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# African Development and the Primacy of Mental Decolonization

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## Abstract

The drastic and manifold difficulties Africa faces suggest that something more than mere delay, unfavorable conditions or misguided policies is obstructing the goal of development. The suggestion calls for a serious reflection on the experience of colonialism, but in a way different from those studies tracing African predicaments back to colonial or imperialist misdeeds. This does not mean colonialism is not the real culprit, just that such a stance is necessary in light of the fact that many studies have not focused on the real source of Africa's ills: the phenomenon of mental colonization. Those scholars who bring out the detrimental impact of mental alienation either fail to totally emancipate their views from Western constructs, or cannot produce an alternative to Eurocentrism. This paper discusses the contributions of African philosophical debates to the elucidation of the negative impacts of colonial discourse on Africa's development effort. It draws attention to the limitations of the contributions and proposes an alternative conception vindicating the view that the great task of freeing the African mind from Eurocentric constructions takes priority over the design of development policies.

## Résumé

Les nombreuses et graves difficultés que traverse l'Afrique laissent penser qu'il existe d'autres éléments qu'un simple retard, des conditions défavorables ou encore des politiques inadaptées, faisant obstacle au développement. Cela appelle à une sérieuse réflexion sur l'expérience du colonialisme, qui soit différente des autres études, qui, elles, affirment que les problèmes de l'Afrique seraient causés par les abus coloniaux et impérialistes. Cela ne signifie pas que le colonialisme n'est pas le réel coupable, mais plutôt, que la plupart des études n'ont pas analysé les véritables sources des maux dont souffre l'Afrique, notamment le phénomène de la colonisation mentale. Les universitaires qui cherchent à démontrer l'effet négatif de l'aliénation mentale n'arrivent pas à se détacher des visions

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occidentales, ou alors ne parviennent pas à définir une alternative à l'eurocentrisme. Ce papier analyse la contribution des débats philosophiques africains à une meilleure compréhension de l'impact négatif du discours colonial sur les efforts de développement de l'Afrique. Il présente les limites de cette forme de contribution et propose une conception alternative selon laquelle, la mission consistant à libérer le mental des Africains des conceptions eurocentristes aurait préséance sur la conception de politiques de développement.

## Introduction

According to the basic belief of the modernization school, modernization occurs when traditional values, beliefs, and ways of doing things give way to innovative views and methods. 'A society is traditional', writes Everett E. Hagen, 'if ways of behaviour in it continue with little change from generation to generation', if it 'tends to be custom-bound, hierarchical, ascriptive, and unproductive' (Hagen 1962:56). To define modernization by the rise of innovative capacity has the interesting twist of putting the blame for Africa's failure to modernize less on the persistence of tradition than on the internalization of the colonialist discourse, which in itself has become a new tradition imposed on older traditions. For no resurgence of innovative capacity can take place so long as internalization of the colonialist argument paralyzes the African mind. Mental decolonization thus emerges as the top priority in Africa's development agenda. To admit the priority of mental decolonization is to acknowledge the precedence of the subjective factor over objective conditions, and so to recognize the importance of the philosophical debates generated by the attempts of African scholars to counter Europe's colonial discourse on Africa. This paper reviews some key moments of the debates for the purpose of showing both how African philosophical positions constitute various attempts to disentangle the African self from colonialist constructions, perceived as the major obstacle to Africa's modernization, and how specific limitations get in the way of these attempts.

## From Traditionality to Decolonization

Before reviewing the position of the different schools, let us pose clearly the terms of the problem. Even though the political decolonization of Africa occurred some forty years ago, many African scholars trace the extreme difficulties of the continent in initiating a resolute process of modernization back to the ills of the colonial legacy. What is less frequent, however, is the equation of African societies with backward cultures as the chief infirmity of the African continent, obvious as it is that analyses

of political and economic obstacles take precedence over the disability induced by the colonial discourse.

The eminent French anthropologist, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, standardized the colonial discourse when he baptized rationality as a Western appanage, thereby granting what he termed 'mystic' or 'prelogical' (Lévy-Bruhl 1985: 63) thinking to non-Western peoples. The underestimation of the repercussions of the colonial discourse by African scholars is all the more surprising as the accusation of having no contribution whatsoever to civilization singles out blackness. Who today would argue that G. W. F. Hegel's statement that of all cultures, Africa 'is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit' (Hegel 1956:99), no longer preserves its original upsetting impact?

Doubtless, Africans strongly reject the characterization of their legacy as primitive. All the same, both the process of Western education and the normative equation of modernization with Westernization condition them to endorse the charge of backwardness. Worse still, their denial only succeeds in pushing the charge to the dark corners of the unconscious. Take the teaching of world history. Not only are all the great breakthroughs and achievements of modern history mostly assigned to European actors, but the whole historical scheme is constructed so as to exclude Africa while presenting the West as the centre and the driving force of history. The example shows that modern schooling is for Africans nothing else than the learning of self-contempt through the systematic exposure to Africa's utter insignificance. Africans cannot but internalize this view, given that their ability to echo the Western idea of Africa is how they acquire modern education.

Africans are all the more compelled to endorse the colonial discourse as the way they defend themselves hardly avoids appealing to Western concepts. Such is notably the case each time Africans use the notion of race to articulate their solidarity and common interests in opposition to the West. The West used race attributes to codify differences through the selection of criteria favoring its normativeness, the most conspicuous of which is the exclusive claim to rationality. As a result, whatever differs from the West becomes irrational and primitive. When Africans define themselves by racial attributes, they are sanctioning this Western codification, and hence their alienation from rationality. Self-assertion, thus obtained through the denial of human capability, puts Africans at odds with the basic requirement of modernity, to wit, the ability to develop science and technology.

No exceptional insight is required to understand that Africans cannot modernize if they internally acquiesce to the allegation of backwardness. Amartya Sen's idea that economic development should be posed in terms of 'human agency' rather than just economic indicators leads to the interesting approach depicting 'development as freedom' (Sen 1999:188). When human agencies are involved and given priority, development becomes an issue of human capabilities in terms of freedoms and opportunities. The focus shifts the question of development from pure development economics to issues of entitlement and empowerment. This centrality of freedom to development issues does no more than invite the proposal that what people can do and be is largely dependent on the representations that they have of themselves. If they define themselves in enhancing terms, the likelihood is that they will set themselves great goals and will believe that they have what is required to make them happen. By contrast, if they have a low opinion of themselves, they will be less ambitious and less inclined to think that they have the calibre to achieve great goals. But more yet, self-debasing representations can lead to behaviours that militate against the idea of agencies and the creating of opportunities.

African philosophical views have emerged from the clear perception of the deep damages caused by the internalization of the colonial discourse. Convinced that no development policy will bear fruit so long as the African self is weighed down by the spectre of backwardness, African philosophers have devised theories to counter the colonialist discourse in order to achieve the decolonization of the African mind. Consider the basic question that feeds on debates, often acrimonious, between the various African philosophical schools, namely, the issue of the existence of a precolonial African philosophy. The importance of the issue is directly linked with the colonialist discourse, since the denial of philosophy, that is, of rational thinking, is how colonialism corroborated the undeveloped nature of African modes of thought. Each school tries to tackle the issue by inserting the refutation of the colonialist allegation into a vision liable to reconcile Africans with their legacy, given that the reconciliation must be such that it takes into account African realities, especially the undeniable technological lag of Africa. This recognition of a major shortcoming complicates the task of rehabilitation: Is there a way of finding a definition of Africans that removes the charge of backwardness even as it grants the African delay in the control of nature?

The definition of African philosophy according to the need of overcoming the aftermaths of colonization provides the means of evaluating the various intellectual paradigms from the vantage point of modernization. The way the question of the existence and nature of a precolonial African philosophy is resolved also provides an answer to the question of the African potential for development. To the extent that development involves scientific and technological aptitudes, it is bound to be elusive without the propensity to think rationally. Similarly, the debate over the philosophical status of the precolonial past challenges the usual definition of modernization as a process of dissolving traditionalism. Granted that modernization implies increasing rationalization of life, the fact remains that the entitlement of the African past to a philosophical status raises the question of knowing whether development should not be defined in terms of continuity rather than discontinuity. If the past is valid, the question of its preservation arises, not to mention the fact that Africans cannot want the repudiation of the past without endorsing the colonial discourse. Decolonization, it follows, is unachievable if the discontinuity imposed by the colonial conquest and its disparaging discourse on Africa's historical legacy are not radically challenged.

The best way to give an account of the complexities involved in Africas's rehabilitation as a prelude to development is to review the major schools of thought on the topic of African philosophy. Three main schools can be identified: (1) Ethnophilosophers, who consider the defence of African otherness as the only non-derogatory way of justifying the technological retardation of Africa. Otherness disputes both the normativeness of the West and the Western definition of philosophical thinking. The thinkers of negritude best represent this trend through the racialization of identities. (2) The universalists or "professional philosophers" who reject the defence of otherness as an endorsement of the colonial denial of rationality and perceive the African retardation as nothing more than an evolutionary lag. (3) The particularists who attempt to strike the middle course by presenting more acceptable notions of African philosophy and difference. Ranging from the hermeneutical orientation to the deconstructionist school, these attempts present the common characteristics of rejecting the negritude concept of blackness, without however succumbing to the universalist stand of the professional philosophers. To take the full measure of the complexity of the effort of rehabilitation, let us begin with the most extreme and controversial of African philosophical schools, to wit, negritude.

## Otherness as the Road to Modernity

Without doubt, the main thrust of negritude is to explain the technological lag of 'black Africa' in terms that do not negatively affect Africa's historical sense of itself and confidence in its indigenous cultures. Though the negritude thinkers take the lag as an undeniable fact, they strongly dismiss all evolutionary explanation. Since social evolution has been defined according to criteria establishing the normativeness of the West, such as science and technological advancements, it cannot avoid presenting Africans as culturally and technologically underdeveloped peoples. Imperative, therefore, is the need to go around evolutionary concepts if decolonization is to be achieved. Hence the conviction that the defence of otherness is the only vehicle for the refutation of the colonial discourse and the rehabilitation of Africa. Universalism sets the theoretical framework for interpreting differences as advancement or retardation by assigning similar goals to all cultures. Otherness dismantles this unilinear construction of history by defying the idea of placing all the peoples and cultures of the world in the same universal and progressive path.

Consider Hegel's notion of universal history. After placing all the cultures of the world in the same unilinear time, he devises the idea of gradual progression through the selection of characteristics peculiar to European history and culture. He then easily arrives at the belief that the selected items, especially individual freedom and rational knowledge, exist in much less developed forms in non-European cultures. This selective parallel allows him to construe differences as earlier stages and to define the evolution of universal history as a process that 'assumes successive forms which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages, gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape' (Hegel 1956:63). The succession promotes Europe to the rank of most advanced and driving force of universal history, and so classifies those cultures that exhibit the greatest disparity with Europe as most backward or primitive. On the strength of this normative role of Europe, Hegel defines Africa (excepting pharaonic Egypt) as 'the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night' (Hegel 1956:91).

Faced with this formidable construction, Léopold Sédar Senghor, one of the founders of Negritude, could find no other recourse than to appeal to otherness, which he provocatively defines by the predominance of emotion over rationality. Unlike the European who uses objective intelligence to fix and analyse the object, the African 'does not keep the object at a distance, does not analyze it'; he rather 'touches it, feels it', he

writes (Senghor 1995:118). His assumption is clear enough: the ascription of a different mental orientation to the black essence is alone liable to give a non-derogatory explanation of the African technological lag. Africans did not advance technologically, not because they were primitive, undeveloped, but because their distinct mental orientation gave them different pursuits and methods. On the other hand, the European predilection for technology does not denote a normative quality, but a specific turn of mind with positive and negative outcomes. Just as the African turn of mind does not encourage technology, so too the European mental direction is not propitious for penetrating the essence of reality, still less for providing an integrated vision.

For Senghor, Europe's technological advances derive from a mental orientation dominated by a conquering impulse. For the European, to know is to dismantle, decompose the object into constituent parts for the purpose of manipulation. An approach so driven by the need to subdue is perforce little in touch with the deeper reality of things. The downside of conquest is metaphysical superficiality. By contrast, the African gift of emotivity wants to sense things, to communicate with their inner essence. The basic condition for sensing things is to give up subduing them: only a sympathetic intention can have access to their intimacy. Compared to the European way of knowing things, Senghor finds that 'what emotes an African is not so much the external aspect of an object as its profound reality' (Senghor 1995:127).

Far from being an outcome of backwardness, non-technicalness is thus the expression of a different way of being in the world and of dealing with phenomena. As Jean-Paul Sartre comments, the 'proud claim of non-technicalness reverses the situation; that which might appear to be deficiency becomes a positive source of riches. A technical rapport with Nature reveals it as a quantity pure, inert, foreign; it dies' (Sartre 1963:43). The stage approach by which peoples are defined as advanced or retarded flies in the face of civilizations perceived as different in the radical sense of having dissimilar means and goals. Nothing is more arbitrary than to ignore this dissimilarity by placing divergent civilizations in the same universal and progressive time.

To the question whether there is such a thing as an African philosophy, the answer is, therefore, a definite 'yes'. What makes the answer confident is that it points to a philosophy whose originality is imparted by a unique racial gift. In place of the dismantling technique of Western episteme, the deeper penetrating insight of negritude promises a vision of the world emphasizing cohesion and integration. Whereas the West perceives the

world as a collection of fixed and juxtaposed objects, African emotivity sees the world as a living reality. It thinks of being as vital force and individuals as communal beings. Being neither premodern nor antirational, negritude presents the inspiration of a different epistemology as an alternative conception of things and of being in the world that pursues integration and harmony in lieu of conquest and domination.

Predictably, a strategy of decolonization based on the assertion of a different epistemological orientation was bound to provoke a flood of hostile reactions. In particular, rationality being the major criterion that Europe used to classify peoples as advanced or backward, the renunciation of reason in favour of emotion could not but convince critics of 'the correspondence of certain aspects of Senghor's ideas of the basic African personality with Western racist theories and with the 'primitive mentality' of Lévy-Bruhl' (Irele1990:83).

What is more, the claim to non-rationality puts Africans at variance with scientific thinking, and so deprives them of the means to catch up with the West. Since without the mastery of science and technology Africans cannot get out of their marginal existence, the surrender of the rational faculty can only perpetuate their marginality. Given this crucial role of reason, Senghor's definition of the particularity of black peoples according to cognitive styles founded on emotivity amounts to accepting the reality of different and unequal aptitudes. The inevitable outcome of this inequality is 'to leave intact . . . the racial hierarchy established by the colonial ideology' (Irele1990:83). The notion of otherness does not ensure emancipation and autonomy; it simply approves the idea of Africans playing a minor role in a world shaped and dominated by Western rationality.

According to critics, the defence of a particularism drawn from the past confirms the acquiescence of the negritude movement to a subordinate position. The return to and the apology of the past can only entail the indefinite postponement of the modernization of Africa. To quote Abiola Irele, 'we cannot meet the challenges of the scientific and industrial civilization of today by draping ourselves with our particularisms' (Irele 1992:213). The philosophy of negritude is problematic because the cult of peculiarities does not rehabilitate Africans. On the contrary, it steers them away from the need and the means to construct those machines that the West used to marginalise Africa. Unable to rescue Africa, the appeal to the black essence by the negritude philosopher thus leads to nothing else than the acceptance of marginality.

However strong and pertinent these objections appear to be, the impression remains that they underestimate the deconstructive message of negritude. The virtue of the explanation by otherness of the negritude thinker is that it champions self-acceptance by relativizing the West. When the West is dethroned from the position of archetype, the African ceases to be a failure. Relativization dismisses hierarchical conceptions: in being different, particular, each civilization is good for some pursuits, less so for others. No other way exists to decolonize the African mind than the relativization of the West. The great goal of modernization can never become real if Africans are prone to self-debasement, which ceases only when they are reconciled with their legacy.

Modernization cannot result from the total assimilation of Africans, the condition of which is the complete extirpation of their historical past. The requirement to wipe out the past is contradictory: although it claims to reject the colonial discourse, it defines modernization in terms of exporting Western institutions and ideas. To import everything from the West is obviously to endorse the notion of African technological and cultural backwardness. African scholars cannot portray colonialism as unjust and colonial discourse as false and demeaning if at the same time they define modernity as a full- fledged Westernization. Moreover, what Westernization actively advocates is the servile imitation of the West. By passively importing Western ideas and institutions, 'all that can happen is that we [Africans] become pale copies of Frenchmen, consumers not producers of culture' (Senghor 1976:490). No mistake about it: if modernity is defined by the rise of innovative spirit, the passive imitation of the West does not promote modernization; it simply postpones it.

For Senghor, then, the reason why Africans must retain their tradition is that its revival and adaptation makes them creative and original. So understood, modernization becomes the adaptation of a living culture to the new condition caused by the expansion and technological advances of the West. 'When we have made this analysis' Senghor writes, 'the problem is to determine the present value of the institutions and style of life born of these [African] realities and how to adapt them to the requirements of the contemporary world' (Senghor 1959:292). Instead of Westernization or assimilation, modernization becomes a process of synthesis in which the peculiar legacy of Africa merges with borrowings from the West. The need to adapt a traditional culture to modern conditions makes modernization conditional on the liberation of African creativity, in line with the spirit of modernity. Taking root in Africa's legacy while reaching out to the West remains the only promising road to modernization.

All the more reason for positing modernization in synthetic terms is that important values of the past concur with modern life. Contrary to the colonial stigmatization, African tradition exhibits characteristics congruent with modern life. In the words of Senghor, 'negritude, by its ontology (that is, its philosophy of being), its moral law and its aesthetic, is a response to the modern humanism that European philosophers and scientists have been preparing since the end of the nineteenth century' (Senghor 1970:184). The African ontology of vital force emphasizes force and energy, and so is more in tune with the assumptions of modern science than Aristotle's static conception of being or Descartes' mechanical view of matter. As suggested by negritude, such notions as relativity, wave mechanics, electron and neutron confirm the existence of a dynamic microscopic world behind the static appearance of things.

Equally remarkable is the fact that the abstract style of the vanguard schools of contemporary Western art attests to the neo-modernity of pre-colonial African art. It is under the direct influence of African art that contemporary Western artists, giving up their conception of art as imitation of the given object, attempted to capture, behind the given material reality, of things their intrinsic form and structure. The African influence was revolutionary, since 'a world of life forces that have to be tamed is substituted for a closed world of permanent and continuous substances that have to be reproduced' (Senghor 1970:188). The substitution clears the way for a conception that connects life with deeper realities beyond the visible and the tangible.

Another, but no less important proof of the modernity of the African past is provided by the persistent aspiration to socialist ideals emanating from the womb of capitalist societies. The contradictions of capitalism, the rise of powerful socialist movements in the West, and the impact of the doctrine of Marxism are consonant with the traditional communal life of Africa as reflecting an optimal world, notwithstanding the present popularity of neoliberal capitalism. In addition to condemning the individualistic and class-divided society of the West, the socialist aspiration proposes the communal values of African tradition as a remedy for the evils of capitalism.

This position of forerunner shifts the return to the African legacy from the unearthing of outdated and useless values to a modernizing venture. In particular, it rises against the depiction of modernization in terms of modernity versus tradition. The disclosure of the modernity of African conceptions and the Western appeal to African values to get out of the crises of capitalism refute the colonial discourse. The rejection of values

even as they prove to be so supportive of modernity would be inconsistent and self-damaging on the part of Africans. Some such reversal credits negritude with an original theory of African modernization. The dichotomy between tradition and modernity is replaced by the conviction that the major impediment is the colonization of the mind, as evinced by the propensity of African ruling elites to 'importing just as they stand the political and social institutions of Europe, and even their cultural institutions' (Senghor 1959:290)

## No Modernity without Universalism

For the opponents of negritude, however judiciously the African past is embellished, the fact remains that the theory, far from decolonizing Africa, capitulates to the colonial discourse. Though otherness is called on to defend the existence of a traditional African philosophy, the price for the recognition of such a philosophy is an identity that alienates Africans from rationality and science by imposing the defence of a collective and uncritical set of beliefs. To present negritude as the philosophy of Africans is to suggest that all Africans are so prone to think alike by virtue of their collective identity that they are incapable of individual and critical thinking. The best way to avoid these detrimental outcomes is to repudiate the very notion of precolonial African philosophy.

In whichever way the notion is contrived, a collective and unconscious philosophy is a contradiction in terms. Philosophy is an individual and systematically critical reflection; as such, it runs counter to the idea of collective thinking. Conversely, religions, mythologies, and worldviews do not appeal to the critical effort of the individual. Instead, they call for the spontaneous, uncritical adherence of individuals to a common and transmitted set of beliefs. So that having none of the attributes by which a philosophical discourse is usually defined, what is identified as traditional African philosophy presents all the characters of a religious system or worldview, not of philosophy. Marcien Towa denounces the notion of 'traditional African philosophy' as a 'dilation of the concept of philosophy to such a point that this concept becomes coextensive with the concept of culture' (Towa 1991:189). Besides being based on the fraudulent identification of philosophy with culture, a philosophical system that is particular to Africa is a direct confirmation of the colonial discourse. Those who have a different nature cannot philosophize like Westerners; they need a philosophy commensurate with their otherness, that is, a collective and uncritical philosophy. Paulin Hountondji calls the acceptance of otherness "folklorism' a sort of collective exhibitionism which compels the 'Third

World' intellectual to 'defend and illustrate' the peculiarities of his tradition for the benefit of a Western public' (Hountondji 1983:67).

For Hountondji, in addition to confirming the colonial discourse, the attempt to revive the past, nay, to baptize it as philosophy, betrays the reactionary stand of negritude. Though the negritude thinkers speak of reproducing a past philosophy, in reality they disguise their own individual philosophies as African. The conservative content of this deceiving identification becomes obvious as soon as we understand that

> behind this [implicit and collective worldview] usage . . . there is a myth at work, the myth of primitive unanimity, with its suggestion that in 'primitive' societies—that is to say, non-Western societies—everybody always agrees with everybody else. It follows that in such societies there can never be individual beliefs or philosophies but only collective systems of belief (Hountondji 1983:60).

When an individual thinking is metamorphosed into an African trait, the purpose is to obtain a collective sanction without providing rational arguments. It is to demand unanimous approval in the name of African authenticity and the authority of tradition. Furthermore, the attribution of philosophy endows an ensemble of uncritical beliefs with the value of indispensability and permanence. As purported products of rationality, such beliefs cease to be tied to outdated particular contexts and epochs. The connection between the unanimist reading of African tradition and the various totalitarian ideologies of Africa, such as African socialism, the one-party system, authenticity, president for life, etc., is not hard to establish.

Does this mean that Hountondji recommends the complete rejection of the past? No, his position is rather to submit the traditional and collective thoughts of Africans to a critical assessment before claiming them as relevant; it is to study them as a philosopher, that is, 'outside of all apologetic perspectives' (Hountondji 1995:191). In other words, Hountondji is against ethnophilosophy because it advocates the indiscriminate consecration of traditional knowledge, not because it wants to reappropriate it. Those aspects of the traditional culture that stand the test of critical examination will be retained as being useful for modernization. The critical appraisal of the past, be it noted, will necessarily lead, unlike the unanimist reading of negritude, to a pluralist interpretation of the traditional thinking.

For Hountondji, then, the reappropriation of past knowledge is not the revival of a traditional philosophy, for African philosophy is yet to come;

'it is before us, not behind us, and must be created today by decisive action' (Hountondji 1983:53). The creation implicates the incorporation of the useful aspects of the past, which is made possible by the submission of the past to a critical assessment. To underline his divergence from the way negritude resurrects the past, Hountondji calls the critical reflections on and reconstruction of African legacy 'learned ethnophilosophy' (Hountondji 1995:173). Hountondji's enlightened, critical ethnophilosophy follows the Marxist method of deriving the thought process from the conditions of material life. It attempts to elucidate the genesis of traditional conceptions by connecting traditional African beliefs and practices with the then prevailing conditions of life. The exposure of the correspondence of the form and contents of the thinking with the conditions of life confirms the limitation of conceptions to specific times and places. Unlike the racial fixation of negritude, the method reveals the historical and transient nature of these thoughts, and hence avoids changing them into eternal African categories.

There remains the question of knowing whether Hountondji's rejection of otherness achieves the decolonization of the African mind. In his eyes, the only pertinent challenge to the colonial discourse is the refutation of the assumption that Africans have by nature intrinsically different ways of thinking or even a different kind of mind. For one thing, the historical genesis of traditional beliefs underscores the rationality of the thought process by displaying the relevance of the thinking to the mode of life. African thoughts and beliefs are no longer the mere products of magic; they are reflections, albeit idealized, of real conditions of life. For another, the method does not petrify the African lag in the manner of negritude; by establishing a correspondence between the mode of life and the mode of thinking, it proposes the notion of delay in development.

Delay means that the disparity between the West and Africa is 'merely in the evolutionary stage attained, with regard to particular types of achievement... merely in quantity or scale' (Hountondji 1983:61). As Hountondji sees it, what is most detrimental is not the admission of Africa's technological lag, but the ascription of the lag to an epistemological difference. Unlike otherness, the stage disparity puts Africa in the same unilinear process as the West, and so attributes the lag to the conditions of life rather than to the mental unfitness of Africans. A difference in quantity promises the rapid narrowing of the gap, given that it views Western achievements as an expression of universal qualities that are shared by Africans as well.

For critics, what Hountondji adds to qualify his harsh evaluation of African tradition does not succeed in removing his uncritical attitude toward Western philosophy. Since Africans are denied philosophy in the name of Western norms, the net outcome of the denial is the consecration of the normativeness of the West. The allegiance to Western philosophy is such that the anthropological characterization of African thinking as collective, spontaneous, and irrational is literally reproduced. The allegiance prevents Hountondji and Towa from developing the slightest doubt about the accuracy of the terms used to describe African traditional thinking. Speaking of Hountondji, one critic writes that Hountondji 'fails to do that preliminary work of questioning the Eurocentric structures as he appropriates European notions of philosophy' (Imbo 1998:87). On account of this failure to challenge Western philosophy, Africa appears to Hountondji as the land of myths and irrational beliefs.

Unless the West is relativized, no critical view emanating from the accepted normativeness of the West will ever be fair to Africans. When a norm is erected, the outcome is the denigration of all differences. This explains the paradox of Hountondji: though he makes pertinent criticisms of anthropology, which he considers as a 'pseudo science', (Hountondji 1983:61), he does not get to the point of accusing Western concepts of misrepresenting African traditions. What failed him is the use of Marxist philosophy and concepts to criticize both the West and the African past. A Marxist critique of the West does not really question Western hegemony; it only advocates assimilation to the European culture defined as the universal and most progressive culture. Since the definition reinstates the backwardness of African cultures, real and radical criticism cannot start unless Eurocentrism and its model of philosophy questioned. Only when the normativeness of the West is rejected does the affirmation of difference become legitimate.

This means that the problem is not so much the reality of the difference as the formulation of African difference in terms that are free of Eurocentric stereotypes. The need to emancipate the representations that Africans have of themselves from Eurocentric biases posits mental decolonization as a prerequisite to development. A serious and forceful will to develop cannot arise while the internalized Eurocentric stereotypes keep telling Africans that they are not equipped for human progress. The only way to extirpate these stereotypes is the relativization of the West, which creates and affirms the idea of difference. True, to define the difference in terms opposed to Western rationality, in the manner of negritude, is little conducive to

invigorating the resolution to modernize. Is there a way of relativizing the West without placing Africans in the box reserved for ' the Other'?

## Deconstruction as a Prerequisite to Development

The need to liberate African self-representations from Eurocentrism emphasizes the necessity for the deconstruction of Western concepts and methods. No view of African difference and philosophy can be authentic and liberating if it remains entangled in Eurocentric distortions. The deconstructive standpoint relativizes the West, just as it unravels the hidden motives and mechanism of its thinking. It offers the best possible tools both to critically analyse the colonial discourse on Africa and to approach Africa from a new perspective.

According to V. Y. Mudimbe, the leading thinker of the African deconstructionist school, what passes for African philosophy and knowledge of Africa is essentially a product of the Western episteme. He writes:

> modern African thought seems somehow to be basically a product of the West. What is more, since most African leaders and thinkers have received a Western education, their thought is at the crossroads of Western epistemological filiation and African ethnocentrism. Moreover, many concepts and categories underpinning their ethnocentrism are inventions of the West (Mudimbe 1988:185).

So pervasive is the dependence of African views on Western concepts that it perverts even the attempts to argue in support of African difference, as shown by the negritude movement, which fully maintains 'the binary opposition between European and African, civilized and primitive, rational and emotional, religious and idolatrous' (Diawara 1990:82). Some such opposition reflects the Western normative standpoint and reasserts the superiority of the West over Africa. What is intended to be a protest turns into an acceptance of hierarchy. No less loyal to Western prejudices are the opponents of negritude. Hountondji finds negritude unacceptable because the primacy of rationality, as established by the West, is not consistent with the products of African thought. Likewise, the idea of a traditional African philosophy is questioned because Western thought rejects the conflation of culture with philosophy.

Yet, seeing the gross misconceptions of anthropology, the suspicion should have been that the anthropological discourse is not accidental. Nor are the demeaning descriptions of Africans mere errors. As a product born of the epistemological specificity of the West, anthropology was first conceived as a reductionist enterprise at odds with a positive idea of

human diversity. Its reductionism is inscribed in the very idea of positing the European as an archetype, the outcome of which is that non-Western peoples are defined as deficient variations. To say that anthropology is a product of Western rationality is to underline the goal of domination as the initial project of anthropology. According to Mudimbe, anthropologists 'speak about neither Africa nor Africans, but rather justify the process of inventing and conquering a continent and naming its 'primitiveness' or 'disorder' as well as the subsequent means of its exploitation and methods for its 'regeneration" (Mudimbe 1988:20).

The purpose of anthropology is not so much to study other peoples as to construct their particularity in a way that sets them against the West. The opposition marginalises these peoples, and so singles them out for domination. The epistemological inspiration of this opposition is found in Western philosophy whose essence is to manufacture representations and explanations of history drawn from epistemological values centring the West. As a means of constructing and structuring the world around the centrality of the West, the Western philosophical paradigm is unfit to provide an objective study of other cultures. Objectivity is illusory if it disregards the basic principle that 'no one enjoys the privilege of being at the center while others remain peripheralized' (Masolo 1994:179). This strong denunciation of Eurocentrism suggests that Mudimbe welcomes the idea of African difference, provided that it does not reflect the anthropological opposition between the rational and the primitive. He writes:

> there are natural features, cultural characteristics, and, probably, values that contribute to the reality of Africa as a continent and its civilizations as constituting a totality different from those of, say, Asia and Europe. On the other hand, any analysis would sort out the fact that Africa (as well as Asia and Europe) is represented in Western scholarship by 'fantasies' and 'constructs' made up by scholars and writers since the Greek times (Mudimbe 1994:xv).

As to the question of the existence of a traditional African philosophy, the best answer is to say, to paraphrase a scholar, 'No! Not yet!' (Maurier 1984:25). The main problem is to find an approach free of Western premises and stereotypes before the attempt to reconnect with the past is made. The problem is less the particularity of Africans than the misconstruction of the perception of particularity by the insidious influence of Eurocentric concepts. To underestimate the impact of these Western concepts is a great mistake. Such concepts are no longer what Westerners

say about Africans; they have been internalized to the point of becoming the unconscious references of Africans.

Most interesting is the correlation that Mudimbe establishes between the socioeconomic reality of Africa and its mental setup. The colonial system of economic exploitation necessitates the inculcation of a subservient mentality into colonized peoples, especially into the educated elite. It presupposes a policy of domestication based on the production of intellectual representations and beliefs inducing mental dependency. The missionary's project of disseminating Christianity and civilization was an important tool of implanting dependency. 'The outcome of these policies was the process of underdevelopment' (Mudimbe 1988:3), which is neither poverty nor backwardness, but the product of domestication. The production of a dependent mode of thinking and producing in colonies shows that what exists in Africa is no longer the traditional society, but a peripherized, marginalised society.

By showing that economic dependency is a consequence of mental dependency, Mudimbe's theory of underdevelopment improves on the position of the neo-Marxist school of dependency. In its heyday, the dependency school, as articulated, for instance, by André Gunder Frank, associated economic dependency with the tendency to rebel rather than to submit, thereby imbuing the third world with a strong tendency to confront imperialism. The tendency was believed to be so firm that the underdeveloped world was often described as the new birthplace of socialism, in contrast to the weakening of revolutionary spirit among the working class of the West as a result of the corrupting effect of imperialist expansions. To quote Frank:

> As the solutions to the problems of underdevelopment become ever more impossible within the capitalist system which creates them . . . the long exploited people themselves are being taught and prepared to lead the way out of capitalism and underdevelopment (Frank 1976:217–218).

Mistaken also was Frantz Fanon's ascription of a revolutionary potential to the dependent word. The trend to accommodate to a world dominated by the West greatly overtook Fanon's vision of a 'Third World . . . rising like the tide to swallow up all Europe' (Fanon 1968:106). In revealing the injection of dependency right into the self-representation of the third world, Mudimbe portrays a situation in which the alleged rebellious stand of underdeveloped peoples is erased by the acceptance of marginality.

Clearly, Mudimbe's approach places the colonization of the African mind at the centre of Africa's problems of modernization. If the mental is

so conditioned as to promote Western dominance, even as Africans seem to contest that dominance, liberation is unthinkable without the complete emancipation from Western categories whose purpose is to marginalise other peoples through the universalization of the West. Subjective liberation, that is, the decolonization of the mind, is thus the forced prerequisite to Africa's modernization. The priority of mental liberation establishes the primacy of deconstruction: when Western concepts are deconstructed, the affirmation of difference without hierarchy or opposition becomes possible. Deconstruction debunks Eurocentrism, and so inaugurates the authentic phase of pluralism by dismissing the antagonism between Europe and Africa.

One major implication of the deconstruction of Eurocentrism is the rejection of the antithesis, so dear to modernization school, between modernity and tradition. In view of the systematic deformation of the African past by Western concepts, nothing justifies 'the static binary opposition between tradition and modernity, for tradition (traditio) means discontinuities through dynamic continuation and possible conversion of tradita (legacies)' (Mudimbe 1988:189). The very process of modernization in Europe and elsewhere gives confirmation of the capacity of tradition to integrate discontinuities by means of a dynamic continuity. When Europeans refer to the Greek, Roman, and Christian roots of modern Western civilization, what else do they underline but the continuity of European history through the integration of discontinuities? If integration is good for Europeans, why would it be retarding when Africans want to achieve a similar continuity by integrating their encounters of the West into their own legacy? When Africans conceive of modernization as a synthesis of African legacy—communalism, dynamic conception of being, etc.—and Western ideas of science and technology, they are attempting to construct a dynamic continuity that centres and protects them from alienation and dependency while opening them to novel encounters and events.

Granted that the great merit of the deconstructionist school is to have understood the extent to which the internalization of Western representations blocks the African initiative, still critics point out that the disengagement and freedom promised by deconstruction are severely curtailed by the underlying relativist philosophy. Though Mudimbe establishes a sharp distinction between the facts of Africa and the Western representations of these facts, critics wonder whether the deconstructive equation of knowledge with construction allows the distinction between facts and representations. Mudimbe has no valid reason to believe that

his own descriptions of Africa are not also inventions. Put otherwise, the availability of an alternative way to Western rationality, by which alone Mudimbe's perceptions of Africa can claim to be real and authentic, is not perceptible. As Masolo puts it, 'he fails, in The Invention of Africa and elsewhere, to show clearly how the 'usable past' should be used by 'experts' to construct an 'authentic' African episteme' (Masolo 1994:179).

Viewed from the need to decolonize the mind, the acceptance of relativism dilutes the authenticity of identification, which is then wanting in conviction and power. Without a forceful belief in the objectivity of identities, effective decolonization cannot be achieved. The suspicion is that this receptivity to relativist philosophical premises may well be an imprint of mental colonization, there being no doubt that the relativization of the West to shake off Eurocentrism leads to disbelief, not to say cynicism. Moreover, deconstruction is unable to make a discourse on Africa that secures a vision superior to or better than the one suggested by negritude. In relativizing the West, it assigns the best qualities (rationality, science) to the particularity of the West so that only the lower attributes of non-rationality remain for African particularity. Add that the quest for authentic particularism tends to downplay those characteristics of the West that produced the modern world. Since African authenticity passes through these characteristics being denounced as Western, the need to be different dampens the resolution to learn from the West, to understand the secret of its power. Relativism cripples the African determination to embark on a competitive course with the West.

## Development as Freedom

The apparent drawbacks of African philosophical responses to the colonial discourse draw attention to what can be termed the African dilemma. The attempt to refute the characterization of Africans as underdeveloped by the assertion of difference ascribes a non-rational mode of thinking to the African self, and so works toward the perpetuation of its marginality. Modernizing ventures, including scientific and technological realizations, are incompatible with a turn of mind alien to rationality. Those African philosophers who reject otherness do not escape the charge of endorsement of the colonial idea of Africa. Their commitment to the universality of the human mind cannot but explain the disparity between Africa and the achievements of the West by a difference in the attainment of progress. The explanation resurrects the evolutionary terms of backwardness. Though they promise that Africa will catch up with the West, the consent to the idea of backwardness paralyses the march toward progress.

The merit of the deconstructionist school is to understand the extent to which the internalization of Western representations blocks the African initiative. Unfortunately, its philosophical premises make the disengagement of Africa dependent on the acceptance of relativism. As a result, the liberated African self lacks the sense of its own objectivity, and hence the power of conviction, without which effective decolonization cannot be achieved. Even so, the deconstructive standpoint correctly prioritizes the issue of African modernization. So long as the African mind is bogged down by Western representations, no development policy, however thoroughly contrived and however skillfully planned, can initiate a sustained process of development.

If the weakness of the relativist strategy, whether that of otherness or particularism, is to take away rationality in addition to racializing or relativizing its commitment, such drawbacks are not without remedy. Take the case of negritude. What is wrong with negritude is less the claim to difference than the conception of difference as otherness by the appeal to racial attributes. Instead of originating the difference from racial, natural characteristics, negritude should have resorted to an act of choice, the very one that led Sartre to argue that, in the case of human beings, 'existence precedes essence' (Sartre 1957:13). The precedence of freedom over physical or cultural determinations assigns differences to historicity, thereby construing human diversity as a product of subjective contingency.

The historical approach diversifies without racializing: it relates to an initial and sui generis option unraveling potentials which, though inherently universal and human, are used diversely as a result of divergent choices. The involvement of choice overcomes the debate over the reality or non-reality of the African essence as a racial entity. Choice refers to freedom, and so excludes objective determinations even as it reinstates the universality of human potentials. The recovery of universality avoids the limitative relativism of deconstruction, just as the foundational role of freedom supplies the power of conviction that deconstruction is unable to offer. The initiative of freedom being the foundational moment of self-determination, it inserts the absolute into the relative.

This agency of choice underlines the crucial role of freedom in the generation of civilizations by tracing the particularity of each civilization back to the contingency of human choices. Since the initial value orientation of a given culture determines the use of rationality, provided that non-technicalness is ascribed to an act of choice, the opposition between Africa and the conquering ethos of Europe is, therefore, perfectly acceptable. Not only a disparity resulting from different choices does not

exclude the rationality of Africans, but by removing the racial barrier it also warrants the possibility of changing lanes, of passing from one conception to another by an act of choice. Most importantly, it invalidates all evolutionary approach. If instead of backwardness, choice accounts for differences, the West is relativized as much as Africa is. Since the selection of some goals always requires the suppression or the giving up of other equally valid goals, there is no room for the ranking enthusiasm of evolutionism. This selectiveness of choice shows that the price for the option to make Westerners 'masters and owners of nature' (Descartes 1978:46) is the inhibition or loss of other ways of relating with nature. At the same time, it salvages Africa by attributing its non-technicalness more to the pursuit of a different purpose, with its positive and negative sides, than to evolutionary retardation.

Some such approach points to what must be the first task of a serious attempt to decolonize the African mind, namely, the radical transformation of what African students learn at schools and universities. The elimination of Eurocentric concepts from the curriculum and their replacement by conceptions whose basic purpose is to centre Africa takes priority over all other decolonizing measures. In particular, the Hegelian scheme of world history advancing by stages that display the progression from the most backward to the most advanced—a notion that carries the basic tenets of most Western philosophies of history, including the Marxist approach—must be cast aside. This scheme enables Hegel to write: 'the History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History' (Hegel 1956:103). Having arbitrarily universalized European characteristics, Hegel, as we saw, has no difficulty in painting the characteristics of other cultures as backward, lagging manifestations of Europe. This theoretical construct must be dismantled in favour of a pluralistic view of history that views each culture as evolving autonomously in pursuit of particular goals stemming from an initial and founding choice. Only thus can Africans dissolve the stigma of backwardness and regain the freedom to define themselves in terms appropriate to their own historical initiatives.

To involve choice is to replace the unilinear scheme of evolutionism by the concept of divergence. Divergence refers to splits within the same unity developing in different directions; unlike the cumulative and unilinear conception of evolution, it exhibits, in the words of Henri Bergson, the process of evolution 'splaying out like a sheaf, sunders, in proportion to their simultaneous growth, terms which at first completed each other so well that they coalesced' (Bergson 1944:130). Though the

directions are particular by their development, they are also complementary by their original unity. Both the particularity and the complementariness of the directions rule out the hierarchical conception of the process. The human effort should not seek the dominance of one direction—which is what Westernization is targeting—but the harmonious development of human potentials But note that this harmonious development remains unattainable so long as the West is infatuated with material power. The one-sidedness of the Western path gives Africans no other choice than to strive to narrow the technological gap.

To sum up, the divergent conception of social evolution is the solution to the African dilemma. To the extent that it involves choice, it dismisses the colonial discourse in terms liable to stimulate the African resolution to seek parity with the West. The relativization of the West by the disclosure of its initial choice challenges its normativeness and invites the development of Africa as a reciprocating act of choice. When the West is raised to the level of norm, Africans are reduced to the status of imitators, or to speak a more familiar language, to dependency. When the West is relativized through a divergent conception, it becomes an object of utilitarian and pragmatic inquiry. Contrary to the mere capitulation stemming from the normative approach, the relativizing impact of choice puts Africans in the self-asserting situation of asking such questions as: What can we adopt and adapt from the West? What has the West adopted from Africa? What must we reject as detrimental? How can we integrate what we borrow into our own continuities? These questions are the very ones that Africans would have raised were they not colonized. Developing this type of utilitarian relation with the West is indeed dependent on the prior decolonization of the African mind, which is neither more nor less than the recovery of freedom.

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