

## EXPLORATIONS ON INTELLECTUAL ETHNICITY, PHILOSOPHY AND ETHNOLOGICAL REASON

### V.Y. Mudimbe<sup>1</sup> in conversation with Sam Okoth Opondo

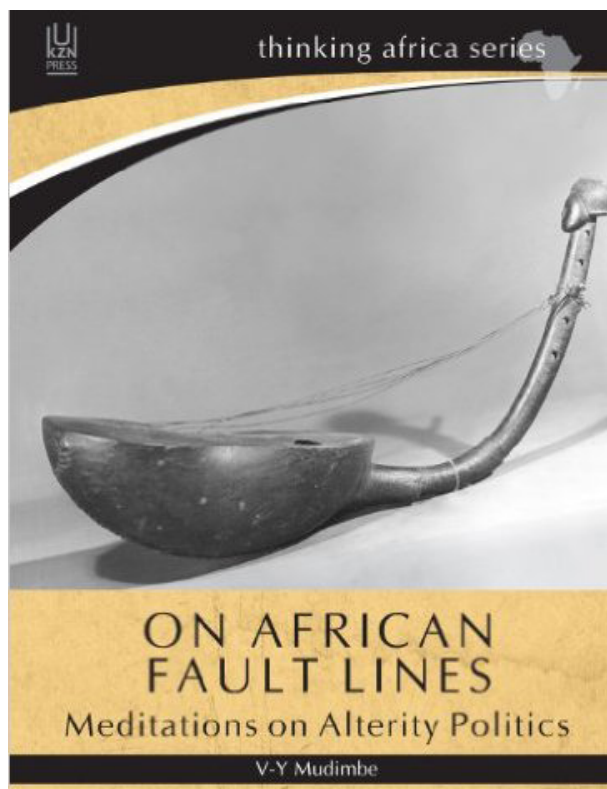
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*This epistolary exchange between Sam Opondo and the philosopher VY Mudimbe, draws upon the ideas of the latter's recently published *On African Fault Lines* (2013) to think through the imbrication of African linguistic, philosophical and narrative practices with a multiplicity of sites and traditions in and beyond the continent. interview, the text review and the letters that it was based upon complete with the tensions that exist between speech and writing.*

#### INTRODUCTION

This conversation engages V.Y. Mudimbe's meditations on alterity politics and the study of Africa as explored in his recently published book *On African Fault Lines*.<sup>3</sup> The first exchange titled "On Letters/Positioning" relates some of the themes and problematics that he treats in this text to broader questions on philosophy, comparison, translation, the letter and ethnological reason in order to interrogate the way 'we' encounter and make sense of African milieus. The solicitation and interview questions also provided an opportunity for further engagement with the 'Greek paradigm' in philosophy, the notion of philosophy as a discipline and an "intellectual ethnicity," and its implications for encounter with others and other ways of knowing.

The second exchange--"Englobing"-- brings together arts, literature, and philosophy in order



Source: UKZN Press.

to think about alternative philosophies as well as alternatives to philosophy and their relationship to the world. The inter-articulation of various philosophical and literary texts and the exploration of the tension between them facilitates the interrogation of the categories and dispositions used to qualify a mode of thought or a thinker as African, philosophical and representative of African philosophy. In the concluding section, V.Y. Mudimbe highlights some aspects of Jean-Paul Sartre's political and ethical commitments and his reversal of conceptual fields to illustrate how "Sartre as a philosopher of French origin who is also an African thinker" pluralizes what

it means to be an African today while pointing to the possibilities of going beyond "our cultural divisions."

The tone, structure and texture of the following exchange is a reflection of the forms of communication and communing that made the conversation possible/impossible. These range from the thematic questions posed at the symposium on "Decolonizing Comparative Methodologies" organized by Amy Donahue of Kennasaw State University in March 2013 to a series of telephone conversations and letters based on a reading/review of *On African Fault Lines*. As such, the conversation maintains elements of the work. The work was made fluent thanks to the presence, transcription and patience of Dr. Catarina Gomes who was V.Y. Mudimbe's first reader and John Attaway who mediated the process and brought the exchange into its epistolary form.

#### I ON LETTERS /POSITIONINGS

**Sam Opondo:** Given that my solicitation comes in the form of a letter, and that your recently published book *On African Fault Lines: Meditations on Alterity Politics* has sections on 'Positions' and 'The Letter,' maybe a good place for us to begin our conversation would be for you to comment on positions, letters and the epistolary form. While the conflation of these categories departs from the organization of meditations in your book, could you tell us how your position as a 'man of letters' and a letter writer informs your orientation towards the practice of anthropology, translation, alienation, creativity, friendship and philosophy?

**V.Y. Mudimbe:** It is an immense question that you raise about the letter; its expressions and variations.

From *On African Fault Lines*, these seem to be concepts that attracted your attention. They can be characterized, reclassified and re-articulated in a different language. Of the three (positions, letters and epistolary form), you chose to focus on the letter and the question of how it informs orientations in the practise of anthropology, and affects such notions as alienation, creativity, friendship and even the practise of philosophy. Diverse concepts and fields are identifiable here.

Let us focus rapidly on the letter. It seems to be key in your reasoning. The Webster Dictionary has synonyms of the letter that could help to respond to your question. A letter is a printed message, an epistle, a memorandum, a message or a report. All these things are letters. Thus, in this sense, *On African Fault Lines* is a collection of letters. Let us use a magnificent metaphor that could justify a paradoxical response that is the ambiguity of any letter and, indeed, in this sense, its difficulty. Here is a case. It is a classical and intercultural illustration. It is also a statement in a sacred tradition that dominates the Christian history of faith. The power of the letter stands in itself as a content which might take on the power and density of the sacred thus impacting on representations of beliefs and practises. And looking at this type of specific discourses, their procedures and marks, one can re-write also their accidents and problems. For instance, consider the Prologue to the Gospel according to John. This sounds like a good example of the polysemy of words in relation to historical and intercultural contexts.

Let us refer to the Prologue in English and focus on the first phrase: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”<sup>4</sup> Invoking the Latin version, one faces its rendering:

*‘In Principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum’, etc.*<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the text continues. The Latin uses ‘*Verbum*’ as translating the Greek ‘*Logos*’. In this sense, with the question of letters, we are mapping equivalents: in Latin, *Verbum*; and in Greek, *Logos* which is a major concept in the philosophical tradition. ‘*Verbum*’ and ‘*Logos*’, are they really synonyms? Does the Latin translate the Greek? This is a wonderful example of how any translation conveys an intellectual configuration in which a particular cultural dimension can possibly get lost or be silenced. Here is a concrete illustration about how the letter relies on a culture. In the Latin version, the Verb ‘*Erat apud Deum*’ refers to the Greek original, which is the ‘*Logos*’. The author of that Gospel, John, if he really is the author, is a Jew. Now, this foundational entry to a canonical Gospel, when approached critically from the point of view of the letter, in time and space, raises questions. In effect, philologically and referring to the original which states that ‘the *Logos*’ was with God’, one reconsiders the translated letter from the perspective of translation politics.

Let us reformulate the issue from a different angle. We note that the English translation presents the ‘was’, which renders the Latin ‘*erat*’. The Greek presents, in actuality, something else, which is ‘inhabited’. The Latin, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to be a strict translation if we keep in mind the Jewish culture of John. From John’s religious background, if we consider him to be the author of this Gospel, a correct Greek translation would refer to the religious norms of the Jewish Temple’s tradition. Thus, strictly speaking, the ‘inhabited with God’ is not a translation but an adaptation in John’s language and, perhaps and possibly, mind, if John really is the author of the Greek Gospel.

By bringing together three issues – the verb, the culture and the demands of the tradition – a faithful reading should be the following: ‘and the *Logos* tabernacled with God’. The reference to Hebrew has been modified by the Greek version. And the Latin has assumed it. And the West has actualized and propagated it with the evangelization of the world. This is a concrete illustration apropos a very simple letter, in this case a verb.

Using simply three languages – Hebrew, Greek and Latin – we have created an immense conceptual field of debates. In brief, the letter, a letter, is very concretely conditioned, in this case, by a cultural locus vis-à-vis its origin and those of its recontextualizations. This is not to say that the letter cannot be translated. It simply implies that its form and semantics are often to be adapted to a new creativity and, thus, the equivalence between ‘*Logos*’ and ‘*Verbum*’. Strictly speaking, one would accept that our present apprehension of John’s Prologue is Latin. It doesn’t render the Greek original in its reference to the Jewish’s cultural tradition. The Latin has reformulated a Greek conceptuality which itself didn’t render perfectly the Hebrew norm.

The example of the Prologue brings us back to your question. It is immense. A response could be linked to debates about the possibility of uncovering cultural specificities. A simple way would be to invoke a practice well-articulated in Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge*.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the transmission of the Gospel or the Enlightenment’s lessons to Africa or to Latin America makes it is possible to invoke classical arguments about the Greek or Latin referents and their elements. In brief, from five prescriptions in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, we receive the following invitations: One, look at

how different literal elements are constituted by rules; two, look at the variations in the application of rules; three, specify the different concepts engaged in the process; four, be attentive to the data that contributes to the interaction between references to an origin and the cultural evolution of concepts, and, finally, be attentive to conflictual cultural games of subordination and complementarity.

**S.O:** Let us explore other aspects of your engagement with letters. I am particularly drawn to your letter to Ambroise Kom where you raise questions about neighbourliness and friendship and their implication for our recognition of existing as being-for-others.<sup>7</sup> You also speak about Edmund Husserl's 1935 Vienna lecture where he singularizes Greek culture in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C as the 'birthplace for a new sort of attitude of individuals toward their surrounding world.' What, in your view, is at stake in such a singularization of the Greek culture in a world of multiple cultures and types of knowledge?

**V.Y.M:** The letter to Ambroise Kom is a meditation that begins with an amusing story concerning angels. It moves on with references, illustrations and issues about friendship from lessons of the Western tradition. The article integrates passages from Dante and there is a statement from Husserl situating in the past of the Greek experience a moment he considered to be the genesis of a practice in the discipline of philosophy. Husserl has an unexpected expression in order to qualify these Greeks who initiate a new way of thinking and speaking about human experience. He invokes the contributions of a diversity of people who are Greeks and who are not Greeks: Babylonians, Egyptians, etc. He names them.

The most important fact might be how to relate to this order of 'our' tradition. And what is also amusing is that he calls these initiators of our ways of reflecting, 'eccentrics'. Their very presence in the past which, intellectually, is also ours is Greek. This past is not detachable from the position of a Simonides who preceded it. Simonides has a statement which is a paradigm: '*polis didaskei andra*'. A number of things can be noted here. First, the phrase states that it is the City that educates men. This paradigm gives an immense power of socialization to the City, which happens to be the dominant culture. Second, the statement is paradoxical in the sense that it uses '*andra*', the plural of '*aner*' in Greek, which is the designation of the male. Simonides could have used '*anthropos*' which is gender inclusive. This choice brings to mind the gender issue in the Greek tradition and with which we are still struggling. Finally, to go back to Husserl again, what we face is our reliance on the Greek practice as the genesis of a demanding philosophical practice.

**S.O:** Recognizing that 'no one speaks from nowhere,' how is one to engage such an ethnocentric claim given the universality of its vocation and the emergence of an intimate community of people from diverse cultural backgrounds who are 'bound together in their devotion to ideas'?

**V.Y.M:** No one speaks from nowhere doesn't seem to be an ethnocentric claim from my understanding of this argument. On the contrary, the argument is more complex than it appears. In my mind, one can face it from its background and from its expressions in the work of Michel de Certeau, a French Jesuit and a thinker who made a huge difference in our

intercultural studies. The statement (no one speaks from nowhere) also indicates that ethnocentrism is not a disease but a way of existing in the world. All of us rely on a cultural context, our own. The American Clifford Geertz has a magnificent illustration that came to him from Asia possibly. The turtle story about the world. The universe is based on a kind of pyramid made of turtles on the back of each other. Thus, the question is on what this structure of turtles is based. The response is simple. It is turtle all the way down. In fact, each turtle constitutes somehow a universe. Thus, a turtle rests on another turtle in an immense infinite pyramid. Each turtle is a living economy. And at the same time, each turtle is part of a dynamic that allows it to exist with other turtles.<sup>8</sup>

**S.O:** My apologies for the ambiguity in my question. It is Husserl's claim that I term ethnocentric rather than the claim that 'no one speaks from nowhere'. However, the response and elaboration of De Certeau's work is very insightful and leads me to my next question regarding your positioning and the recognition that 'no one speaks from nowhere'.

I am very interested in how you position yourself in *On African Fault Lines* vis-à-vis earlier positionings. As you state in the opening sections; "*The Invention of Africa* was written by a Central African Francophone. The chapters of *On African Fault Lines* have been lived by an Anglophone black man." How does your attentiveness to your locus of enunciation, everyday life and questions of method inflect your analysis of the colonial library, the Greco-Roman tradition and the religions of the book?

**V.Y.M :** It might not seem obvious that *The Invention of Africa* was written by a Central African

Francophone. A simple attention to the organization of this book, the proportion of the Francophone quotations, and the issue of the African practice of philosophy, and you will be dealing with perspectives in which Francophone views constitute a majority of references. A good test would be the number of French quotations in the chapter on the patience of philosophy. On the other hand, in *On African Fault Lines*, Anglophones are dominant in terms of questions of method, debates on ideas, and references. Thus, it makes sense to say that if *The Invention of Africa* was written by a Central African Francophone, *On African Fault Lines* was lived by an Anglophone black man. The locus of enunciation is important. It might determine ways we look at intellectual problems and how we handle them. On the other hand, these qualifications don't necessarily determine our thinking. They are circumstantial. They might inflect our analysis; they don't determine automatically our vision. In any case, my everyday language is Spanish and not English. Speaking English at School twice a week doesn't make me an Anglophone in actuality.

As to the religions of the book, my intellectual position has always been for a methodological agnosticism and its demands for suspending religious judgments as arguments in the practice of the discipline. The choice is political. It is also ethical in the sense that it allows communication with people from different cultures, and different beliefs. And what is happening in Africa, the confrontations between Islam and Christianity are good reasons to promote a methodological agnosticism. Indeed, one might say: you do it, they don't do it. That is not a reason.

**S.O:** Before moving to the debates on the plurality of philosophies or the democratization of philosophy, I would also like to invite your thoughts on two related questions: First, can there be a conception of philosophy that is not inscribed in and to the Greek tradition? Second, in what ways does your conception of philosophy and its Greek origins resonate with or differ from that pursued by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who, writing about geophilosophy in their *What is Philosophy?* state that "philosophers are strangers but philosophy is Greek" ?<sup>9</sup>

**V.Y.M:** There is a long response to this question of yours. The Coda of *On African Fault Lines* is a response about the issue raised here and it is quite explicit. One may distinguish several lines. The first is a statement about the polysemy of the very notion of philosophy. It might designate any *Weltanschauung*, any commonsensical way of existing. In a recent document, I went so far as to emphasize our everyday understanding of philosophy that makes us distinguish, for instance, the philosophy of MDs or of Lawyers in the United States versus that of European professionals. There is nothing wrong with such an understanding. That said, like astronomy or biology, philosophy is a discipline. It has rules and it has a history like other disciplines.

Secondly, any dictionary can give you definitions and values concerning the meaning of philosophy independently from the technical one. In this sense, there is no reason not to accept the value of expressions like the philosophy or the science of American Indians or the conception of desire in African traditional philosophy, along the model of problematizations of our philosophy thanks to which the Greek tradition survived and was transmitted to

the West. Back to the brief note about the concept of philosophy that can designate the singularity of professions. Indeed, there is a philosophy of MDs and of lawyers in the USA which is different from the philosophy of MDs and lawyers in Germany or in West Africa. And, in Africa, you have differences qualifying the philosophy of lawyers who are Anglophones vis-à-vis those who are Francophones. The real issue is not one concerning the understanding of the demands of a philosophy that relies on the Greek tradition in relation to or in opposition to values of philosophy as a way of existing from a cultural background, any background. You don't necessarily need the Greeks in order to organize your conception of hospitality for instance and your everyday relations to your neighbour. And thus what we do is, about philosophy, to be attentive to issues of methods and their recommendations about the practice of a discipline. That said, the concept belongs to a culture and can be used with different values in the practice of everyday life.

**S.O:** What does this mean for comparative philosophy?

**V.Y.M:** Comparative philosophy can be approached diachronically and synchronically. The best illustration would be, for example, the practice of affirmations in history versus in anthropology. Secondly, we can explore the correlation between languages and religious beliefs. Finally, and through this concept that imposed itself on my mind, thanks to Michel Foucault, we could compare the interrelations between a hearing perception and a speaking perception and that between two different cultures.

This type of work is possible. It can be done by historians or by anthropologists. It raises questions of interest for comparative philosophy. And from this point of view, one can accept a diversity of orientations of what philosophy is, on the one hand, a technical practice of a discipline with its Greek roots and, on the other hand, philosophy can be understood as a vision of the world. In a given country, in Italy or in Germany, in Brazil or Guatemala, you have variations about the philosophies of MDs, lawyers, priests, politicians and so on. The concept translates *Weltanschauungen*, that is particular local visions of the world. And these have often an impact on everyday life as well as on disciplinary practices. That said, nothing, absolutely nothing, prevents you from calling them philosophies as long as we don't confuse them with both the demands and expectations of the discipline.

## II ENGLÖBING

**S.O:** Thank you for your very insightful responses. I would like to raise a few more questions with regard to disciplinarity, fidelity, alterity politics and their implication for philosophy and comparison. As I mentioned during our previous conversation, my interest in philosophy is derived from an interest in aesthetics, ethics and diplomacy broadly conceived as the mediation of estrangement. In thinking about the relationship between different mediation practices, regimes of intelligibility and affects, I have found Cesare Casarino's concept of *Philopoesis* useful.<sup>10</sup> According to Casarino, a philopoetic intervention/interference is "one that produces the different zones of indiscernibility between philosophy and literature." As a method and an orientation,

philopoesis makes literature and philosophy question each other and by questioning each other they put the whole world into question.<sup>11</sup>

As someone who has written philosophical and literary works and who continues to make literary and other aesthetic references in their philosophical investigations, how does a trans-disciplinary orientation and an appreciation of arts from different cultures and cultural differences inflect your analysis of philosophy as a disciplinary practice?

**V.Y.M:** You bring together arts, literature, and philosophy in your project of thinking about relationships of mediations and regimes of intelligibility. And you refer to Cesare Casarino's concept of 'Philopoesis'. I think I have known him, if we are referring to the same person. Cesare Casarino, back in time, was a remarkable graduate student in our graduate program in literature at Duke. He did an exceptionally brilliant work.

From your interests in humanities, your question is about mediations and estrangements of regimes of intelligibility. In actuality, it is about a tension, that's the correct word, between philosophy, literature and arts. It brought to my mind a reflection from a novel by Albert Camus, *The Fall*.<sup>12</sup> The writer, who is also the object of the narrative, interrogating himself and his past, distinguishes his life as a lawyer in Paris versus his present life among marginals in an Amsterdam bar. And comes in, this statement: "Are we not all alike, constantly talking and to no one, forever up against the same questions although we know the answers in advance?" Camus' *The Fall* is a piece of literature. It is also a philosophical text on a search and a waiting. The qualification, indeed,

requires an understanding of what literature is vis-à-vis philosophy.

Any good dictionary would define literature as anything written with an aesthetic preoccupation, a work of imagination that transcends the everyday reality it is supposed to convey to transmit knowledge or, at least, instructions about how life should function in a community at a given time. One could oppose such an understanding to entries on philosophy in an ordinary dictionary. They would include, in principle, three main axes: Human questions about existence, organization of systems of ideas sanctioning a discipline, and a general conception or vision of the world and its ethics. That is also an entry that is generally used in order to think transcultural dialogues.

In fact, such a concept can convey intercultural mediations about understanding ways of existing and believing. In this sense, it is possible to face the demands of a dialogue between cultures, which would assume the tension between these open approaches to concepts of arts, literature and philosophy. They interact in any intellectual praxis which should be understood as a negation of an affirmation; and, paradoxically, at the same time, it is an opening up of another affirmation that can lead us to abstract questions pertaining to issues about space and time, existence and death. In brief, to an approach of the world and human experience. In my opinion, it is from such a background that the concept of an intercultural philosophy might make sense and justify the pertinence and validity of its ongoing projects in our time.

**S.O:** Let us return to the Greek paradigm in philosophy with some insights from trans-disciplinary



and intercultural encounters. Can we read philosophy critically such that one speaks of a philosophy that is invested in Greece's others (the barbarians) rather than a self-referential or self-contained Greece? At a minimum, can we speak of a philosophy that is more *philo-barbaric*?

**V.Y.M:** If we look at everyday dictionaries and the entry on philosophy, is there a convincing understanding of a pursuit of knowledge, an understanding of its intellectual means and methodological organized systems? The question begs an investigation in terms of inquiry and demonstration, an analysis and an interpretation of what is out there. Indeed, philosophy is also often equated with systems of beliefs. It claims to be a method of knowing and, at the same time, to be a science. More precisely, a discipline. From the Greeks to the present, determinations contributed to the constitution of a model exemplified in the Western tradition. We can reconstruct its requirements in African hypotheses that led to conceptualities and anthologies of texts which qualify an African philosophy. This is a vague concept, since it embraces, on the one hand, traditional *Weltanschauungen*, and, on the other hand, practices branching from the Western practises. Thus, when used properly, the concept of an African philosophy should be related to a number of criteria. There are, first of all, agents committed to the practice of philosophy. Generally, they are born in African languages, attended Islamic, Christian or Western education. Secondly, initiated in a Western or Islamic intellectual tradition, the agent analyzes or speaks of an African philosophy from the intellectual background of a cultural education which is marked intellectually. The perspective is

immersed in cultural presuppositions that should be interrogated hermeneutically within their own conditions of possibility. They are, in principle, explicit and should be auto-critical.

In this sense, one distinguishes two orientations. On the one hand, an anthropological one that considers a *Weltanschauung* as a philosophy, and that is a first approach. It confuses philosophy with a vision of the world. There is nothing wrong with this anthropological dimension. One could go back to the past and consider, for instance, practices in the 18<sup>th</sup> century within what was a different Germany, study and understand how cultural agents interpreted their tradition, assuming it and re-expressing it as a philosophy. It was a discipline and a respectable one. Kant is one of its icons. Technically, in the last two centuries, the trend has been remarkably valorized by cultural anthropology.

On the other hand, the intellectual world has been instrumentalizing another type of philosophical experience. This one gives a primacy to the subject. It depends on a new reappropriation of the Greek legacy as it has been internalized in the West through philosophies of the subject. Again, one invokes the figure of Immanuel Kant. The reference does not negate varieties of cultural experiences in the world. The orientation is simply a recognition of three measures. One, the history of a practice; two, the recognition of a method; and, three, the inscription in a tradition. That said, what we are getting at, and facing are two entries to African practices of philosophy and the possibility, as well as the demands of two backgrounds, the historically dominant legacy of a practice, and the synchronically powerful domain of African anthropology. Objectively, they don't conflict with each other; and, also objectively, they can

be dialogical and give meaning to our questions and our ways of existing.

*“The locus of enunciation is important. It might determine ways we look at intellectual problems and how we handle them. On the other hand, these qualifications don't necessarily determine our thinking. They are circumstantial. They might inflect our analysis; they don't determine automatically our vision”.*

**S.O:** As illustrated above, to acknowledge cultural differences is to acknowledge that the world 'we' inhabit is also the world of other people. In the African context, as in most previously colonized spaces, it is also to acknowledge colonial inventions, claims to universality and colonial difference. If we turn to Jacques Derrida's reading of the problem of 'genesis in Husserl's philosophy', we learn that the history of philosophy it presents is also a philosophy of history.<sup>13</sup> That history and philosophy imply each other. As is well known, this philosophy of history is built on exclusion, elisions and silences -- or inventions if you like. How is one to engage other pasts (that are not necessarily historical) and other knowledges (that are not necessarily philosophical) given the dominance, and I would even add the hegemony of historical and philosophical modes of inquiry and intelligibility? Do these knowledges present us with alternative philosophies or alternatives to philosophy?

**V.Y.M:** Let me give you a simple response that goes back to what might be the origin of Derrida's position, that is a question of method and clarification about discursive formations by his tutor, Michel Foucault. Three main entries will lead us to questions on

cultural geographies as explicated by Michel Foucault. There is, first of all, how to define and distinguish a science from an ideology and a system of beliefs. This implies the necessity of defining what is a science and what is not a science; what is a science and what is a pseudo-science and what is a rigorous practice of a discipline and what is not.

Secondly, from this angle, one would consider the truth of everyday life, empirical approaches and the distance from which they witness the discursive formations of disciplines. And thus the necessary distinction between scientific disciplines, pragmatic systems of knowledge versus cultural narratives and their ideological excesses. Strictly speaking, they cannot and shouldn't be confused. Yet, in our time, they have been competing with each other and creating perplexing value systems which have been referring to what philosophy should be about. And that is not a particularity of the African intellectual space.

Your question, in actuality, made me think of Foucault's impatience about cultural geographies in relation to a genealogy of psychiatric studies in which one faces extended politics and conflictual practices of a supposed rigorous discipline. In brief, all this might come down to issues about the maligned concept of truth. It brings to my mind an ill-known intervention of Foucault concerning the truth and its use of a paradigm; the Confession of the flesh. The French philosopher distinguishes the discourse itself and suggests to centre its own immanence. It is local and cultural. And then, intervenes in the Confession of the flesh the continual variations and (double) conditioning of ethical rules. In other words, a polyvalence informs the truth of propositions concerning the Confession itself.

Thirdly, about intellectual formations in relation to philosophy, one has to accept, at least, an obligation. That of facing the fact that discursive formations are expressions of a cultural knowledge. They are to be approached in their historical dimensions as discursive practices that organize objects and distinguish clearly methods, principles and ways of combining them.

**S.O:** The double conditioning takes various forms. In your *Idea of Africa*, you carry out a critique of 'ethnological reason' and the ideological practices that classify types of political, economic and religious ensembles in Africa and other non-western spaces.<sup>14</sup> Doubtless, such a critique provides a way of going beyond anthropology's perspective, which in many ways runs through Western thought. However, there have been a number of African philosophers (if we may use that term) who creatively examine African attitudes, categories and symbols in a manner that provokes thought while pointing to the heterogeneity of systems without privileging one particular system over others. What, in your view are some of the constraints of thinking within a culture that is not one's own? Is it possible to disabuse ethnological reason so as to enable a more fruitful mode of cultural encounter, translation and comparison?

**V.Y.M :** We can have a conversation based on Paul Ricoeur's grids. Let us observe that in all cultural formations it is possible to access foundational sagas. They are generally perceived as sacred and venerated justly so. They illustrate where we come from, the meaning of the history of a culture and its institutions. This is a field that has its paradoxes and cannot really be submitted to a rational deconstruction. It is of

the order of cultural epics. Then comes in a second level that would qualify as assuming an everyday practice and the virtues by which we live. Sayings and discourses convey values and ways of existing, and explicate a history and its predicaments. In Africa and elsewhere, this second level of discourse allows, and often promotes a critical discursive distance by interrogating itself. Indeed, approaches about this interrogation have varied through generations and are not the same in all cultures. They adapt to circumstances and socio-historical contexts and events. They generally imply the effect of contact with other ethnic groups, with a variety of cultures, with other fellow humans.

Since the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, at least in Central Africa, we can read and interpret the histories of cultures from the disciplines that have been describing the so-called exotic areas, cultures and their particularities. This type of knowledge exists in reports of travelers and documents established by missionaries. They constituted a representation of a cultural difference and its progressive transformations through intellectual histories of the sciences. With the Enlightenment phenomenon and, one century later, with the effect of the Berlin Academy, a distribution and a classification of knowledges were sanctioned and a new order came to be represented in the faculties of knowledge, and the institution of the social sciences. Fundamentally, it was about propositions in sciences and in arts, as well as their variations. As a matter of intellectual discipline, all these domains relate to each other in mutual conditioning and rules of practices. One can invoke the intellectual ambiguities of Kant's *Anthropology* versus his intervention in *The Conflict of the Faculties* that dwells on the privileges of disciplines, specifying

themselves from theology to law and medicine in a descending order of domains.<sup>15</sup>

One reads carefully *The Conflict of the Faculties* and discovers, in its Preface, Kant's position which states a fidelity to the hierarchical power of the political and, at the same time, and paradoxically, recognizes the primacy of the spiritual. Amazing, what to believe? In any case, the polyvalence of the two books has transformed orientations into propositions of power by marking distinctions concerning religious confession, objectivist practices and administration of alterities. Essentially, here is a legacy of the Enlightenment and its equivocations. On the other hand, from the twentieth century, a transcultural perspective has been imposing its intercultural lessons through explorations of philosophies of the subject in dialogue with anthropological inquiries.

In our present day climate, why not invoke the book that Pierre Legendre has just edited. In its own right, the *Tour du monde des concepts* (Going around the world of concepts), is an intercultural manifesto.<sup>16</sup> It brings together a number of languages (Arab and Persian, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Russian, Turkish and African languages) and dwells on the circulation of concepts dealing with the truth, the law, the contract, as well as everyday life in relation to nature and our present day social institutions, such as the State and the society. Suresh Sharma notes in the Postface, and very correctly, that "the philosophical and linguistic exercise that Pierre Legendre initiated is an invitation that interrogates the nature and implications of relationships between language and thought in modern contexts."<sup>17</sup>

**S.O:** Finally, and in line with the crossing of cultural divisions, you have posited that Jean Paul Sartre is

an African Philosopher. Does the adjective African in African philosophy mean anything? What does presenting Sartre as an African philosopher imply for discourses on Africanness, philosophy and African philosophy?

**"The qualification of Sartre as an African philosopher is both innocent and it is not. In a language of representation, the adjective 'African' rules an affirmation and implications of marginality".**

**V.Y.M:** The response is very simple. I used the concept of Sartre as an African philosopher in the mid 1970's, at the University of Strasbourg during the ceremony of a *Doctorate Honoris Causa* of the Rector of the National University in the Congo. Sartre was still alive and loved my liberty. What it meant is not outrageous. Consider Sartre's political writings and link them to his piece on *Black Orpheus*.<sup>18</sup> They are in a relationship of complementarity. Also, in his time, between 1945 and the 1960's, observe his socio-political objections concerning the Jewish Question, the relations between the North and the South, and how they have been and can still be observed in technical terms of political economy. Sartre's interventions faced social relations of production, exploitations and aimed at transcending the violence which was observable in the name of equality.

Calling Sartre an African philosopher shouldn't surprise. In actuality, the first time the image was used, at Strasbourg University, I called Sartre a "Negro philosopher". It was a political statement made in highly distinguished academia, a manner of recognizing the exemplarity of a philosophical commitment and of celebrating its modalities. Sartre

liked it, I was told. He was to die a few years later and I was in Paris to accompany him.

The qualification of Sartre as an African philosopher is both innocent and it is not. In a language of representation, the adjective 'African' rules an affirmation and implications of marginality. They have been integrated in our horizon. The English volume of Sartre anti-colonial political writings has now acknowledged my daring qualification of Sartre as an African philosopher.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, one could read it, only in a language of the political, for what it was in the 1950-60's, a political and polemical stance. It was supposed to connect ethical rules to political observations. Issues of language here cannot but be related to human conditions. That means a simple fact: to dare to think about what has been dividing us in the last three centuries with the classification of races. In one of the texts you refer to, commenting on a contribution by a specialist of American cultures, I indicated, for instance, that the color of American Indians moved from white to red and even to black through time. The classification of Linneaus has been dominating us for the last centuries. It is based on analogical models from plants to animals to human beings. Interestingly enough, of types of human beings, there is a race that has been elegantly erased by commentators. A race of monsters.

In any case, the issue is here more than symbolic. Sartre, as a Black philosopher, is both a symbol and a concept. At any rate, there are generations of White people in Africa. In South Africa, and along the Atlantic and the Pacific borders, since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. There are White people born in Central Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and whose children were born on the Continent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They constitute a minority, living in Africa or exiled in Europe. Also, one



should note that inter-communication with the Indian Sub-Continent is centuries old and there are Africans of Asian ancestry. This is to say that we should have the courage of engaging another horizon from a simple question; who is African and what it means to be an African today.

A committed thinker, Jean-Paul Sartre reversed conceptual fields. And, using the Hegelian dialectic, he faced its internal difficulty. *Black Orpheus* is an open-ended question which, contrary to lazy readings, does not celebrate blackness for itself, but raises the challenge of a future. The synthesis is an expectation for going beyond what predicates it. It would stand both as a negation of a racial antithesis and an opening up in what transcends an essentialist stance.

Here I am concluding this issue with a lesson from E. D. Hirsch on interpretation and criticism. Regarding Sartre, African philosopher, we can invoke some qualifications: First, an interpretation of that which is not given, even in *Black Orpheus*. Second, a sign of an engagement and its textuality that is critical of a period in our common history. Finally, it also testifies to the comprehension of meaning as a political signature. All these have a function in judgment and signification in a resolution that qualifies Sartre as a philosopher of French origin who is also an African thinker who went beyond our cultural divisions.

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