

TRADITION, HINDRANCE OR INSPIRATION?

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Two temptations

In examining a given tradition, two temptations should be resisted: first, the temptation of contempt and second, that of an overall justification. It was the fate of some cultures in the world that they were systematically said to be inferior during centuries of Western domination including, as far as Africa is concerned, a long story of Slave Trade and colonialism. This sense of inferiority was unfortunately internalised to various degrees by the cultures themselves. On the other hand, voices arose both from within these cultures and from within the dominant, i.e. the European cultures, to resist this claim for superiority and put Western civilisation back to its right place, a place far more modest than it pretended. African voices were part of this new concert. The danger then, however, was to fall into the exact opposite of the first attitude by idealising and romanticising non Western cultures.

Cultural imperialism

The first temptation is that of cultural imperialism based on what might be called first order ethnocentrism, as opposed to a defensive or second order ethnocentrism. Historically its most visible form during the last four centuries or so was the collective sense of superiority developed within the Western civilisation by some of its ideologists. This form of ethnocentrism is known as Eurocentrism. A whole range of scholars have been for centuries putting their intelligence and learning to the service of this prejudice. For instance Gobineau, the author of *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, thought he was doing science. So obvious, however, were his racist assumptions, that nobody should have given the slightest credit to his scientific pretensions.¹ Lévy-Bruhl's theory of "primitive mentality" seemed at first sight more consistent, though it was based in the last analysis on the same kind of prejudice.² Lévy-Bruhl's work is a good example of how an accumulation of real facts can be arranged, organised and interpreted in such a way that they serve as a means to reinforce sheer prejudice. Books as *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* and the five others which were to follow³ are good illustrations of how false science is constructed. The case is the more eloquent as the author himself was to write a self-criticism published posthumously as *Les Carnets de Lucien Lévy-Bruhl*.⁴ *Mutatis mutandis*, one dares to hope that the authors of *The bell curve*, a book much talked about in

America in the last five years, which also tried to give scientific appearance to sheer racist prejudice, will rehabilitate themselves before they die, for the sake of science and for their own personal dignity.⁵

Cultural nationalism

The second temptation is that of an excessive and uncritical reaction to the former one. It usually takes the form of an identification with one's own tradition, as a result of self-defence and justification. We are still facing this danger today. Most of the time, we develop with our own cultures a kind of relation which is not so pure and straightforward as it would have been normally, if we did not feel compelled to answer the challenge of other cultures at the same time. For instance, because some of our ancestral uses have been or are still under external (say, Western) attack, we would still today defend or seek to justify them as part of our identity though we are conscious ourselves of how outdated and little adapted they are to the present conditions of life. We would have certainly rejected these uses or fought for them to be improved and better adapted if we had been alone together. In other words, our relation as individuals to our original cultures is frequently biased, not to say poisoned by the obsession of collective self-defence imposed on us by a hostile environment.

One of the most serious issues, therefore, is how to get rid today of this obsession of the Other and develop again a free and critical relationship to our own cultures. In other words: in places or circumstances where the internal debate within particular cultures has been slowed down or even stifled down by external aggression, how to revive this debate? How to minimise the negative impact of racism and colonial contempt on the way people behave towards their own culture? How to get mentally liberated from other cultures' view on our own culture, in order to prioritise our own debate with and within the latter? William Abraham, a Ghanaian (now Ghanaian-American) philosopher, wrote something similar in *The mind of Africa*: it has often been said, he argues, that the eyes of the whole world are upon us; this is not true, we must get rid of this idea and behave just as we think we have to (I cannot unfortunately give the exact quotation, since it is impossible to find the book anywhere in Cotonou - which, by the way, is also part of the conditions of intellectual work in our countries).⁶

A secret complicity

People from dominated cultures are not the only ones, however, to react this way. Not only are they strongly supported, but most of the time they are pre-

ceded and shown the way by dissident voices from within the dominant cultures themselves. I called attention to this point many years ago: the rejection of Eurocentrism came first from European intellectuals themselves, namely the anthropologists. Some of them went so far as simply to invert the imperialistic scale of cultural norms: whereas Western civilisation was usually valued for its technical and economic achievements, Malinowski, instead, saw “a menace to all real spiritual and artistic values in the aimless advance of modern mechanisation”. To him, the study of primitive forms of human life was “one of the refuges from this mechanical prison of culture” and “a romantic escape from our over-standardised culture”. I recalled the major role played by the German anthropologist Frobenius in the intellectual development of both Senghor and Césaire, the two poets of “negritude”. There is therefore, I suggested, a secret complicity between the “progressive” anthropologist in the West and the cultural nationalist in the South.⁷ The latter is often provided his arguments by the former. When these arguments happen to be weak or inconsistent, the cultural nationalist tends unfortunately to take them up as they are.

Let me give an example. In his overview of *African religion, spirituality and thought* published 30 years ago, Dominique Zahan, a French anthropologist, mentions incidentally a custom which was held sacred in some parts of Africa as late as the 19th century: at the burial of King Ghezo of Abomey, now part of Benin Republic, several dozens of his wives were sacrificed to accompany and continue to serve him in the Beyond. Moreover, most of them were said to be volunteers and to consider as a great honour to be chosen. Colonial ideologists would have simply presented this practice as one more proof of how savage or primitive Africans are. Instead, the modern anthropologist tries to identify the *philosophy* behind this custom. To Dominique Zahan, this ritual only means that for the Blacks, there is no real discontinuity between life and death: life flows from death, and death is but the continuation of life.⁸

This way to present things is a good example of how ethnophilosophy works: it refers to some collective worldview or conceptual framework as possible justification for the most unjustifiable customs. Cultural nationalism aims at the same goal: it seeks to justify all inherited practices including the most unjustifiable. That is why ethnophilosophy, obviously an invention of the West, has been so massively taken up by Third World intellectuals and especially by African philosophers. Yet, as a matter of fact, no woman today, even from the culture of King Ghezo, the Fon culture in present-day Benin, would like to be buried alive with, or sacrificed in any other way for the sake of her husband, however prestigious he may be.

What is needed, therefore, in the present circumstances, is to get rid of this need for self-justification before the tribunal of other cultures in order to develop the internal debate within our own cultures. We need to question our

cultures from within, i.e. from our own point of view instead of assuming that they can only be questioned from without. We need to understand how such a ritual came to existence in the past, why so many princesses not only accepted it but went so far as to offer themselves as voluntary victims. Zahan's reference to a certain conception of life and death is probably not false, but we need more: we need to appreciate how strong was the social pressure on these princesses and the overall social atmosphere in the context of absolute monarchy in a small size country. We need to understand how this very *philosophy* of life and death came to develop and why it does no longer work today.

I wrote some time ago about brainstorming as a way to favour, from within a society, a new awareness of values. Instead of trying to impose norms imported from other cultures, it would be more effective, I argued, to draw upon the inner dynamism of every culture, the inner potential for self-criticism and self-improvement. All cultures have developed in the past social practices which are today totally disapproved by common sense. What seemed normal yesterday does no longer seem so today: for instance the Inquisition in Western Europe and later on, the Slave Trade and the anti-Black racism in West Europe and America. Second, not only cultures are dynamic and bound to change over time, but moreover, no culture admits of just one system of norms at the same time. Instead, in any given culture there are always several systems mutually competing. Therefore, instead of taking for granted the claim for universality of a given model at a given time, one should always, beyond the dominant social model, carefully look for the wide range of secondary or marginal models.⁹

Identifying murmurs

We are facing, therefore, two kinds of problems: a theoretical problem and a practical one. We need, first, to develop new paradigms in the social sciences. Whatever the discipline, whether history or sociology or economics or law or any branch of anthropology including legal anthropology and religious anthropology, to quote just a few examples, the tendency in the social sciences in Africa has been so far to frame out just *one* way of living, doing or thinking that appears to express, in each case, the specificity of Africa. This search for specificity is probably still relevant today. However, by calling attention exclusively to what might be considered as *the African difference*, social scientists have overlooked so far the internal pluralism of African cultures, the inner tensions that make them living cultures, just as unbalanced and therefore, just as dynamic, just as bound to change as any other culture in the world.

Greater attention should be paid, therefore, beyond the norms and social practices usually held as characteristic of a given culture, to the wide range of marginal practices and norms. The problem, then, is a methodological one: by what methods, through what theoretical and practical tools is it possible today for the social scientist to identify these hidden models? How can we best recognise, behind the brouhaha of the dominant culture, the stifled voices that tell another story? To stick to our example, how can the anthropologist or historian of Africa, today, identify and make evident to all the critical murmurs, the stifled protest which were presumably uttered or eventually suppressed, by the time of King Ghezo's burial, by the princesses' mothers, sisters, relatives, secret lovers (if any), or even by the princesses themselves, when given the opportunity to speak out of record? What was the comment by the king's jester or by the authorised satirical singers? Such questions are based on the assumption that, beyond the unity and specificity of a culture, it is important to explore its internal diversity and pluralism. They invite new approaches and an important shift in the current scientific paradigms.¹⁰

Breaking the walls of prejudice

However, it is not enough to develop a new reading of the past, a new comprehension of tradition. Once it has been recognised that tradition is plural, the practical question is: how to promote here and now the internal debate inside our own culture in such a way that it may itself develop new, and the best possible alternatives? I may not have perceived, in my aforementioned article, how difficult it is to organise brainstorming in a social context where very few people really want it; in a context where some people are used to manipulate the masses and for that reason do not want the truth to become evident at all. A favourite method used by these manipulators is to pour torrents of lies on their followers. More exactly put, they deposit in their followers' minds the seeds of lie and delusion in such a way that these seeds grow by themselves without any need for additional intervention. Followers internalise what they have been told, including the forbidding of all dialogue with other sides and the conviction that the people in front are bad people.

I do not wish to elaborate on this. Let me just mention how harsh this refusal of dialogue can be, not only in politics but even in such domains as religion. In my country for instance, we know of a religious chief, a pastor of the Methodist Church of Benin, who was elected as President of the Church in March 1993 for a five years' mandate renewable once. In 1997, instead of organising new elections to get another mandate starting from 1998, he came to the annual Synod with a new draft constitution making provision that, once the President is chosen, he should remain in office till his retirement. This gave birth to a deep crisis within the Church, the deepest crisis ever

experienced by this congregation which happens to be the first Christian group ever established in Benin.¹¹

Time has not yet come to draw the lessons of this crisis, which has been stirring up all religious communities in Benin, whether Christian or not, for the last two years or so. What strikes me most, however, is how an issue which looks so clear, so simple, so limpid has been confused so far by all means and through all kinds of methods by the man in question and his staff. What fascinates me is the way they have been exploiting the ignorance and lack of information of thousands of people in the Church. They rush here and there to whatever local church they feel has not yet got the proper information to mislead the members and warn them against any contact with the so-called “rebels” or “dissidents”. They erect around them walls of prejudice that incline them simply not to listen to any other explanation or information. Despite this, however, some of these people sometimes come across the facts that the man has been trying to hide. The charm then is neutralised and people are prepared, once again, to face reality.

I happen to be myself part of this conflict - you can guess on which side I stand. Beyond this specific fight, however, one question arises: how can in each case the walls of prejudice be broken? How can people unwilling to discuss or warned against any questioning of the established order be progressively brought to face reality and accept discussion? How can such people be brought into the brainstorming exercise which is the condition for collective invention and renewal? To me, the well known sentence of the Founding Act of UNESCO (“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”) sounds like a paradox: if principles of tolerance, ideas of human rights and human equality or, for that matter, the belief in the God of love are understood to be the defences of peace, piling these principles and belief up in the minds will never be enough to create peace. Specific actions are needed to deconstruct and, whenever possible, break down the walls of prejudice erected by manipulators to prevent fair discussion and dialogue.

Notes

¹ Joseph Arthur comte de GOBINEAU, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, Paris, Didot, 1853 – 1855, 4 vol.

² The French anthropologist intended to oppose the basic hypothesis of “the English anthropological school”, namely Tylor and Frazer. The latter assumed, first, that human nature was identical everywhere and at all times, and secondly, that the facts and deeds

of the primitive man were based on a particular philosophy, that is a coherent and self-conscious worldview. Tylor called this particular worldview “animism”. To him, animism was a philosophy shared by all members of “primitive” societies, and the rationale for all those customs, habits, rites, social uses which seem at first so peculiar to the European observer. In view of this theory, Tylor appears to have been doing what we call today *ethno-philosophy*, while Levy-Bruhl’s refutation amounts to substituting for this *ethno-philosophical* account, an *ethno-psychological* account of non Western realities. To him, the rationale for the primitive way of life does not lie in any kind of philosophy but in a “mentality”, i.e., the bare fact of a given psychic constitution. The primitive’s behaviour is not motivated by logical reasons, but determined by his/her psychological nature. To that extent, no real understanding is possible between the “primitive” and the “civilised”. Levy-Bruhl’s story amounts to widening the gap between cultures and splitting down the unity of humankind.

- ³ LEVY-BRUHL, Lucien, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, Paris, 1910; *La mentalité primitive*, Paris, 1922; *L’âme primitive*, Paris, 1927; *Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive*; Paris, 1931; *La mythologie primitive*, Paris, 1935; *L’expérience mystique et les symboles chez les primitifs*, Paris, 1938.
- ⁴ A good presentation of Lévy-Bruhl’s thought and development on primitive mentality will be found in Jean CAZENEUVE, *La mentalité archaïque*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1961.
- ⁵ HERRSTEIN, Richard and Charles A. MURRAY, *The bell curve: intelligence and class structure in American life*, New York, First Free Press, 1995.
- ⁶ W. ABRAHAM, *The mind of Africa (The nature of human society)*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press and London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962.
- ⁷ Cf. Paulin J. HOUNTONDJI, *African philosophy, myth and reality*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996 (2nd edition): 157-159.
- ⁸ D. ZAHAN, *Religion, spiritualité et pensée africaines*, Paris, Payot, 1970, 245 pp.
- ⁹ P. HOUNTONDJI, “Brainstorming - or how to create awareness of human rights”, in Federico Mayor in collaboration with Roger-Pol Droit, ed., *Taking action for human rights in the twenty-first century*, Paris, UNESCO publishing, 1998: 144 - 147
- ¹⁰ This does not only apply to Africa. Examples can be taken from any other culture. For instance, committing hara-kiri has been said to be part and parcel of Japanese culture. The heroism of the kamikazes who, during the second world war, sacrificed their lives to destroy enemies’ boats, appears to be a modern illustration of an age-old practice, deeply rooted in the ancestral culture. However, how universally approved was this practice? Who can assert that there has never been at any time, in any circumstances, a secret protest by a mother, a sister or a lover, a discrete murmur, a self-contained revolt against the unwritten law or the social pressure that forced young and valid people to commit suicide?
- ¹¹ The first Christian missionary came to Dashome in 1843 by the time of King Ghezo, and he was from the Methodist Church of Britain, founded by John Wesley in the eighteenth century.