and that in this sense it can be said that they are 'doing' philosophy, but that, at the same time, that culture does not have a philosophy until those thoughts are written down. As far as this particular objection goes, I do not have an argument to back it up, but must simply submit that something *seems* very wrong here: perhaps it is just a question of Hountondji refusing to commit himself to either of the alternatives which follow from his position, i.e. that the existence of philosophical thought and philosophers is also dependent on writing, or that philosophy is possible without writing. However, there is no evidence in the text to suggest that Hountondji would countenance either of these alternatives.

We may also object that Hountondji overemphasizes the diachronic aspect of philosophy, to the detriment of the synchronic aspect. At any one time, people can discuss matters philosophically, and what they produce is then unwritten philosophy: this is what the students in philosophy classes do every day, so it is surely something that could be done by 'sages'. (I think in response Hountondji would argue that it is the diachronic philosophical heritage, in the form of formal texts, which enables students to philosophize at any single point in time, and that this heritage is lacking with respect to sages.) Perhaps we would not be able to

talk about Kantian ideas if there were no texts from or about Kant, but it is worth bearing in mind that as much as texts allow us to transmit knowledge and to submit it for continual and unlimited examination and interpretation, it is just as true that they lock us into particular ways of thinking about the world from which it is often very difficult to escape.[240]

Furthermore, by his own standards, Hountondji appears to be construing philosophy as an autonomous history of ideas, and yet he cites at great length Marx and Engel's *German Ideology* in order to spell out that 'ce n'est pas la conscience qui détermine la vie, mais la vie qui détermine la conscience', and that the history of philosophy 'ne tire pas d'elle-même la loi de son propre développement'.[241] But in this case we might wonder why writing is of such crucial importance, if it is the material, productive conditions of life which determine the length and breadth of our ideas.[242]

But the profoundest critique must be that Hountondji is quite clearly attempting to manoeuvre us into his final (conclusive) position. In effect, we only have to face his conclusion if we (1) accept his definition of philosophy, (2) concede that literacy (in the sense that he understands the term) is a necessary condition for the existence of such a discipline, and (3) grant that Africa was non-literate in this sense. Since we are free to take issue with any or all of these claims, and having seen some of the reasons for doing so, we may wonder whether Hountondji's position is not once again more of a polemical stance than a serious and thorough argument.

In a similar moment of rhetoric, Marcien Towa asks: 'toutes les cultures connaissent-elles un développement de la pensée philosophique?' (*L'Idée d'une philosophie négro-africaine*, p. 19). Again, the answer is in the negative, this time

because of the fact that many cultures are not open to dissension and debate, which are the mainstay of philosophical activity. So not all cultures have (though all are capable of having) philosophy.

But once more this is a loaded question: Towa has already defined philosophy as a discipline originating in a Western tradition, then he asks whether everyone shares this tradition.[243] The answer is a foregone conclusion. In order to 'unload' the question, we would have to define philosophy without reference (explicit or implicit) to Western culture. Whether or not (we believe) we can do this depends on whether or not (we believe) the essential elements of philosophy are truly context-independent: the arguments of the last section brought this thesis into doubt.

Furthermore, Towa mixes two different ideas of universality, mistaking the universality of practice (everyone doing philosophy) for the universality of reason (philosophy producing results which, if at all valid, are universally valid). Obviously the latter is an important mainstay for the conventional concept of philosophy, though the former is not.

Towa (who concurs with Hountondji's literacy criterion) also makes the following statement:

> on peut admettre aisément que l'Afrique moderne n'atteindra pas vraiment sa maturité culturelle aussi longtemps qu'elle ne s'élèvera pas résolument à la pensée profonde de ses problèmes essentiels, c'est-à-dire, à la réflexion philosophique. ('Conditions d'une affirmation d'une pensée philosophique africaine moderne', p. 341)

Apart from the lurking shadow of a singular, linear theory of development (what model of 'cultural maturity' is assumed — a Western one?), it is pertinent to ask whether Africa's 'essential problems' are really going to be solved by philosophical analysis.[244] And we might wonder if there is not a certain slippage

between the uses of 'philosophy' deployed by the two 'professional philosophers'. For while it seems plausible that a highly technical philosophical text of the ilk of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* could not be elaborated without an equally technical language and a sufficiently precise, durable form of representation, i.e. writing, it is far from obvious that the latter would also be requisite in order to deal with existential problems of the kind that face Africa today. If we are using 'philosophy' in *this* sense, why should one think that African peoples, or any of the peoples of the world, have ever been lacking in this respect?

6.4 Strategies *En Folie*

In this section we return to a closer reading of Mudimbé's texts, in particular to the concept of the *ruse* (see 5.5.4). We shall deal with some of Mudimbé's plans for dealing with the *ruse* and examines his radical diagnosis for Africa, asking what sort of framework could support authentic African activity.

6.4.1 *Le Cadre*

Aimé Césaire, in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*, gives an example of how one's thinking may become trapped in futile and sterile oppositions. He cites Gourou, who remarks: 'les pays chauds typiques se trouvent devant le dilemme suivant: stagnation économique et sauvegarde des indigènes ou développement économique provisoire et régression des indigènes' (*Discours sur le colonialisme*, p. 35). Again, what is being asserted is some inherent and essential difference between 'developing' and 'developed' countries, such that for the former to undergo any kind of 'development' or 'modernization' is for them to lose their soul.[245] Césaire's critique is not long in coming: 'Gourou choisit […] d'omettre

de préciser que, si le dilemme existe, il n'existe que dans le cadre du régime existant' (p. 35). It is only within the given framework of international economic and political relations (and specifically, for Césaire, international capitalism) that the dilemma is operative.

Mudimbé makes a similar point about the general split existing within the African humanities and social sciences, a split which has developed as a result of colonial discourse, and which leads to two types of scientific practice: 'celle produite par la société coloniale et celle qui serait de la responsabilité de la nouvelle société décolonisée' (*L'Autre Face du Royaume*, p. 102). Although the first continues and is openly complicit with Western discourse, while the second strives to negate it, in effect they are both subordinate practices since they both assume the primary, grounding reality of the colonial culture.[246]

To illustrate this situation, the condition of the African humanities and social sciences is symbolized with a metaphor that represents the African scientist as a being perpetually enclosed in a lift, whose movement and function are controlled by the Westerners who use it. Intermittently, the doors open and close, people enter and exit the lift, and the eternal inhabitant snatches glimpses of the world beyond. For want of genuine personal experience, it is in relation to the information given by those coming from outside that the African must construct her/his theories, and decide whether to accept or reject the given model, or even to resort to 'une parole narcissique tournant et retournant ses rêves pour les intégrer au monde clos et dérisoire de sa cabine' (p. 103). Without a way of taking a perspective on her/his position, s/he cannot understand the full significance of the symbols s/he manipulates. Thus, 'ces vues réfléchies par le regard d'autrui deviennent pour lui "savoir"', and, naturally, the 'prisonnier' shows a preference

for those theories which allow her/him to construct her/himself positively, as a thinking, intelligent and free individual.

The greatest irony is that the African is in no way constrained to stay within this limited and suffocating context:

> En principe, il lui suffirait d'un geste pour arrêter la machine, en sortir et occuper, selon une convention de louage ou de cession acceptée, un appartement ou une chambre; bref vivre et voir son monde à même la réalité. Mais visiblement il ne parvient pas à comprendre que l'initiative lui appartienne. (*L'Autre Face du Royaume*, p. 102)

Ultimately, what is represented through this metaphor is a lack of consciousness about the origins, the conditions of possibility of one's discourse, together with a general refusal to consider the inter-penetration of ideological and scientific practice (Cf. *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 102). Through this failure of self-reflection, the African subject resigns her/himself to the hegemony of the prevailing discourse, and this ultimately leads to a state of alienation, since Western discourse is unable adequately to represent African realities:

> L'ordre du discours occidental, espace parfaitement délimité, fonction d'une structure socio-économique et d'une archéologie culturelle, ne rend et ne pourrait rendre compte d'autres cultures ou d'autres systèmes que par référence à lui-même et point, me semble-t-il, dans la spécificité d'une experience qui lui serait irréductible. (*L´Odeur du Père*, pp. 44-5)

In this sense, Africa has not escaped (neo-)colonization, for in a discourse where the West is set up as the norm, as the standard from which all measurements are to be made, the only space available to Africa, insofar as it differs from this standard, is a role of deviance. In such an environment, data which do not fit in with the dominant theory are either restructured to fit within alien categories (e.g. Senghor's treatment of African art) or effectively become incomprehensible within that context. Hence the problem of radical difference, as opposed to mere exoticism, where a genuine Other who is not reducible to a handful of

ethnocentric propositions demands a real opportunity for dialogue. Mudimbé's question is within what framework this engagement may take place: 'la réponse africaine doit-elle partir de l'intérieur des catégories proposées par ces cadres ou surgir d'ailleurs?' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 86).

This leads us to the discussions of difference and theory convergence which we find in *L'Odeur du Père* (part II, chapter 4 and part III, chapter 7, respectively). Mudimbé criticizes a text which attempts to compare and contrast African and European traditions through a distinction between existence and essence, and asks:

> Pourquoi, en effet, pour définir l'Afrique et la situer face ou contre Europe, faut-il partir de la pertinence des catégories aussi 'chargées', à ce point intimement liées à la tradition occidentale […] depuis l'antiquité grecque la plus ancienne […]? (pp. 183-4)[247]

If we work from the concepts of existence and essence and idealize African and European traditions as sets of characteristics, then if there is any cultural crossover at all (surely no-one would deny there is), there are two broad possibilities: either African tradition is 'contained' in the European, all the elements of the former realizing the essence of the latter, or there is an intersection, where some elements of the former are present in the latter, while others are not. (In other words, either Africa is only another, less developed, version of Europe, or there are particular African characteristics which cannot be reduced to European tropes.) If the latter is the case and there are norms and values which appear in one realm but not the other then 'il faut bien relever les propriétés de non commutativité et de non associativité et tirer les conclusions qui s'imposent' (p. 184). Which is to say, it must be taken into account that there exist elements in one tradition that cannot be understood in the terms of the other (and *vice versa*). If this is not done, then given the fact of the 'dépendance qui [relie

l'Afrique] aux anciens colonisateurs', fresh problems of neo-colonialism arise: for neo-colonialism is nothing but the old violence of colonialism (which essentially submits the colonized to an alien *ordering*, both materially and ideologically) perpetuated through the supposedly post-colonial mechanisms of contemporary existence. Consequently:

> Des idéologies de développement [enchaînent l'Afrique] à des modèles étrangers dont l'application se fait selon des grilles qui ne tiennent compte ni de ses contradictions propres ni de ses problèmes réels. (p. 118)

Once again, Mudimbé takes up the twin examples of Christianity and science, in order to sketch his notion of a creative *écart*. To this end he considers a text by M. Hegba, who writes in hope of a new approach to the issue of africanizing Christianity, one which would reduce neither to a panning for 'common denominators' (i.e. between Christianity and indigenous animist religions) nor to a purely humanist endeavour (i.e. charity and good works — the 'spirit' of Christianity).[248] Hegba's desire to separate Christianity, which he sees as 'une religion orientale, accaparée par l'Occident', from its impregnation and unfolding within Western histories does not, for Mudimbé, seem to indicate a 'refus des données révélées', but a 'désir de les intégrer dans une relation nouvelle de l'homme africain à son monde et à sa culture' (p. 119).

But, taking this even further, what would it take to effect a repositioning, or rather a reconciliation, between Christianity and local African religions? For the conception of the former as something radically different from and hostile to the latter is itself a legacy of the violence of Western imperialism which set itself the task of bringing the rest of the world to the light of reason and true faith. On the other hand, some of the most central acts and symbols characterizing Western Christianity were derived from the pagan rites of pre-Christian Europe.[249] Indeed,

when the genesis and evolution of the Christian religion is replaced in its proper context, we cannot help but realize that 'l'occidentalisation du christianisme est une des mesures de son harmonie visible et invisible avec, notamment, les animismes locaux d'autrefois' (p. 120).

However, what must be avoided in the attempt at *rapprochement* is simply ending up with a kind of syncretic 'jam' of the various religious beliefs. Instead, it is to be hoped that each individual religion retain its specificity and originality. The intrinsic irreducibility of each element is, therefore, a basic principle of this way of thinking. But how, then, is a reconciliation possible: surely any belief in the truth of Christianity necessarily relegates all other religions, actual or possible, to the realm of myth?

In order to approach the problem from another angle, Mudimbé looks at the analogy of the convergence of the wave and corpuscular theories of matter at the turn of the twentieth century. It was discovered that, depending on which initial postulates are adopted (i.e. to describe in terms of the 'observable' or in terms of the 'inter-observable') one arrived at totally different and conflicting conceptions of the fundamental nature of matter: that it is either corpuscular or undulatory. To resolve the apparent antinomy of simultaneously assigning two contrary properties to the same stuff it was necessary to come to the understanding that, in absolute terms, matter is in fact neither one nor the other, and moreover we truly cannot say what matter is 'absolutely'. Any knowledge that we have is inevitably drawn from a perspective (or series of perspectives) and is thus intimately bound up with our own positioning. All we are able to do is to construct a 'language' that best captures the truth of this perspective, while not ruling out that there may be others which require radically different 'languages'. Consequently:

> l'inconciliabilité ne réside donc pas dans les choses qui demeurent telles qu'en elles-mêmes, mais dans la représentation que l'on a et dans les langages du corpusculaire et de l'ondulatoire. (p. 121)

To try to make a compromise, as such, would be to lose the power of at least one of the theories, so in order to make consistent sense of this paradoxical situation it is necessary to take a step back from both theories and elaborate a language which is capable of dealing equally with the two, without distortion.

For Mudimbé, this procedure is just as pertinent to the question of religion. All religions try to convey a deep understanding of the infinite and the absolute, yet none are capable of doing so, precisely because the languages they use are finite and limited:

> N'est-ce pas par un jeu […] de dérèglements (réductions, analogies, transpositions) que la Mystique opère pour parler de Dieu dans un langage fini alors qu'Il est l'infini? Sur quel type d'énonciation et de système objectif de transcription des corrélations entre le fini et l'infini se fonde-t-elle pour dire une réalité (essence et existence) qui est hors du langage, hors de l'espace, hors du temps? (p. 185)

As in the case of science, it is possible to conceive of different religions as different expressions of a single search (for a single object). No finite, perspective-based language can actually capture the infinity and universality of truth. No language is final and absolute, but each is a way of looking for finality through a particular context. In reply to Hegba's conviction that 'nous voulons Jésus-Christ comme référence suprême unique', Mudimbé emphasizes that indigenous religion is for many Africans 'un mode d'être fondamental, un savoir et une histoire, à partir desquels des positivités s'organisent, se modifient, s'harmonisent' (p. 120).

So once again, the only way to accommodate both of these different 'theories' on a rational basis is to perceive them as discrete and non-commensurate (and therefore non-competitive) bodies of knowledge of the same thing (i.e. God). The

'recul' that is required here is not a step back from truth (or God) but from our own expression of truth, it is a form of modesty. For the different 'languages' try to convey the Absolute, but they are not the Absolute; they try to express the inexpressible. There is no neutral position from which to arbitrate between them, yet the true division exists not between the enunciations themselves but between the postulates which give them sense, and these postulates, created by people, are not irreconcilable.

There is, however, an obvious disanalogy with the scientific example. For we may say that the *same* scientists must have believed enough in *both* the corpuscular and undulatory theories of matter to try to effect a reconciliation. Indeed, one of the most profound problems with religion through history has been that when people of different creeds encounter each other, peaceful reconciliation is often the furthest thing from their minds and hearts.

The reply I believe Mudimbé would make to this objection is that such people, who (unfortunately) probably make up a large proportion of the world's believers, have mistaken their religion for their faith: that is, they have mistaken the language they use to convey (imperfectly) their own sense of the divine for the divine itself (cf. *L'Odeur du Père*, pp. 120-122). Nevertheless, one cannot help but suspect that this argument would get short shrift from a great number of 'believers'. Would this be a sign that religious antagonisms are really, as Mudimbé says, 'entre des genres de pouvoir culturel et spirituel en concurrence […]' (p. 122)? In any case, Mudimbé's argument is a lot more localized than it may appear: he is not trying to advocate or predict any kind of global syncretism, but is rather leading up to the conclusion that:

> Le problème de l'africanisation du christianisme et le problème de l'intégration des religions africaines à la modernité sont isomorphes. (p. 122)

It is basically a question of those people who have something 'at stake' in both Christianity and indigenous religions. In effect it is a suggestion for a way individuals (e.g. 'Westernized' Africans) might come to terms with what appear to be two contradictory ways of life, by showing that there cannot be a contradiction because the two ways start from different bases; at the same time this indicates the essential unity behind religious thought.

Introducing this kind of perspective also enables Mudimbé to disrupt the sort of oppositional thought which sets up Christianity as the ultimate form and expression of the truth, and relegates all other religions to the status of mystification and barbarity. Yet he does so without attempting to negate or challenge Christianity on its own terms, thereby avoiding the *ruse* (see section 5.5). In doing this, he also disrupts any conceptual alignment that might exist between the notions of Christianity, civilization and modernity (with paganism, savagery and primitiveness on the other side) by displacing the religious element from its privileged status.[250]

From this discussion we can see the general trajectory of the Mudimbean assault on the humanities and social sciences, which is not so much concerned with the truth or logical validity of Western discourses (though this is also a part of his critique). Mudimbé comments that:

> le problème de la vérité au sens strict paraît secondaire face aux impératifs de la validité des systèmes à construire d'après les règles. (*L'Autre Face du Royaume*, p. 90)

His main concern is how Western discourses are constructed with respect to other possible discourses:

> La question est, en effet, dans la signification des objectivations des chercheurs qui, — niant, ignorant ou taisant prudemment — l'irréductibilité de l'autre, proposeraient les résultats d'investigations comme lectures totales et définitives de l'autre et de son milieu. (p. 98)

6.4.2 *L'Ecart*

So it might seem as if Mudimbé is saying that all that Africans have to do is to affirm the reality of their experience and the value of their positioning, in order to bring about a new order, converging Africa with the West in the manner we have outlined above. Unfortunately, it is not so simple. For would such an affirmation amount to much more than the basic position of Négritude? Would Hountondji admit to any other motivation for his own texts? Yet we have objected to these positions on the grounds that, in various ways, they permit the continuation of certain aspects of colonial discourse.

The problem, the essence of which was touched upon in the preceding chapter under the heading of the *ruse* (5.5.4), may be schematized as follows. What is at risk is that, in claiming a new discursive space in which to elaborate their 'own' sciences, Africans inadvertently take up the ready-made framework of yet another strain of Western discourse. The consequences of this are twofold: first, the framework may support unpalatable contents (e.g. speculation about 'the African soul', or assumptions about the neutrality of abstract philosophy); secondly, the framework is *given*, which makes it inherently subordinate (Négritude was an *antithetical* moment), subject to recuperation and once again answerable to Western control. The former element has already been discussed sufficiently; the latter leads in two directions: the first, another subject that has already been treated, is that for Africans to accept a new 'liberating' evolution of Western discourse amounts to a vindication of the latter, because in continuing a particular strain of history it provides a continuation 'peut-être infidèle' of that discursive history, which includes colonialism. The second and more insidious consequence is that the new form of speech is literally given to the colonized, irrespective of

whether it actually addresses their problems. Within such a context, the appearance of post-colonial autonomy can only be illusory.

Let us take a landmark to fix our bearings. In *L'Autre Face du Royaume*, Mudimbé remarks upon Lévi-Strauss's astonishment that non-Western theorists should criticize the cultural relativist phase of ethnology as a further attempt to establish the inferiority of non-Westerners. In reply he argues that:

> ce qui serait anormal c'est que les chercheurs non Occidentaux ne s'inquiètent pas du triomphe de la 'manière de dogmatisme' que le structuralisme actualise et qui, à partir de leurs sociétés et de leurs mythes, plonge l'agent social qu'est l'homme dans le silence, l'y oubliant presque avec bonheur, ou mette très haut un métalangage au désavantage des rapports et de la vie des hommes. (p. 99)[251]

Among other objections we may note that: first, there is no break in the social histories which yield this conceptual evolution; it is continuous with the same structures that created and supported the problems.[252] Secondly, it is a continuation of the denial, or ignorance, that there are elements of Africa which cannot be understood through the European experience. Thirdly, it represents a refusal to wait and hear what others have to say about the problems of 'dogmatic' science, instead trying simply to give *the* answer (which is itself a sign of dogmatism). Fourthly, it is a continuing preoccupation with truth and validity rather than position and history.[253]

In order to correct the excesses of colonial science, new rules are brought into play about what counts as a good discourse, but once more these are posited on Western terms. Cultural relativism is proposed as an answer, before the other has even been 'allowed' to consider the form and content of the question. What is given is another account of 'the' problem and another definition of 'the' solution, when what is needed is the space within which the formerly colonized may start (and continue indefinitely) to redefine themselves.[254]

The most important element of Mudimbé's prognosis for African science is that Africans themselves must move to regain their *parole*, and this must be a true activity. It is not simply a question of their occupying different epistemic positions, and therefore having different perspectives on reality, from Westerners, but it is also a matter of coming to terms with colonial alienation, i.e. the negation of the colonized individual's subjectivity. True independence cannot be *given*, in the same way that a sufferer of mental illness cannot just be given her/his sanity, but it must be taken up for oneself through an assertion of one's subjectivity.[255] To make sense of this, we are given a passage from Sartre:

> Le chemin qui mène à l'indépendance (faire face à ses fantasmes, faire face aux hommes) ne peut passer par la dépendance absolue: transfert et frustration, promesse au moins tacite — je vous guérirai (je vous libérerai; vous serez maître d'un savoir…) — attente d'une permission.[256]

And Mudimbé concludes that 'c'est que la relation doit éclater' (p. 192). True emancipation, true recovery requires autonomous activity, which in principle cannot be given. Thus, the freedom offered by new forms of Western theory in fact represents a continuation of colonizing discourse insofar as it sets up new norms and rules which are exterior to the colonized subject: once again it is the 'attente d'une permission'.

J.-C. Willame comments thus:

> c'est donc parce qu'il est un dit d'autrui — le critère de la scientificité ici importe peu — que ce nouveau discours ne peut être retenu. Langage 'fou'? L'auteur le reconnaît volontiers. Mais cette prise de position, ce témoignage lui apparaît indispensable pour mettre terme à l'aliénation coloniale et néo-coloniale. ('L'Autre face du royaume ou le meurtre du père', p. 93)

What I believe Mudimbé is getting at is that *any* theory that Africans can *currently* articulate is necessarily 'colonized' in advance, since it will invariably be a continuation of colonial history. Thus even the most careful and open-

minded perspective can be accused of complicity with the colonizer. As Christopher Miller says: 'Within this system, the specter of legitimation, elitism, and dominance is naturally omnipresent, and all positions are ambiguous' (*The Surreptitious Speech*, p. 433). True Africanity quite simply is not something that can be known from the current perspective, but will only be knowable in the post-revolutionary era, when the African psyche has been restructured. This is how I interpret the following extract:

> la réadaptation de notre psychisme après les violences subies [… est] le problème majeur [….] C'est de cette entreprise que dépend aujourd'hui et dépendra demain la pertinence des attitudes que nous pouvons développer face aux endémies qui nous viennent d'ailleurs ou que nous créons nous-mêmes, qu'elles soient de nature économique, politique ou idéologique. (p. 13)

The pertinence of one's stance against undue Western influence depends upon a 'psychic reorganization'. A text by Herbert Marcuse provides enlightenment at this point:

> The wants of liberated men and the enjoyment of their satisfaction will have a different form from wants and satisfaction in a state of unfreedom, even if they are physiologically the same. ('On Hedonism', p. 182)

And this is because

> these wants and interests themselves, and not merely their gratification, already contain the stunted growth, the repression, and the untruth with which men grow up in class society. (Ibid., p. 168)

We may explain this by returning to the arguments of section 4.3.3. In order to know the true interests which bind us to solidary action, it is necessary first to divest oneself of one's interests, needs and desires as they have been constructed through the present forms of social existence. Freedom is not just a matter of being able to have what one wants, but primarily of being able to see clearly what it is that one wants. Or rather, it is existing in a space where one's wants develop

in harmony with one's true interests (but there is no guarantee that the latter are perceptible from one's current perspective).

Here is the reason why Mudimbé emphasizes 'cette norme importante: l'arrêt sur nous-mêmes, ou plus précisément, un retour constant sur ce que nous sommes avec une ferveur et une attention particulières, accordées à notre milieu archéologique …' (p. 14).

6.4.3 *Folie*

Might the *folie* of Mudimbé's text, as the Sophoclean epigraph suggests, be no more than a futile form of vengeance?[257] In fact, Mudimbé's proposal to effect an *excommunication majeure* from Western scientific culture may not be so 'fou' as it appears at first sight. The *folie* supposedly resides in the decision to reject, or at least to extricate oneself from, a discourse of a certain origin, when this discourse is eminently scientific and truth-loving.

As with the discussion of convergence above, there is no question of a relativism about truth here; the debate is not about whether truth is single or multiple, but whether the production of truth-statements is or is not a deeply political enterprise. It is a confrontation with, on the one hand, the difference between the form and content of a discourse (i.e. the methodology, theoretical framework and the actual enunciation), and, on the other hand, the meta-theory which interprets that discourse and the context which nourishes it. For example, it is perfectly possible to approach philosophical problems from a realist perspective without having fixed the status of one's discourse. That is to say, from the fact that one adopts a realist stance with regard to the existence of truth, we are not committed to believe that we are emitting *the* discourse, telling *the* truth in the only way it can be told. All we are committed to is the objective reality of truth,

that the way the world is 'ne dépend aucunement de mon caprice'.[258] It is still assumed that there is a single truth to be apprehended, the difference lies in the way that we believe we are related to it. Thus one can be philosophical realist, as I believe Mudimbé is, yet still contend that

> l'universalité ne peut exister qu'à partir d'une expérience critique et permanente d'une authenticité singulière … (*L'Autre Face du Royaume*, p.136)

But an authentic African discourse must involve a 'bracketing' of what is Western, even if it is 'right', and a reprisal (re-taking) of original speech.[259] Such a strategy appears folly because, while the space for such a manoeuvre does not exist, it appears as if Mudimbé simply wants to reject the truth that Western science offers, without having anything to put in its place. In response to this concern, I cite Marcuse:

> insofar as unfreedom is already present in wants and not just in their gratification, they must be the first to be liberated — not through an act of education or of the moral renewal of man but through an economic and political process encompassing the disposal over the means of production by the community. (*Negations*, p. 193)

It is not just that Africans must replace colonial discourse with their own, authentic discourse, but that they must cause a rupture which will close the colonial discourse and prevent a neo-colonial recuperation of their efforts.[260] In the present context, where relations have been structured and maintained through (neo-)colonial domination, even the most seemingly nationalist of endeavours can betray a sense of the noxious *odeur*. Effectively, then, Mudimbé projects 'une utopie se réduisant à une prise de parole' (p. 86): freedom and authenticity are not defined but are projected into a void, a new space within which they can be reconceived without fear that one is merely picking crumbs from the colonial

platter. Having said that, we are given a clear idea of how Africans are to navigate towards this emptiness:

> en commençant par cerner, d'abord et rigoureusement, ceux qui sont, en vérité, les tendances réelles de nos sociétés et les expressions les plus concrètes de nos contradictions d'hommes situés en un temps et un espace donnés. (Ibid.)

Another aspect of the 'folie' consists in the discursive doubling that Mudimbé must use in order to situate himself with respect to the 'utopia' he posits. Essentially, this is a recapitulation of the theme of the final section of chapter 4, regarding 'racial' violence: the need to simultaneously utilize and disavow certain categories which are found to be ideologically suspect and scientifically inaccurate, but which are also politically meaningful.

If it is accepted that terms like 'the West' do not accurately (or neutrally) describe the real state of the world and simply to use them brings into play some dangerous ideas, then the fact that Mudimbé makes use of this category appears to trap him within the very coils of the *ruse* he hopes to escape. On the other hand, such terms are in common use: if 'the West' does not exist in the world in quite the same way as it is talked about, nevertheless we may say that it also has an 'ideal', or perhaps 'ideological' reality. Since the categories are active within our minds, we may be sure that they also have some political reality. In order to be able to theorize this aspect of reality, it is therefore important to be able to handle these concepts, inadequate as they may be. The African theorist must still theorize 'Western discourse' *as such*, in order to be free of it, for though it does not exist *as such*, it still ensnares him; paradoxically, to give up the ability to do so is itself a snare of Western discourse.[261]

6.5 Conclusion: The Invention of Africa

Much of this chapter was oriented around the argument that neutrality cannot consist in the total text which says everything from every perspective, any more than it could consist in perfect abstraction from all perspectives. Indeed, the conclusion I am leading up to is that neutrality cannot consist in texts at all, but must be something about the general way in which we orient our reading and writing practices. Neutrality consists in our openness before the possibility of an other text which might compete with and displace our own, or more radically, which just could not be calibrated against our own.

This vision must be strongly linked to a particular idea about truth. For if we believe that truths are, in some sense, already out there just waiting to be apprehended, and also that the only tool needed for their apprehension is the universal, abstract reason which acts as some sort of 'truth-detector', then there is no point in being open to another's point of view, except insofar as s/he might be a better logician.[262] But if we accept that when we discourse we are doing something really *creative*, and that the position from which we speak substantially influences what we say and how we say it, and if we also accept that even in relation to a single, indivisible truth there may be better perspectives from which to apprehend it (and, furthermore, that there is no safe, neutral position from which to discern which is the best perspective) then it becomes imperative that we are open to other discourses: it is a matter of our rational survival.

It should be remarked that this position is a long way, indeed as far as possible, from naïve relativism about truth, because if there were not some fact of the matter (i.e. objective truth), rather than just many different and arbitrarily different accounts, then there could be nothing that we could genuinely miss out

on by ignoring other perspectives (except the spice of variety). If there is something genuinely at stake then the imperative to listen is really a co-operative attempt to get to this something. Hence the importance of 'le maintien et l'épanouissement par l'adaptation […] d'expériences socio-historiques singulières' (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 11).

This conclusion is in line with Mudimbé's argument about the convergence of irreconcilable scientific or religious positions. Convergence is only conceivable because it is held that there is a single truth, but that this truth can be only imperfectly comprehended in a limited, partial way; without this attitude, not only would we have no reason to seek to reconcile competing theories, but we would also have no way of contending with false ones.

But there is also a danger of asserting a binary opposition which leads us to a doctrine of unexamined partiality versus unexamined neutrality.[263] Mudimbé wants an open, reflective partiality which, because it is non-totalizing, leaves the way open for a multiple neutrality, for it is obvious that true neutrality cannot be represented unilaterally.

Another focus point of this chapter was the use of terms like 'modern' and the difficulties that are engendered when one is not careful about the baggage they carry with them. For although we may attempt to use the concept of 'modernity' in a neutral way, it is already loaded with dangerous ideology. Either it presupposes contraries like 'traditional', 'developing', underdeveloped', etc., thereby continuing a Eurocentric view of development, or it is so vague and diffuse a concept that it distinguishes nothing and says nothing much about anything. In the end we may fairly ask: why bother with the concept at all? Why

should we constrain ourselves to a defense of African modernity, any more than an acceptance of African primitiveness?

But it is probably counter-productive for the African theorist to give up the term (whose use will certainly continue elsewhere), since it describes a reality, a real system of inequalities and constraints, that is, of both quantitative and qualitative differences between the 'developed world' and the 'developing world'. The use of the term 'modern' is ideological not because it connotes profound difference (for the difference exists, though not in so clear cut a way), but because it suggests that the difference is normal, natural or essential. The term may indicate its historical context but only in an impoverished way, as it points to a single linear path of development and substitutes the very particular for the universal. If we are to use 'modern' in the historical sense of the term (rather than just meaning 'contemporary') then Africa can never become modern, any more than America can be part of the Roman Empire. Africa can only be modern*ized* — a simulacrum of modernity. If we use 'modern' in the third sense, to make a socio-cultural distinction, then we are obviously presupposing some sort of Eurocentric view of development.[264]

Next, we examined the literacy criterion stipulated by Hountondji in his discussion of what African philosophy should be. It was argued that Hountondji's concepts of literacy and philosophy seem rather narrow, that it is not obvious that literacy is a necessary condition for science, as he claims, and that his analysis of the type of social organization which develops through literacy is too simplistic.

The last section continued with a discussion of the social and theoretical frameworks which enclose African discourses and considered a way in which apparently competing languages may be reconceived as different expressions of

the same truth. This approach preserves the fundamental irreducibility of different ways of life, while also enabling those whose existence spans the cultural divide to preserve the essential elements of both cultures, without compromising either.

From there we went on to develop the theme of the *écart*, a subject which was broached in the preceding chapter. We discussed the argument that in order for Africans to arrive at a truly authentic African discourse the most important condition is that they bring about a kind of rupture between the Western discursive space and their own. By opening up a sort of negative space, a utopian 'prise de parole', Africans will be able to redefine (indefinitely) the problems that they face and to begin to look for solutions that are primarily relevant to their environments.

One of the paradoxes of this position is that Mudimbé must thereby recognize that he is himself speaking from a position of compromise; he is speaking from a wholly transitional state. Hence, I believe, his refusal to give positive content to terms like 'authenticity' and the 'odeur'; instead he accepts ' "le complexe de Tirésias": cette capacité de pouvoir assumer, dans la virginité de la parole et la folie d'un espoir, l'activité et la force de la subjectivité face à l'histoire' (pp. 201-2).[265]

It seems appropriate to close this final analytical chapter with these words from Chinua Achebe:

> You have all heard of the African personality, of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up, we shan't need any of them any more. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an antiracist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better. (Morning Yet on Creation Day, pp. 71-2)

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 *La Philosophie Africaine*?

It was in the search for an answer to the question *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie africaine?* that we started by looking at two apparently contradictory approaches. The first type we considered, exemplified by the evocative writings of Léopold Senghor, whittles the question down to the issue of racial essence. African philosophy is the philosophy which permeates African culture and can therefore only be created by Africans. The term 'African' is taken to mean something stronger than merely being a national of an African state: it is more like being an 'ethnic African', or, as Senghor put it, a *négro-africain*.

Paulin Hountondji, the author of the second approach, argues that African philosophy need not be intrinsically African, indeed he doubts whether anything at all can be intrinsically African, if that is to imply having a racial essence. The Africanness of a text is nothing more than the Africanness of the author, and does not determine philosophical content: it follows from this that any sort of text can be African, provided its author is. Furthermore, this Africanness is not taken to be an essence, nor does it consist in a particular culture, it is the mere fact of whether someone is or is not an African national, or rather a citizen of an African state.

These two approaches rely on two very different ideas of philosophy. The first represents philosophy as something of a collective nature which inheres in our cultures, that is, in our day-to-day activities, arts and literature, rituals, proverbs and general outlook on life. We may be philosophical without realizing because the philosophical structures are always already imbedded in our languages and ways of life. Thus it is possible to find out about a people's philosophy by examining their social interactions, folktales, customs, sayings, the structure of

their language, and so on. Since one's essence determines one's basic philosophical beliefs, which in turn determine one's culture, the 'authentic' philosophy of a people will expose the metaphysical roots which give that people their essence, and thus their identity.

Hountondji's account holds that this concept of philosophy is both mistaken and wildly misleading, being founded in part on a confusion of the different senses of the word 'philosophy'. What has been described above, it is argued, is not philosophy in any strong sense, but a hypertrophic culturalism which preys on a select range of philosophical terminology. To construe philosophy as a substratum of culture is to render the concept diffuse: if philosophy could exist in the unconscious workings of the mind, then even animals might be credited with philosophical wisdom.

Hountondji objects that it is not an unconscious, collective phenomenon which constitutes the discipline of philosophy as it is practised in universities across the world. On the contrary, the strict use of the term refers to the never-ending, but teleologically guided, construction of rigorous critical texts. These are texts which discuss issues such as freedom, the self, the problem of good and evil, the forms of logic, and so on. Academic philosophers tend to be keenly and meticulously critical both of themselves and of their fellows. The texts they produce, therefore, rely to a great extent on individual, conscious reflection. Understood in this way, philosophy is a universal discipline, identical in all countries and *in essence* incapable of being split into African and European varieties. Unconscious collective philosophies can only be impossible figments of the Africanists' imaginations: they cannot exist because any philosophy requires the conscious production of critical texts by individual thinkers.

7.2 African Identity and Colonial Influence

We have also shown how the two writers respond to the issue of the revaluation of African identities. Senghor attempts an ecstatic celebration of the *culture négro-africaine*, which is impressive but fatally flawed. His critics generally agree that Négritude played a valuable role as the first high-profile movement directed *by Africans* which intended to reassess the role of the African in the modern world. But there was no profound questioning of the colonial categories of thought which justified European invasion and exploitation of Africa on 'universalist', humanist grounds. Concepts of racial difference were not brought into question, but were re-evaluated, their order turned upside-down. Hence, Négritude was not quite the discourse of African emancipation that was hoped for; the only difference between Négritude's tenets and those of colonialism is that the former ostensibly represent colonizer and colonized as equal (though still opposite) parties. Admittedly, this has the virtue of clearing the way for dialogue between the two sides, since it is henceforth assumed that the colonized people has something to say. But another consequence is that African reason is supposed *a priori* to be of a different type from that of the colonizer: the price of equal status seems to be an inevitable mutual incomprehension.

Hountondji is not interested in the mythologization of the African proposed by Senghor, and it appears that he does not choose to fight Western dominance through ideology but through the abstractions of academic philosophy. However, the oppositional structure of this reading of the two writers is deeply flawed, and in chapter 4 we paused to consider whether the debate is really so dualistic and clear-cut as we have made out. It was said in defence of Senghor's position that the stress he placed on the existence and role of the putative African essence was

not merely gratuitous, but, on the contrary, was intended to address the needs of Africans during what was experienced as a time of crisis for African identities. Négritude was an attempt to redress the perception of Africans as backward, non-rational, or otherwise inferior to white Europeans.

Having said this, the criticisms that Hountondji makes of Négritude, Africanists and ethnologists are largely fair and accurate. In launching his critique, and in offering his own ideas, Hountondji is himself responding to a perceived historical imperative: namely, that African philosophers do not need to be told what they are and must be in essence, they do not require the systematic *a priori* determination of their discipline; rather, they need the political and conceptual space in which to formulate their own questions and manners of response in ways analogous, but not identical, to those of Western philosophical circles. What Hountondji tries to bring to the debate is the sort of systematic rigour that he believes should characterize philosophy everywhere, despite having been practiced chiefly in the West.

The terms of the comparison of Senghor and Hountondji were partly set by the particular focus of our own interests in the subject, but this same focus unavoidably distorts the relationship between the protagonists. Rather than opposition, the concept of *supercession* represents with greater accuracy their position relative to each other. For not only does Hountondji react critically against the Négritude movement, but he also takes for granted ways of thinking that may only have become open as a direct consequence of the historical developments of which Négritude was a key expression. For example, Hountondji does not believe it necessary to *argue* that Africans are capable of philosophy, nor

even that African philosophy exists ('la philosophie africaine […] *existe*, c'est indiscutable', *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 12).

7.3 The Ruse

7.3.1 Violence

One of the conclusions drawn in chapter 2 was that Senghor's texts are in some way quite desperately politically naïve: he appears to refuse to face the facts of conflict and radical inequalities based on racial concepts. He also appears to renounce all serious attempts to criticize colonialism ('la France n'a pas à justifier ses conquêtes coloniales. […] Elle doit seulement concilier ses intérêts et ceux des autochthones', *Liberté 1*, p. 40).

Similarly, Hountondji's position is also in danger of being too quiet on issues of inequality. His conviction that there exists only one sort of reason and only one sort of philosophy leaves out of the picture the history of exclusion of non-whites from the realm of reason.

However, when we looked at theories which try to carry out a critique of the violence that characterizes colonialism it seemed as if, by doing so, they necessitate the use of categories such as 'the West' and 'the dominant culture'. Recycling such terms maintains the sort of binary opposition (e.g. *West/other*) which we are struggling to undo. Without seriously bringing into question the cogency of *all* categorical identities it is impossible to go further than Négritude, i.e. a re-ordering of values which is essentially limited to a 'Narcissistic' phase of reaction. Yet by abandoning a strong reading of terms such as 'the West' (i.e. a reading that allows us to say how the West dominates Africa), it seems that we

give up the possibility of articulating a coherent critique of neo-colonial domination.

This is exactly what Mudimbé means when he refers to the *ruse*: a discursive trap, such that even when trying to criticize the West we end up by unwittingly re-asserting its importance. In some way our discourse is already 'colonized' in advance, and it either undermines itself or finds itself powerless. This problem was also expressed in the section on racial violence, where it was argued that to continue to use the terms of racial difference was to continue to realize one of the preconditions for racial violence of all kinds. Only by reaching a point where racial violence becomes literally unthinkable, where the objective absurdity of the category permeates our subjectivity, will the violence ever truly end.

Yet at the same time it is unreasonable to expect that we can directly give up the language of racial categorization, for it enables us to describe those aspects of reality which are still experienced through such categories. Practical experience, shaped by concepts which are ratified by society, undermines the rigour of theory and forces us to continue talking in terms of racial classification which have no objective claim on our speech.

7.3.2 *Folie*

When Mudimbé advocates an African excommunication from Western social discourses, to the extent that African discourse might henceforth be truly authentic (i.e. an activity grounded in one's autonomy, springing from local 'conditions de possibilité', and regardless of the truth or falsity of Western discourse), he tries to reconcile theory and praxis, re-inscribing value into *how* something is said, *who* says it, and from *where*.

But the *folie* also runs deeper, for he persists in talking about entities, such as 'the West', whose existence has already been brought into question. In effect, the African theorist must in some sense project his discourse into a void, or limbo-like space: s/he must treat 'the West' as if it were simultaneously present and absent. It is absent because we know that it does not exist in the singular way we are often drawn to think and speak of it; but it is present precisely because it is thought and spoken of in this way. The concept is politically active, even if it refers to no specific objective reality. The void-like quality of this discursive space consists in the irresolvable tension that this strategy generates — neither from our current position, still squeezed within the coils of neo-colonialism, nor from the projected perspective of an accomplished revolution does it entirely make sense — hence it is something of a psychosis, a pathology to be undergone.

The allusion to the 'complexe de Tirésias' suggests that we undergo this linguistic splitting because what we are really trying to achieve is an understanding of reality not as it actually appears to us but as it might, if we could effect a re-ordering of society which would allow 'la réadaptation de notre psychisme'. In the meantime, we must use the categories we possess to describe the world as we currently experience it, while bearing in mind that our conclusions are to be continually brought into question.[266]

7.4 Possible Further Development of the Thesis

One of the conclusions that appears to have developed by the end of this thesis is that the idea of there somehow being two 'sides' to colonialism, the idea that we can neatly and with a good conscience designate the oppressors and the victims, the agents and the patients, is quite wrong and painfully misleading. Such a clear-cut division, if ever it was feasible, could only have been applicable to the state of

affairs at the very beginning of colonialism, when factors such as inter-cultural influence and marriage, and global trade networks and corporations (which transcend, and perhaps dissolve, national boundaries) were less significant. By comparison, the state of the world today is a complete flux, and it seems increasingly difficult to designate social groups that can meaningfully and accurately be described as 'dominant'.

In fact, even this conclusion is to a considerable extent shaped by the limits of space and time which have been imposed on this thesis. If I had been able to justify, and do justice to, a more substantial digression then my answer would have been that there were never two sides, that such a categorization of historical agents and such an analysis of historical events are in all cases too simplistic and disregard the important details of the matter. This response, which I suspect to be true but cannot yet substantiate, would have been backed up and contextualized with extended research which has not been possible for the present work. On the other hand, it is not difficult to suggest an initial direction that such research could take, and this is the subject of the final few sections below.

7.4.1 Complicity

First, I would like to determine whether it is true that some Africans, perhaps whole societies or social groups, were complicit in the selling of other Africans to European slave traders (and to what extent, if any, slavery was already practised among Africans). Clearly this issue is of some importance, as it brings into question the assumption of African solidarity, which is the assumption that, as victims of European brutality, all Africans suffered from a common cause and were constrained to a single destiny.

An associated question is to what extent there existed inter-ethnic conflicts in Africa before the advent of slavery and colonization. Once more, it is a matter of doubting the assumption that the pre-colonial era was some kind of golden age for Africa, and that the wave of colonial violence and terror crashed upon and submerged what had previously been a land of peace and harmony. It seems quite likely that inter-ethnic conflicts and rivalries may have been invisible to the foreign eyes of Europeans who often perceived only an undifferentiated mass of savagery.

The reason such questions are important is that they enable us to begin to disencumber ourselves from the sort of 'charity' which portrays all Africans as victims of single fate which was imposed on them from outside and over which they had no control. The concomitant idea, arriving silently beside its partner but all the more powerful for its silence, is that pre-colonial Africans were not social agents, that, along with colonialism, history burst upon the continent and washed the inhabitants into the modern era.[267]

As an equal and opposite inquiry, I would want to investigate the actual states of affairs within so-called colonial societies, as they were before, during, and after colonialism. For I imagine that there must also have been dissension, and indifference, within these societies with respect to the motives, projects, and ends of colonialism. Was there ever a *single* Enlightenment voice, or is this itself an Enlightenment myth that has been taken up by critics of Western discourse? How can we talk of *the* Western, humanist tradition, in the singular?

7.4.2 Complacency

Colonialism has become an established fact, by which I mean that everyone seems to know what happened with more or less precision, and everyone seems

sure of exactly how and why it is wrong. Yet such confidence and such certainty are themselves reasons for careful inquiry. Colonialism is a social system and social systems only work (in the sense that a machine 'works') if everyone does what s/he is expected to do. Since people inevitably do not always do as they are told, as they are taught, or as they are compelled, the social machine never even comes close to perfect functioning, and insofar as theories of social movement are elegant and rational, to the same extent they are ideal abstractions from society as it is, or could be.

As we move further into an era which is ostensibly *post-colonial*, to assume that modalities of oppression can be unambiguously theorized under rubrics of race, or even social groupings like 'Africa', 'the West', and so on, is to help oneself to quite a substantial presupposition. When modern institutions of power automatically wear egalitarian colours in office, how may we unequivocally assume that when a person is oppressed or dispossessed, the violence is committed upon her/him *qua* a minority subject, and how may we unequivocally unmask the holder of power?[268]

7.4.3 Colonialism/Imperialism

It is assumed that we know what colonialism is, and therefore that we know what are we criticizing when we condemn it. Similarly, we assume that we know that colonialism is over. But I wonder, what exactly is over? What is, or was, colonialism? For instance, was the former system of apartheid also colonialism, or was it a crisis internal to the South African state?

Sometimes it is thought just to say that although colonialism — i.e. physical occupation of land — is over, imperialism remains. Indeed, it is a valid point and a useful direction for inquiry: as both Mudimbé and Hountondji argue, the modes

of Western dominance are hard to perceive, self-propagating, and grow abundantly within African social space. But if colonization is the occupation and control of another's space, then perhaps looking into the concept of space will allow us a more fecund critique of the relations between Africa and the rest of the world.

On the other hand, in what sense may we say that Western societies are, or were, imperial societies? How can we make such blanket statements? For although we may admit, Socratically, that if one suffers to remain in her/his native land then s/he tacitly accepts to abide by its rules and be judged according to its laws,[269] it is quite clear that there never was (and probably never will be) the sort of wholesale consensus that would constitute a *bona fide* social contract. Analogously, it may be said that every member of a colonial society is complicit with that society's enterprises, especially insofar as s/he, knowingly or unknowingly, enjoys the material and psychical advantages that it confers; nevertheless, this complicity is not necessarily either conscious or active (as the colonized individual's responses are actively complicit, as defined by Fanon and Memmi). So we may wish to criticize the modern Westerner's integration within a network of social forces which maintains Western power, wealth, and 'development', while simultaneously marginalizing, impoverishing, and retarding countries of the 'Third World'. But at the same time, it is unrealistic, and ultimately pointless, to posit the average white, middle-class, male, office worker in the West as the dominant opposite of poor black African farmer. Indeed, we might suspect that the problem in such cases is really not one of domination, active or passive (whatever the latter could mean), but a problem of estrangement: a powerlessness on both sides, which, although establishing vast differences in

standard of living, is ultimately sad because it precludes common understanding of the factors which structure our selves and direct our lives, and hence human solidarity.

7.4.4 Language

Fanon says that in speaking a language one takes on the whole weight of the civilization behind it. By contrast, Marcien Towa argues that language is an empty receptacle. Is Towa writing from a very Western (e.g. Lockean) perspective, reflecting a culture which has not had to fight through linguistically constructed barriers of oppression and misrepresentation?

Likewise, Donald Davidson says, in rebutting the notion of alternative conceptual schemes, that if we could not assign credible explanation to a creature's utterances than we could not ascribe to that creature linguistic ability (and hence intelligence). But, in history, things have worked the other way around. Through denying *a priori* the intelligence or humanity of certain classes of human beings, dominant groups have managed to ignore or silence the rationality of their speech.

Kwasi Wiredu also comments that 'the very conceptual frameworks of our lucubrations are in many ways those that are embedded in the foreign languages in which we have been trained. Who and what, then, are we?' (*Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p.147). Other theorists take this point even further:

> Every time we speak or write in English, French, German, or another dominant European language, we pay homage to Western intellectual and political hegemony.[270]

But why should this be so? Like cultures, languages are also heterogeneous — with different accents, dialects, grammar, semantics, syntax, registers, and so forth.

7.5 Conclusion

It is immensely important to enagage with the problems that are raised within the area of African philosophy. One of the first concerns of this area is the fundamental question of the nature of philosophy, a question which, due to the specificities of Africa's history, forces the discipline to take account of socio-historical context. On the one hand, philosophy must come to terms with the role it has played in the justification of colonial exploitation and the fact that many of the greatest exponents of what was supposed to be a neutral, universal discourse have actually been highly partial and ethnocentric. On the other hand, the growing interest in traditional forms of thought and the possibility of different types of reason necessitates a re-examination of the discipline's boundaries, and could even lead to a complete revolution in what we take to be 'philosophy'.

Whether or not this will be the case, an immediate effect of African involvement within international philosophical circles is to bring the discipline into a closer rapport with the political environment, for 'le sort de la philosophie est liée à celui de la liberté'.[271] In a continent that has undergone and continues to undergo dramatic, and often extremely violent political upheavals, it is increasingly important to put into practice those skills which can promote clear thinking and clear speaking, the primary basis for effective communication and mutual comprehension. When the structures of African societies frequently change, for better or for worse, what other discipline is capable of addressing simultaneously

the legal, economic, political, and ethical demands of many and diverse social groups?

And if a fair number of the problems that have occupied African philosophers so far seem to take the form of irresolvable conundrums that go round and round in circles, this fact only fairly reflects the current state of our (global) societies. The profound (and, I think, irresolvable) difficulty in deciding, and then proving, exactly what is colonial or neo-colonial influence is only one aspect of a world that seems unable to come to terms with its ultimate unity, particularly in the face of moral and political issues whose deep complexity is finally revealed as we start to bring into doubt old, comfortable cultural essentialisms and ethnocentric reduction. Other aspects might include: the moral status of international military intervention, concerns about globalization, the distinction between armed struggle for freedom and terrorism, problems of immigration, and modern questions of national identity.

At the same time, it is obvious that there is a reason to engage with these issues only so long as we believe that we can actually come closer to resolving them. Or perhaps resolution is too difficult a goal, or of the wrong order. For indeed, what Mudimbé offers us is not so much a solution or a resolution, as a suggestion for a path to take, which might lead us to find a fresh perspective. It is '"l'aventure" contre "la science", l'incertitude contre la sécurité intellectuelle'; and for Africans it is also:

> une promesse, celle de pouvoir produire 'une science du dedans', celle de s'intégrer dans la complexité véritable des formations sociales africaines et de les assumer, non plus comme des calques de l'histoire occidentale mais en leur specificité culturelle et historique; c'est concevoir l'Afrique comme pouvant être autre chose qu'une marge de l'Occident et donc comme pouvant prétendre à un autre avenir que celui de zone sous-développée, garante du développement de l'Occident; c'est enfin, et surtout, vouloir que les sciences sociales ne soient pas seulement des collectrices d'informations dites objectives mais qu'elles soient, de manière réelle, revélatrices de

mouvance sociale et lieux d'une prise permanente de conscience et de parole. (*L'Odeur du Père*, p. 57)

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Notes

[1] William Blake (1948), from 'The Book of Thel' in *Didactic and Symbolic Works*, in *Blake's Poetry and Prose*, 4th edn, ed by Geoffrey Keynes (New York: Random Press, 1948).

[2] This type of discipline is discussed below, particularly in chapter 3, throughout, and in chapter 5, section 2.2. Also see Paulin J. Hountondji, *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'* (Paris: Maspero, 1977), p. 16; and Valentin Yves Mudimbé, *L'Odeur du Père* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982), p. 52.

[3] 'Current African professional philosophy is predominantly a metaphilosophy. Its central theme is the question "What is philosophy?" And a corollary of this question is "What is African philosophy?". Henry Odera Oruka, 'Sagacity in African Philosophy', in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, ed by Tsenay Serequeberhan (Minnesota: Paragon House Publishers, 1991) pp. 47-62 (p. 48).

[4] Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1910; repr. 1985), especially pp. 37-38, 78.

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971). Of course, the 'glory' is a double-edged sword, since it is consistent with the content of the less flattering views which are described below.

[6] Arthur de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1884).

[7] David Hume 'Essay XXI - Of National Characters', in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary by David Hume, Volume 1*, ed by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1907), pp. 244-258.

[8] Apart from the standard example of St. Augustine, see also Hountondji's discussion of Antoine-Guillaume Amo, in *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 139-170. Hountondji details Amo's bibliography in *Libertés: Contribution à la Révolution Dahoméenne* (Cotonou: Éditions Renaissance, 1973), pp. 32-35.

[9] See Robert Bernasconi, 'Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism', in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed by Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 145-166.

[10] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 91-99.

[11] See John Stuart Mill, 'On Goverment', in *On Liberty, Representative Government, the Subjection of Women: Three Essays by John Stuart Mill* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912); Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie bantoue*, 3rd edn (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1949).

[12] See *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. from 2nd German edn by N. I Stone (London: Kegan Paul, 1904); 'British Rule in India', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Colonialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

[13] *L'Autre Face du Royaume: Une Introduction à la critique des langages en folie* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1974), p. 27.

[14] *Studies In a Dying Colonialism (L'an 5 de la Révolution Algérienne)*, trans. by H. Chevalier (London: Earthscan Publication, 1989), p. 50.

[15] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952; repr. 1995); see also Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957; repr. 1985) Note Fanon's remark: 'je n'ai pas voulu être objectif. D'ailleurs c'est faux: il ne m'a pas été possible d'être objectif', in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 70.

[16] Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris/Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1955). Hountondji also comments that the two parties are 'enchaînés à un même destin, condamnés à vaincre ou à périr ensemble', in *Recherche théorique africaine et contrat de solidarité* (Geneva: Institut national d'études sociales, 1978), p. 2.

[17] 'Conditions d'une affirmation d'une pensée philosophique africaine moderne', in *Présence Africaine* (1981), nos 117-118, 341-353 (p. 341); English trans. in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, pp. 187-200.

[18] *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London: Methuen, 1992), p. 148.

[19] These interests are usually the same ones: the revaluation of African subjectivities, the development of African cultures and disciplines, and so on.

[20] For example, Senghor's first texts, Fanon, Césaire, and Memmi's works; and, amongst the Europeans, Tempels and Sartre.

[21] Cf. *L'Odeur du Père*, and *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*. This notion is introduced in chapter 5 and developed in chapter 6.

[22] Sartre is another essential figure in this history, whose importance it is hard to overstate. Sartre wrote the 'introductory essay' *Orphée Noir* for Senghor's anthology of black poetry, and with it gave the definitive rendition of the soul, purpose and destiny of the Négritude movement. He also wrote prefaces to the 1961 edition of Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* and Albert Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé*, not to mention his numerous independent publications dealing with racism: plays (most famously *La Putain respectueuse*), prose fiction, essays, and articles in *Le Figaro*, *Combat*, *Présence Africaine*, *Les Temps Modernes*, and many other newspapers and journals. For discussions of Sartre on the theme of racism, see Julien Murphy's 'Sartre on American Racism' and Lewis R. Gordon's 'Sartrean Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism' in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed by Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 222-240 and pp. 241-259.

[23] See also Senghor's provocatively titled obituary, 'Senghor l'Euronègre', in *Le Monde*, 22 December 2001, pp. 1, 15.

[24] As the principal trajectory of this thesis derives from the question 'what is African philosophy?', I shall deal neither with Senghor's humanist theory, nor with his political theory, 'African socialism'. Though these are clearly important areas for research and discussion, they do not lie within the scope of the current work.

[25] Leo Frobenius, *La Civilisation africaine*, trans. by H. Back and D. Ermont (Paris: Le Rocher, 1995).

[26] *In My Father's House*, p. 330, note 48.

[27] For an explanation of the term 'professional philosophy', see 3.1. The 'strict sense' of 'philosophy' is explained partially above, and more thoroughly in chapter 3.

[28] Cf. *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962); *Liberté 3: Négritude et Civilisation de l'Universel* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977).

[29] Peter O. Bodunrin, 'The Question of African Philosophy', in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, pp. 63-86 (p. 68). And see *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, p. 3.

[30] 'By "minority discourse", we mean a theoretical articulation of the political and cultural structures that connect different minority cultures in their subjugation and opposition to the dominant culture', in Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. ix.

[31] Nancy Hartsock, 'Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories', in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, pp. 17-36 (p. 22).

[32] Aimé Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956), p. 15; cited in *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 14.

[33] E.g. Hountondji (*Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 64, note 28), Appiah (*In My Father's House*, pp. 247-50, and 330, note 50), Owomoyela (*African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 181), Serequeberhan (*The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, pp. 47, 59).

[34] 'Négritude and African Socialism', in *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. by P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 438-447 (p. 440); also published in

St. Anthony's Papers, 15 (1963), pp. 9-22. The second quotation is taken from Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Liberté 3: Négritude et Civilisation de l'Universel* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 69.

[35] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Orphée Noir', in Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue francaise* (Paris: Quadridge Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), pp. ix-xliv (p. xiv).

[36] Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964. All subsequent citations from Senghor are taken from this text, unless otherwise stated.

[37] Fanon complains that 'Jean-Paul Sartre, dans ['Orphée Noir'] a détruit l'enthousiasme noir', *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952; repr. 1995), p. 109. See also V. Y. Mudimbé, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 84.

[38] *Essays Moral, Political and Literary by David Hume, vol 1*, ed by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1907), p. 252, note 1.

[39] For example: ' … as the French word "*con-naître*" suggests, be reborn …', in *The African Philosophy Reader*, p. 438. In fact this is a false etymology, as the Latin forms show: *cognoscere* (from the Greek γιγνωσκω) and *nascere* (from γενναω); the distinction is preserved in Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, and only the French forms permit this confusion. For other examples of Senghor's tendency to resort to etymological arguments see *Liberté 1*, pp. 25, 47; 'Negritude', in *Optima*, 16, pp. 3, 6; *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la Politique Africaine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962), pp. 15, 19, 22, 36, 64.

[40] See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971).

[41] *La Philosophie bantoue* (Paris: Prèsence Africaine, 1949).

[42] We may notice that he says '*le* Blanc européen' as if there were only one type of white European, thereby reinforcing the myth of the homogeneity of the West. This subject is treated in section 3 below, and also in chapter 4, sections 3 and 4.

[43] The term *surréalité* (and sometimes *sur-réalité*) may be intended to link Négritude implicitly with the Surrealist movement; see *Optima*, pp. 5-8.

[44] *Liberté 3*, p. 72. The context makes it clear that 'la philosophie classique' refers to Western philosophy.

[45] See section 2.3 below, on the notion of 'race'.

[46] Augustine Shutte notes that 'Negritude appears as a collection of insights, each bearing a certain relation to the others deriving from their common origin, rather than as a systematic philosophy …' in *The African Philosophy Reader*, p. 437.

[47] These are all pursuits that Senghor believes go to make up a civilisation, see *Liberté 1*, p. 202.

[48] Although the idea of eurocentrism is worth investigating, its position is peripheral to the primary concerns of this thesis and precludes more than a passing reference. See instead E. Saïd's seminal work for a much fuller treatment of the issue: *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

[49] *Racial theories*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 2 (emphasis added).

[50] See *Liberté 1*, p. 22, where he talks of a 'culture une et unitaire'.

[51] Senghor also makes this connection in *Optima*, and in *Liberté 3*, p. 70. Cf. Henri Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 43rd edn (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1944); *L'Energie spirituelle*, 42nd edn (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946); *L'Evolution créatrice*, 80th edn (Paris: Presses Universitares de France, 1957).

[52] See *The German Ideology*, trans. by W. Lough (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1942).

[53] Compare Senghor's 'African socialism', elaborated in *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* and *Liberté 3*.

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[54] Cf. *The Republic of Plato*, trans. by John Llewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1885), Book X.

[55] For example, one may consider his enthusiasm for French language, culture, and thought, as it is expressed in 'Ce que l'homme noir apporte', in *Liberté 1*, pp. 22-38.

[56] *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 127.

[57] Cf. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 78.

[58] Cf. *The Philosophy of History*, ch. 2.

[59] The important difference between Senghor and Bergson on this point is that it never occurs to Bergson that these two ways of gaining knowledge might be racially segregated. See *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*.

[60] Cf. *La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 113.

[61] Janet G. Vaillant *Black, French, and African: a life of Leopold Sedar Senghor* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 95.

[62] 'Les' refers to 'les Blancs'. One may note the similarity between this and Tempels' remark: 'ce qu'ils [les Bantous] désirent avant tout et par-dessus tout, [… c'est] bien la reconnaissance par le Blanc et son respect, pour leur dignité d'homme, pour leur pleine valeur humaine', p. 44.

[63] Hountondji says that 'la recherche de l'originalité est toujours solidaire d'un désir de paraître. Elle n'a de sens que dans le rapport à l'Autre, […] Rapport ambigu dans la mesure où, en l'affirmant, on n'a de cesse que l'Autre ne l'ait effectivement reconnue.' *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 34.

[64] Even if they are false, we might follow Nietzsche in thinking that 'nous ne voyons pas dans la fausseté d'un jugement une objection contre ce jugement', *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), (§4) p. 15.

[65] Although Senghor admits 'notre orgueil se tranforma vite en racisme' (*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*, p. 20), Senghor is talking about Africans' relation with Europe, i.e. the 'racisme antiraciste', the counter-violence posited by Sartre (*Anthologie*, p. xl). Cf also Senghor in *The African Philosophy Reader*, p. 440.

[66] See Mudimbé, *The Invention of Africa*, p. 92.

[67] The main conclusion of Tempel's book, for instance, is that the Europeanization of Africans should stop, in order to allow them to be 'authentically African'. See *La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 123.

[68] Quoted in *The Invention of Africa*, p. 137.

[69] See *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine* and Teilhard de Chardin's *Sauvons l'humanité* (same volume).

[70] See repetitions of the theme in later texts such as the *Optima* essay, and the paper given at Oxford (in *The African Philosophy Reader*).

[71] This is, in effect, a form of the Nature versus Nurture debate.

[72] Mudimbé finds Hountondji's 'great intellectual authority' derives partly from his education at L'École Normale Supérieure, 'one of the most select and prestigious schools in the world', his *agrégation de philosophie*, which gives him 'an indubitable prestige', and his academic career in Europe and Africa, as well as his positions in international philosophical institutions, which have facilitated the dissemination of his ideas. He continues: 'nevertheless, it is only fair to say that the brilliance of his texts, the soundness of his reasoning, and the pertinence of his arguments probably constitute the real factors in the success of his critique of ethnophilosophy.' In *The Invention of Africa*, pp. 158-9.

[73] *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 48.

[74] More precisely, 'philosophy in or *about* Africa', since it is one of Hountondji's most ardent criticisms of ethnological/ethnophilosophical studies about Africa that it is too often the voice of a

non-African who speaks: the vast majority of dialogue *about* Africa is constructed by non-Africans. This criticism is a accompanied by a call for dialogue *in* Africa between *Africans*. The term 'ethnophilosophy' is explained below.

[75] See section 2.4.1.

[76] *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'* (Paris: François Maspero, 1977), p. 82. All citations from Hountondji will refer to this text, unless otherwise stated.

[77] Liberté 1, p. 24. See section 2.2 of this thesis.

[78] For example, see, Lévy-Bruhl's 1910 text, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieurs* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1910).

[79] Soyinka's critique may be found in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, on pp. 127 and 136. For a good discussion of the radical role of culture in socio-political change, see Arif Dirlik's 'Culturalism as Hegemonic Ideology and Liberating Practice' in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. by JanMohammed and Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 394-431.

[80] See *Liberté 1*, p. 22, where he talks of a 'culture une et unitaire'.

[81] See Senghor's *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine* and Teilhard de Chardin's *Sauvons l'humanité* (same volume).

[82] The Bantus are generally taken to inhabit southern, eastern and central Africa. This is not, then, a single society, but the languages of the Bantu are supposed to derive from the same linguistic family: hence one of the justifications for this categorisation.

[83] Alexis Kagame, *La Philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être* (Brussels: [n. pub.], 1956); Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (London: Heinemann, 1964); Alioune Diop 'Niam M'Paya ou de la fin que dévorent les moyens', preface to *La Philosophie bantoue*. Hountondji credits Nkrumah as the originator of the term 'ethnophilosophy'. See 'From the Ethnosciences to Ethnophilosophy: Kwame Nkrumah's Thesis Project' in *Research in African Literatures* 28.4 (1997), pp. 112-120.

[84] Hountondji supplies what he calls 'une bibliographie minimale' of African philosophy on p. 12, note 1. On p. 53, note 1, he refers us to Alphonse Smet's *Bibliographie de la pensée africaine*, in *Cahiers philosophiques africains*, 2 (July-December, 1972), Lubumbashi.

[85] Towa adds: 'Mais on peut dire autant des autres ethnophilosophes. D'une façon générale, la liste des ethnophilosophes et celle des théologiens africains coïncident à peu de choses près.' in 'Conditions d'une affirmation …', p. 343.

[86] E.g.: 'Celui qui prétend que les primitifs ne possèdent point de système de pensée, les rejette d'office de la classe des hommes', in *La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 15.

[87] Cf. *La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 123.

[88] This is because the sources are supposed to be *implicitly* philosophical; see *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 32-3. For a discussion of why Hountondji rejects this claim, see the next section, on Hountondji's own concept of philosophy. For a defence of ethnophilosophical methodology, see Oyenka Owomoyela, 'Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration', in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, pp. 156-186.

[89] Hence Tempels: 'Si les Bantous possèdent une philosophie définie, une sagesse profonde et un comportement fondé, nous pourrons peut-être y trouver une base valide sur laquelle il sera possible aux Bantous de construire leur civilisation', *La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 113. Clearly, with such a narrow focus, there is little room for a critical appropriation of Bantu philosophy, for it is regarded as an object.

[90] Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, referring to Molière's caricatural bourgeois, who is delighted and amazed to learn that all his life he has spoken prose, without realizing. Quoted in *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 54.

[91] Mudimbé deals with such an argument; see L'Odeur du Père, pp. 135-6. See also Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, pp. 15, 37-41; and John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Representative Government, the Subjection of Women*, sections 197-9 and 382.

[92] For a more detailed discussion of the links between ethnology and domination, see *L'Odeur du Père*: 'l'ethnologie ne prend ses dimensions propres que dans la souveraineté historique — toujours retenue mais toujours actuelle — de la pensée européenne …' p. 23; also pp. 44-5, and 52.

[93] Compare the following: 'What one might call the "imputation of community" is one of the favoured ways of advancing racist discourse: it is by assigning a "singular plural" — *the* Jew, *the* Arab, *the* Bambara, *the* homosexual — and thus by the negation of individuality that all forms of rejection are practiced, Jean-Loup Amselle, 'Anthropology and Historicity', trans. by Marjolijn De Jager, in *African Studies Review*, vol. 28, nos 2/3 (1985), 12-31 (p. 27).

[94] See Marcel Griaule, Griaule, *Dieu d'eau: Entretiens avec Ogotemmêli* (Paris: Editions du Chêne, 1948). Hountondji's criticisms of Griaule may be found on pp. 91-4, and 101 of *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*.

[95] So they are described in the *Collins English Dictionary* (1998).

[96] Compare Oyenka Owomoyela: 'A true African philosophy would aim at reconciling Africans to Africaness [sic], not at advocating dissolution in a European cultural mélange', in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 178.

[97] In *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, vol. 5, *African Philosophy*, ed by Guttorm Floistad (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) p. 34.

[98] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), II, 2, 249-50.

[99] Arguably, the objection raised through this particular example comes down to another terminological confusion, 'natural philosopher' simply being synonymous with 'natural scientist'; still it is a matter of fact that the status and role of Western philosophy has greatly changed since its ancient hellenic inception, for this reason, if for no other, Keita's argument merits consideration.

[100] *L'Idée d'une philosophie negro-africaine*, pp. 24-44.

[101] Christopher Miller comments that 'within this system, the specter of legitimation, elitism, and dominance is naturally omnipresent, and all positions are ambiguous', in 'Alioune Diop and the Unfinished Temple of Knowledge', in *The Surreptitious Speech*, pp. 427-434 (p. 433).

[102] *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 48 (emphasis added). For reservations about Hountondji's commitment to this 'geographical criterion', see section 3.4.1, above.

[103] *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 49. Hountondji discusses this at length in 'Recapturing', in *The Surreptitious Speech*, pp. 238-48.

[104] See also *Recherche théorique africaine et contrat de solidarité* (Geneva: Institut national d'études sociales, 1978).

[105] Owomoyela in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 171.

[106] Cf. bell hooks: 'The force that allows white authors to make no reference to racial identity in their books about "women" that are in actuality about white women is the same one that would compel any author writing exclusively on black women to refer explicitly to their racial identity. […] It is the dominant race that reserves itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily aware of her racial identity.' In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), p. 138.

[107] Cf. Oyenka Owomoyela: 'the mentality that sees superstition and fetish priests in Africa while it sees religion and thinkers in Europe, that sees mythology and systems of thought in Africa while it sees philosophy in Europe, is kin to that which sees natives, savages and tribes in Africa while it sees citizens, civilized peoples and nations in Europe.', 'Africa and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Consideration', in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 179.

[108] Eleni Coundouriotis, *Contesting Authenticity: Colonialism, Ethnography and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 95.

[109] For further discussion on the use of the 'singular plural', i.e. natural racial kinds see Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, p. 106; see also *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 226-8 for Hountondji's discussion of the 'singulier trompeur', la civilisation africaine.

[110] Once again, it is Senghor's penchant for etymology that leads him to rely on the term 'sympathetic'; a more natural English translation might be 'empathic understanding'. See section 2.2.

[111] Cf. 'L'Esthétique négro-africaine', *Liberté 1*, pp. 202-17. See also the second chapter of the present work for a discussion of the issues recapitulated above.

[112] Léopold Senghor, 'Négritude and African Socialism', in St. Anthony's Papers (repr.), *The African Philosophy Reader*, pp. 438-48 (p. 439).

[113] Serequeberhan, summarizing these views, labels them 'Senghor's internalized and ontologized racism', in *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*, p. 46. See also pp. 49-52 for Serequeberhan's convincing argument that, for Senghor, 'it is Indo-European humanity which, properly speaking, is the embodiment of "true" humanity as such. […] Africanité — on its own terms — describes the humanity of the human in Negro-African existence as primitive savagery', pp. 50-52.

[114] According to Towa, the very question about whether there exists a black reason relies on the racist context which makes it possible; v. 'L'Idée d'une philosophie negro-africaine'.

[115] See *Myth, Literature and the African World*, pp. 127-9; see also chapter 2, section 4. 3, of this thesis.

[116] 'In Praise of Alienation' in *The Surreptitious Speech*, pp. 201-224 (p. 205).

[117] Coundouriotis comments that 'Senghor addressed the future and not the past in his humanistic ideal, seeking to assert what Fabian calls the "coevalness" of African and European experience from the present moment onward', *Claiming History*, p. 82.

[118] Cf. *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine*, throughout.

[119] I am thinking principally of Senghor's discussion of this subject in 'Ce que l'homme noir apporte', in *Liberté 1*, pp. 22-38.

[120] The principal texts we have used in our reading of Senghor were first published between 1939 ('Ce que l'homme noir apporte') and 1966 ('Negritude' in *Optima*). Compare Césaire's less moderate critique of the colonial culture, in *Discours sur le colonialisme*, p. 41.

[121] See section 2.3 of this thesis, and *Liberté* 1, p. 259.

[122] Cf. *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la Politique Africaine*.

[123] Hountondji ascribes a methodology which is not supposed to be relevant to any particular school, movement, style, or generation of philosophy. See section 3.4.

[124] Compare Senghor, who says 'le Négro-Africain nous a, toujours et partout, présenté une conception du monde à l'opposé de la philosophie classique', *Liberté 3*, p. 72.

[125] For details, see chapter 2 of this thesis.

[126] 'Beauvoir and the Problem of Race', in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed by Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott, pp. 260-284 (p. 282). See also M. P. More, 'Outlawing Racism in Philosophy: On Race and Philosophy', in *The African Philosophy Reader*, pp. 364-373 (especially pp. 370-372).

[127] Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. by John T. Goldthwait (London: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 113.

[128] In making use of the following extracts from minority discourse texts I am certainly not assuming that these are the only or the best examples. Rather, it is a matter of looking at a style of discourse which theorizes the problems of marginalizing violence, since it is precisely this element that was said to be lacking in the responses of Senghor and Hountondji.

[129] Nancy Hartsock, 'Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories', in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* , pp. 17-36.

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[130] Such is the tone of 'Vues sur l'Afrique Noire ou assimiler, non être assimilés' in *Liberté 1*, pp. 39-69. He even goes so far as to say that the French language, due to its clarity, orderliness and harmony, is the perfect vehicle for African development (p. 65). Since this essay, like the others, was written for a French audience we may infer that Senghor's extreme tact was at least in part for the sake of diplomacy.

[131] I use the equivocation 'minority or marginalized' because groups such as women are, of course, numerically in the majority. In general I shall treat the two terms as synonymous.

[132] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 131. See also *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy,* pp. 62-3.

[133] Cf. *La Philosophie bantoue*, p. 17; *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, pp. 60-2.

[134] Cf. Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, throughout; and *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, pp. 55-85.

[135] Nancy Hartsock, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, p. 21, note 3.

[136] I am not claiming that Hartsock would accept these points of view, only that the over-simplicity of her analysis entails them.

[137] Cf. *Peau noire, masques blancs*; *Le Portrait du colonisé.*

[138] There are other marginalized groups, whose concerns are not taken to be solidary with minority discourse. Extreme right-wing organisations — 'white-power' groups, and so on — are also marginal.

[139] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 194.

[140] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 194.

[141] This is not such a strange idea as it may sound: both Fanon and Memmi discuss colonized subjects who internalize their oppression and are, in effect, their own worst enemy. See *Peau noire, masques blancs*, and *Le Portrait du colonisé.*

[142] There are traditionally at least two broad senses to the term 'violence': the more obvious being the use of (excessive or undue) force against other people or objects. The second, perhaps derivative, and less common sense is 'to distort or twist the sense or intention of'. See *Collins English Dictionary* (1998).

[143] It is possible to hold that there are differences between 'whites' and 'blacks' without wishing to assign any moral value to those differences.

[144] Obviously in some way it is what is called for, since without an understanding of the racist's subjectivity there is no rational way of proceeding to counter, undermine, or simply treat it.

[145] This is analogous to Mudimbé's description of 'l'ethnologie qui peut, au gré des idéologies ambiantes en Occident, privilégier tour à tour ou simultanément la thèse du relativisme culturel ou son contraire', in *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 99.

[146] Cf. 'On Government', in *Three Essays by John Stuart Mill*.

[147] *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, p. 71. For a more contextualized discussion of these issues, see M. P. More's 'Outlawing Racism in Philosophy: On Race and Philosophy', in *The African Philosophy Reader*, pp. 364-373; Anthony Appiah's ' The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race', in *'Race', Writing, and Difference*, ed by H. L. Gates, Jnr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 21-37; and Lucius Outlaw's *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[148] According to Hountondji, the strict sense of the word 'philosophy' is an 'ensemble de textes et de discours explicites, [une] littérature d'intention philosophique.' See *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 33, n. 20, and also chapter 3 of this thesis.

[149] E.g., Towa 'Conditions d'une affirmation d'une pensée philosophique africaine moderne'; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London:

Methuen, 1992), pp. 135-171; Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, pp. 13-30.

[150] 'The perceptions and arguments of the professional philosophers inevitably show the consequences of what Mudimbe … describes as "silently depending on a Western episteme," and share the weaknesses of inauthenticity that are often associated with Négritude …' Oyenka Owomoyela in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, p. 181.

[151] As Margaret A. Simmons comments: 'if racial differences are not cast in stone, they are nonetheless salient features of individual lives in a racist society', in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*,

ed. by Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 260-285 (p. 282).

[152] Manthia Diawara, in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation & Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Anne McClintock et al (Minnesota: University Of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 456-467 (p. 457).

[153] Jean-Claude Willame 'L'Autre face du royaume ou le meurtre du père', in *Génève-Afrique* (1976), 1, 89-95 (p. 90). Willame continues: 'Cette minorité a été formée par des maîtres admirables, certes, mais qui appartient [au] royaume européen.'

[154] The preceding citation is the subtitle to *L´Odeur du Père*. Mudimbé describes his collection of essays as 'écrits de circonstance. Différents et même, apparemment, contradictoires, ils sont davantage expressions d'une interrogation attentive à la vie et au milieu vital que recherches systématiques selon les normes scolaires'. In *L'Odeur du Père: essai sur des limites de la science et de la vie en Afrique noire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982), p. 14. All further citations of Mudimbé, unless indicated otherwise, will refer to this text.

[155] I leave the last three items of this list in their original French forms since it seems to me that a concise translation would lack precision, and a precise one would lack concision.

[156] Note the naval image invoked by the term *arrimer* — 'to lash, or stow' — Africa would therefore be constrained both in terms of position and direction, both subordinate to the West at present and fated to follow the same line of progress. Mudimbé develops these elements later on, as shall we.

[157] Tibor Mende, quoted by Mudimbé, p. 12. We might also add to this list of economic problems faced by Africa, the enormous burden of financial debt owed to various national and international banks, and the obligation to produce so-called 'cash crops' (which are largely destined to constitute luxury goods for Eur-American consumption) and thus neglect the public food supply, a policy whose disastrous consequences have been seen in the chronic famine suffered by the poor of several African countries during the recent decades. Serequeberhan also remarks: 'in the name and in the guise of technological and scientific "assistance" Europe imposes on us its hegemonic political and cultural control', ref. p. 21

[158] According to Hountondji this is the case with ethnophilosophy, which thereby becomes a 'réplique scientifique de l'extraversion de nos économies dominées', in 'Occidentalisme, élitisme: réponse à deux critiques', in *Recherche, Pédagogie et Culture* 9, 56, 58-67 (p. 63).

[159] See Mudimbé, *The Invention of Africa*, pp. 86-90, and Sartre's 'Orphée Noir, in the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre*, pp. ix-xliv.

[160] This citation is reminiscent of Fanon: 'la philosophie n'a jamais sauvé personne … l'intelligence non plus n'a jamais sauvé personne … si c'est au nom de l'intelligence et de la philosophie que l'on proclame l'égalité des hommes, c'est en leur nom aussi qu'on décide leur extermination', in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 22. We explore this link further in what follows.

[161] There is a further rapport between these two terms: *étreindre*, here implying 'to embrace', may also mean 'to grip tightly'; the noun *étreinte* may also be translated 'stranglehold', hence the danger of *étouffement* (suffocation, smothering).

[162] Compare JanMohammed and Lloyd: 'Such pluralism tolerates the existence of salsa, it even enjoys Mexican restaurants, but it bans Spanish as a medium of instruction in American schools', p. 8 in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*.

[163] Mudimbé with B. Jewsiewicki, 'African's Memories and Contemporary History of Africa', in *History & Theory* (1993) 32. 4, 1-11 (p. 3).

[164] Also note the voluntary renunciation of the claim to objectivity; Mudimbé: 'il se peut que cet ensemble de traits soit purement accidentel ou n'ait d'autre sens que de signifier moi-même' (p. 14). Fanon writes: 'je n'ai pas voulu être objectif. D'ailleurs c'est faux: il ne m'a pas été possible d'être objectif', in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 70.

[165] *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956), p. 15. Hountondji also cites this passage (see below).

[166] Mudimbé, *L'Autre face du royaume, une introduction à la critique des langages en folie* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1974), p. 136. Cf. David Armstrong's theory of 'immanent universals', *Universals and Scientific Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). See also Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, p. 12.

[167] Mudimbé is here making explicit reference to Michel Foucault's *L'Ordre du discours* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971).

[168] See also Mudimbé's 'African Gnosis', where he writes: 'epistemological contexts … make [discourses] possible and … account for them in an essential way', in *African Studies Review* (1985) vol. 28, nos 2/3, 149-233 (p. 149). Towa also makes a similar case: 'Conditions d'une affirmation…', p. 348.

[169] *L'Odeur du Père*, part I, section 3.

[170] This is, of course, a common reproach made to post-modernists like Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and Rorty. For a criticism of these writers along such lines, see Nancy Hartsock in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, pp. 17-36.

[171] Of course, there is no *obligation* to give an English translation; I am working on the assumption that if we can give an adequate translation then we understand and can make use of the phrase. In what follows, a periphrastic translation of the term is also the beginning of an exegesis.

[172] Cf. the title of Kwame Anthony Appiah's book, *In My Father's House*.

[173] 'Space' in the literal sense of the word and also in the senses which imply 'les attitudes d'être, […] l'exercice de la pensée, les pratiques de connaissance et les manières de vivre', *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 11.

[174] Compare vision, which Locke calls 'the most comprehensive of all our Senses', *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book II, Chapter IX, §9. See also M. Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1966), pp. 144-5.

[175] Notably 'L'Esthétique négro-africaine', in *Liberté 1: Négritude et Humanisme* (1964), pp. 202-217 — see chapter 2 of this thesis.

[176] And see Eleni Coundouriotis, *Claiming History: Colonialism, Ethnography and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 73-96, where she discusses Paul Hazoumé's ethnographical rewriting of Western interpretations of African art and symbolism.

[177] *La Pensée africaine: recherches sur les fondements de la pensée négro-africaine* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1983), pp. 58-60.

[178] Indeed, unless we take the particle 'de' in the phrase *'l'odeur du Père'* to indicate a causal link, it does not even mean that he *ever* existed..

[179] *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), p. 128.

[180] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1928), §293.

[181] Is the last item in the list really 'aid', or something which '[sert] remarquablement bien à la recolonisation'? *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 12.

[182] Surely this is precisely what Owomoyela has in mind when he claims that the 'professional philosophers' 'silently depend on a Western episteme' and goes on to argue that 'in order to

rehabilitate our professional philosophers, African universities might need to absorb the discipline of philosophy into their institutes of African Studies. The philosophers would then have strong inducements to shed their present disdain for African Studies'. See Owomoyela in *African Philosophy: The Essential Readings*, pp. 181-2.

[183] Robert Graves notes that 'official English literature of the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries cannot … properly be understood except in the light of Greek mythology …', in *The Greek Myths* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1960), p. 11.

[184] Cited in *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 9. Senghor also goes further, arguing that Africans must discover their blackness and a style to express it through the study of French letters: see *Liberté 1*, pp. 39-69.

[185] Of course it is important to discern the nuances of these positions. The object of Hountondji's dissatisfaction is a discourse that is focussed *on* Africans while tending to elide them as speaking subjects, or, when they are permitted to speak, forcing representations/interpretations of African realities into rigid conceptual schemes that are proper to the West. There is no equivalent of this with respect to Europe and the Greeks, as the latter were exhumed, so to speak, not assimilated as contemporary masters.

[186] See Eleni Coundouriotis who remarks on 'a tendency to equate anticolonialism with an anti-Western attitude', *Claiming History*, p. 95.

[187] Achebe goes on to say :'I have indicated somewhat offhandedly that the national literature of Nigeria and of many other countries of Africa is, or will be, written in English. This may sound like a controversial statement, but it isn't. All I have done has been to look at the reality of present-day Africa. This "reality" may change as a result of deliberate, e.g., political, action', and also:

'There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the faculty for mutual communication […] The only reason why we can even talk about African unity is that when we get together we can have a manageable number of languages to talk in — English, French, Arabic.' pp. 94-5.

[188] Cf. Mudimbé: 'les critiques […] élident par trop facilement une question majeure, celle du sens de l'écart à prendre à l'égard de l'Occident et ce qu'il coûte vraiment d'assumer cet écart', *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 44. This line of thought is developed below.

[189] Cf. *La Mentalité primitive*.

[190] *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 45 and Jean Baudrillard, *Le Miroir de la production* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1985), p. 97.

[191] Compare what Carlos A. Forment writes of post-colonial writing: 'Postcolonial narratives do not aspire to provide a definitive account of the encounter between ex-colonials and ex-imperialist masters, rather they provide normative and literary resources for both groups to undergo a transformation that takes them beyond their previous experiences of each other. Postcolonial narratives, in contrast to Enlightenment stories, do not hold out the promise of complete mastery and transparent understanding. Instead, what they offer its practitioners is an acknowledgement of differences and a tolerance for the mobile, nonfixed, fluid nature of sociopolitical meaning …'. Carlos A. Forment, 'Culture, Identity, Democracy', in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries   of the Political*, ed by Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 320.

[192] *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 100. See also Benoît Verhargen's essay 'The African University: Evaluation and Perspectives', in *The Surreptitious Speech*, pp. 333-343.

[193] B. Verhaegen, quoted in *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 101.

[194] *L'Odeur du Père*, part II chapter 3 and part III chapter 5. See also chapter 5 of Appiah's *In my Father's House* for a discussion of these criteria.

[195] It is worth noting the resonance between Senghor's confident phrase and the critical introduction to *L'Odeur du Père*, where it is stated that 'l'occidentalisation de l'Afrique […] est à présent une action et un mouvement qui […] président à l'aménagement de la vie et même de la pensée', p. 11.

[196] See Towa 'Conditions d'une affirmation …', p. 341; Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, p. 61; and Bodunrin in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, 3rd edn, ed by Richard A. Wright (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), p. 7.

[197] Indeed, this may be the key to the problem of the *odeur*: within a context of dependence and 'extraversion', anything can be seen as neo-colonial oppression.

[198] Perhaps this possibility is represented by the symbol of the 'meurtre du Père', an overthrowing of the old order.

[199] *Antigone* in *The Theban Plays*, ed. by Betty Radice, trans. by E. F. Watling (Middlesex: Penguin, 1947), 587-98.

[200] What follows is, therefore, a condensed translation of Mudimbé's argument, which may be found in *L'Odeur du Père*, pp. 67-71.

[201] 'L'Autre face du royaume ou le meurtre du père', p. 92.

[202] Cf. Paulin Hountondji, 'Recapturing' in *The Surreptitious Speech*, p. 238-249.

[203]Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Allen Lane, 1968), p. 191. See also the rest of chapter 5, 'On Hedonism'.

[204] At this point, Memmi's comment is again apposite: 'le fait colonial n'est pas une pure idée. […] Il n'est pas si facile de s'évader, par l'esprit, d'une situation concrète, d'en refuser l'idéologie tout en continuant à en vivre les relations objectives', *Portrait du colonisé*, p. 47-8.

[205] The divorce operates through the denial of the reality of the colonial period, which thereafter functions as a hiatus: 'the "colonial parenthesis" of African history - a period corresponding to a sort of descent into hell and deserving only to be forgotten'. Mudimbé, 'African's Memories and Contemporary History of Africa', p. 1.

[206] René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1992).

See Wiredu, who argues that Descartes confuses certainty and infallibility, in *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 139.

[207] Kant makes a similar point in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, 6th edn, trans. by T. H. Abbott (London: Longmans, 1909), pp. 112-113.

[208] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* §16 (p. 22). See also §16-7 (pp. 22-25) for a general deconstruction of introspection and a critique of the logic of the *cogito*.

[209] Compare Kierkegaard's observation: 'If the claim of the philosophers to be unbiased were all it pretends to be, it would also have to take account of language and its whole significance with relation to speculation, for therein speculation has a medium which it did not itself choose …', in *A Kierkegaard Reader*, ed. by Robert Bretall (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 12.

[210] This is also, therefore, a question of excluding the cultural particularities which make a supposedly universal discourse ethnocentric.

[211] Hence the Platonic doctrine of the soul's recollection of the ideal realm. See *The Republic of Plato*, trans. by John Llewelyn Davies and David James Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1885), book 10; and 'Phaedo', in *Five Dialogues Of Plato* (London: Dent, 1910).

[212] Cf. Richard Rorty: 'Not only is there no universal agreement on the conditions of intelligibility or the criteria of rationality, but nobody even tries to pretend there is, except as an occasional and rather ineffectual rhetoric device', in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.100.

[213] See Willard Van Orman Quine, *From A Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953).

[214] See *The Moral Law*, or*, Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. by H. J. Paton, 3rd ed. (London: Hutchinson, 1956).

[215] See John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* (London: Dent, 1972).

[216] For example, the infamous refusal of Kant to trade off minor immoralities, like lying, against

greater evils, like murder. Does this show that there something wrong with Kant's system, or that morality is not strictly rational? See *The Moral Law*. Eric Weil also argues that, unless we can philosophically define the starting point of ethics, i.e. one's interests and desires, then 'pourquoi veut-on que l'individu préfère, dans un domaine quelconque et particulièrement dans celui de l'action, ce qui est logiquement satisfaisant à ce qui ne l'est pas?', in *Philosophie Morale*, 4th edn (Paris: Vrin, 1987), p. 8.

[217] Here I am glossing over the role that philosophical ethics plays in describing and explaining our moral lives (either to gain clarity, or to improve rationality), as I wish to focus on the *prescriptive* aims of ethics.

[218] *L'Ordre du discours* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1971), p. 22.

[219] The argument that philosophy is not subject to training or education is not meant to imply that we cannot train to become (better) philosophers. Rather, it refers to the assumption of the innateness of philosophical reasoning, its timelessness and self-sufficiency, which constrain Socrates to his maieutic role with respect to philosophical truth, such that an uneducated slave-boy needs but a little prompting to search within himself and find basic philosophical (or, in this case, geometrical) principles. See The Meno, in *Five Dialogues Of Plato*.

[220] *The Meno*, 97-98. It is important to note that Plato does not argue that reason is the sole, nor necessarily the quickest way to find truth, but only the surest way of locating and keeping hold of it.

[221] Heidegger, 'The Age of the World View', in *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 116.

[222] 'En septiembre se conocerán los criterios de O'Neill para administrar el llamado Fondo Milenio, un mecanismo recién creado por Washington para proporcionar recursos a los países pobres que demuestren una gestión correcta', from an article by Enric Gonzalez, in *El País*, 31 May 2002.

[223] We might compare the diplomatic disturbance of July 2000, when Charles Josselin caused outrage by what were perceived as the colonialist overtones of his comments on the electoral proceedings in the Ivory Coast. See, for example, *Le Monde* 29th July 2000. See also *The Independent*, 7th June 2002, 'Once again, African children are dying of hunger. But why is famine afflicting places of such natural wealth?'.

[224] ' "una misión histórica" con el objetivo de sacar a África del abismo', Enric Gonzalez, in *El País*.

[225] 'el continento más pobre', Enric Gonzalez, in *El País*.

[226] *Recherche théorique africaine et contrat de solidarité* (Geneva: Institut national d'études sociales, 1978), p. 3.

[227] 'Occidentalisme, élitisme: réponse à deux critiques', in *Recherche, Pédagogie et Culture* 9, 56, 58-67 (p. 63). See Hountondji, *Recherche théorique africaine*, p. 5 and passim, where it is argued that the use of Africa as trove of informational wealth leads to the 'drainage des richesses du tiers monde', in terms of data, researchers, etc.

[228] See Ernest Milcent and Monique Sordet, *Léopold Sédar Senghor et la naissance de l'Afrique moderne* (Paris: Seghers, 1969).

[229] *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 136-144. Compare Radhakrishnan: '[Jesse Jackson] was identified and found not genuinely representative because he was the spokesperson of "special interests" […] the implication is that certain interests are "natural", "general", "representative", and ideologically neutral and value-free. Corporate, military, business, male, "white", non-ethnic interests are general and representative to the point of being non-ideological, objective, axiomatic, and even "disinterested", whereas the axis of constituencies represented by Jackson are distortions of political reality,' p. 66.

[230] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Is the "Post-" in "Postcolonial" the "Post-" in "Postmodern"?', in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation & Postcolonial Perspectives*, Anne McClintock et al (eds.) (Minnesota: University Of Minnesota Press, 1997) pp. 420-444 (p. 424).

[231] See Nancy Hartsock in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, pp. 26-31, and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[232] See also Abiola Irele: 'Western civilization, at least in its contemporary manifestations and circumstance, provides the paradigm of modernity to which we aspire', 'In Praise of Alienation', in *The Surreptitious Speech*, pp. 201-224 (p. 202).

[233] *Moving the Centre: the Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (London: James Currey, 1993), p. 10.

[234] African philosophy 'ne [peut] exister que sous la forme de discours explicites, c'est à dire, avant tout, sous la forme d'une littérature', *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 130.

[235] 'En philosophie, d'une certaine manière, il n'y a pas de vérité absolue. Ou plutôt que l'absolu, ici, est dans le relatif: procès illimité, essentiellement ouvert. En d'autres termes, que la vérité ne saurait être un ensemble de propositions indépassables, définitives, mais le processus même par lequel nous cherchons, par lequel nous énonçons des propositions en essayant de les justifier, de les fonder.' *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 83. In Aristotelian terms, philosophical progress towards truth is *energetic*, rather than *entelechic*, that is to say, it is in the movement it inspires that the final cause is active, and not in any achievable finality.

[236] 'Le discours d'un Ogotemmêli, dans la mesure où il prétend énoncer une sagesse éternitaire, intangible, un savoir clos issu du fond des âges et excluant toute discussion, s'exclut lui-même de l'histoire en générale et, plus particulièrement […] de cette recherche inquiète et inachevable, que nous appelons philosophie', *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 101.

[237] In analogy with Socrates, who never wrote anything, but who produced philosophical ideas, which have been preserved through a literate tradition.

[238] Insofar as these accomplishments are at all scientific, and since Hountondji's concept of philosophy subordinates it to scientific development, is this not already an initial reason for questioning the philosophical capabilities Hountondji ascribes to 'non-literate' societies? See *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 124-5.

[239] Lévi-Strauss also notes that: 'il faut admettre que la fonction primaire de la communication écrite est de faciliter l'asservissement. L'emploi de l'écriture à des fins désintéressés […] est un résultat sécondaire, si même il ne se réduit pas le plus souvent à un moyen pour renforcer, justifier ou dissimuler l'autre', in *Tristes tropiques*, Paris: Librairie Plon, 1955), p. 354. And on the following page: 'Si l'écriture n'a pas suffi à consolider les connaissances, elle était peut-être indispensable pour affirmer les dominations.'

[240] Consider Kant's 'dogmatic slumber', for example: 'Prolegomena' in *Kant Selections*, ed by L. W. Beck (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 159.

[241] *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, pp. 114-16.

[242] Compare Lévi-Strauss: 'il n'y a donc pas de développement autonome de l'idée […] l'idée est toujours un produit de la pensée humaine, un produit de l'activité spirituelle, inséparable de l'activité matérielle, des hommes', in *Tristes tropiques*, p. 116.

[243] Compare this with Appiah on the subject of modernity. Also see Towa's definition of philosophy, in *L'Idée d'une philosophie négro-africaine* (Yaoundé: Éditions Clé, 1979) p. 167.

[244] For example, consider this extract from a report by Julius K. Nyerere: 'between 1989 and 1996, African states paid about 224 billion USA dollars in *servicing* their debts to the North […] Yet the debt continues to mount; whereas in 1982 Sub-Saharan Africa owed some 77 billion USA dollars, by 1995 it owed 223 billion USA dollars! The largest part of that increase is the result of arrears payments being capitalised […] In addition to the Debts Burden, Africa's terms of trade have been moving downwards almost continuously since the mid-70s […] Meanwhile aid is declining […]', in *African Philosophy*, vol. 11. 1 (June 1998) 7-12 (p. 9).

[245] Towa also deplores the dilemma that necessitates giving up either (1) African identity, or (2) philosophy. See *L'Idée d'une philosophie négro-africaine*, pp. 194-5.

[246] Along these lines, Hountondji comments: 'il n'y a, malgré les apparences, que la persistance, sous deux modalités différentes, d'un seul et même conformisme, d'un seul et même refus de

penser, d'une seule et même incapacité d'effectuer […] "l'analyse concrète des situations concrètes"', *Sur la 'philosophie africaine'*, p. 44, note 3.

[247] The text is J. Vincke's *Le Prix du péché* (Kinshasa: Mont Noir, 1973).

[248] M. Hegba, *Émancipation d'Églises sous tutelle*, (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976), cited in *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 119. See also section 5.3.

[249] E.g. the 'Christmas' tree, the 'Easter' egg, the Christ's parthenogenetic mother, etc. Earlier, Mudimbé comments that 'le récit même de l'existence de Jésus-Christ n'est point neutre: il appelle ou rappelle des mythes antérieurs appartenant à divers cultures', *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 108.

[250] See chapter 3 of this thesis.

[251] Cf. Nancy Hartsock: 'Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at this moment in history, when so many groups are involved in "nationalisms" which involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others, that doubt arises in the academy about the nature of the "subject," about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical "progress"', in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, p. 26.

[252] 'L'analyse des contradictions de la société occidentale n'a pas mené à la compréhension des sociétés antérieures (ou du Tiers-Monde), elle n'a réussi qu'à exporter ces contradictions. […] Et parfois même pas les contradictions, tout simplement la *solution* […]', Jean Baudrillard, *Le Miroir de la production* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1985), p. 97.

[253] For Mudimbé, it is not, therefore, the superficial similarity of content that determines discursive genealogy, it is the roles they play, the histories they continue. Compare the following quotation from Robert Bretall: 'the truth of a proposition, for Kierkegaard, is not a thing that can be asserted once for all; it is relative to the intention of the asserter and depends ultimately upon what the proposition is asserted *against*', in *A Kierkegaard Reader*, p. 282.

[254] This time the solution is supposed to be a liberating one, though there is reason to doubt this - even the constraint to be relativist is a constraint. For a good critique of the disabling power of relativism, see also S. P. Mohanty, 'Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism', in *Yale Journal of Criticism* (1988), 2.2, 1-31.

[255] This is Mudimbé's example; see *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 192. Cf. Fanon: 'Le bouleversement [i.e. l'émancipation] a atteint le Noir de l'extérieur. Le Noir a été agi. […] L'ancien esclave exige qu'on lui conteste son humanité, il souhaite une lutte, une bagarre. Mais trop tard', in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 178-9. See also Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*.

[256] Cited in *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 192. Sartre's full article appears as 'L'Homme au magnétophone' in *Les Temps Modernes*, 274 (1969), p. 1813.

[257] 'Je vois les traditions antiques de la maison des Labacides se modifier comme une succession des malheurs de ceux qui ne sont plus. La génération qui monte n'en délivre point la race […] une lueur d'espoir dans la maison d'Oedipe avait éclairé ses derniers descendants, mais voilà qu'une poussière ensanglantée accordée à ceux d'en bas la dissipe cette fois encore dans la folie des mots et en une frénésie vengeresse.' Cited in *L'Odeur du Père*, p. 9. An English translation may be found in 'Antigone' in *The Theban Plays*, ed. by Betty Radice, trans. by E. F. Watling (Middlesex: Penguin, 1947), 590-600.

[258] Sartre, *L'Imagination* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1936), p. 1.

[259] In any case, this is the etymological meaning of 'authentic'.

[260] Serequeberhan also talks about a rupture, this time in political terms: colonial violence ended one 'time' and began a new one ('colonial time'), and in order truly to progress beyond colonialism there must be closure. See *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, pp. 55-85.

[261] Compare Marcuse: 'a theory that wants to eradicate from science the concept of essence succumbs to helpless relativism, thus promoting the very powers whose reactionary thought it wants to combat', *Negations*, p. 45.

[262] As if all we had to do was follow dictates of logic, put information into a mechanized system and receive the answer, without a truly human input. Cf. Fogelin on Wittgenstein and logic as the machine-as-symbol, in *Wittgenstein*, pp. 138-152.

[263] Cf. Appiah's 'institutionalized plurality', 'Is the "Post-" in "Postcolonial" the "Post-" in "Postmodern"?', p. 424.

[264] See *L'Odeur du Père*, pp. 190-1 for further discussion of the theme of 'development'.

[265] In Greek mythology, Tiresias was a man who was unaccountably metamorphosed into a woman and, having lived for seven years thus, was changed back into a man. Hence, he is the symbol of the individual's encounter with a previously unknown, unknowable, and radically different perspective. See *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. by Mary M. Innes (Middlesex: Penguin, 1955; repr. 1961), pp. 89-90.

[266] Compare Foucault: 'When a colonial people tries to free itself of its colonizer, that is truly an act of liberation, in the strict sense of the word. But as we also know, that in this extremely precise example, this act of liberation is not sufficient to establish the practices of liberty that later on will be necessary for this people, this society and these individuals to decide upon receivable and acceptable forms of their existence or political society. That is why I must insist on the practice of freedom. 'The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', trans. by J. D. Gauthier, in *The Final Foucault*, ed by J. Bernauer and D Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 2.

[267] Cf. Mudimbé with B. Jewsiewicki, 'African's Memories and Contemporary History of Africa', in *History & Theory* (1993), 32.4, 1-11.

[268] Hence the reactions of certain politicians and journalists of the 'Right', when they perceive equal opportunities policies to be instances of positive discrimination

[269] Plato's *Crito*, 50-53, in *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, trans. by F. J Church (London: Macmillan, 1903).

[270] JanMohammed and Lloyd, *The Nature and Context*, p. 2

[271] Marcien Towa, *L'Idée d'une philosophie négro-africaine*, p. 18.