Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization

Messay Kebede
University of Dayton, mkebede1@udayton.edu

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The first condition to understand the problems and contents of African philosophy is to refer to the colonial narrative about Africa, there being no doubt that African philosophical reflections are all attempts to refute the degrading views developed in the West to justify slavery and colonialism. Central to the colonial discourse and the justification of colonial rule is the hierarchical notion of human races with its blunt promulgation of the superiority of the white race over all other peoples. However, another facet of this Western discourse proved nagging in default of being equally influential. It came out against the colonial idea of hierarchy through the rejection of the notion of human races or the affirmation of non-gradable pluralism. This chapter studies these two aspects of the Western conception of Africa with the view of laying the theoretical ground for the African responses.

1. The Invention of the “White Man”

Let me begin by underlining that the Western attempt to degrade Africans has required the prior embellishment of the “white man.” Grant that the notion of primitive Africa is a construct of Eurocentric concepts, and the logical precedence of the invention of the “white man” over the invention of Africa springs to mind, given that the inventors must first believe lies about themselves before they give credence to the demeaning descriptions of Africans.

A. The Prelogical as Opposed to the Rational

No need to go into fussy research to lay hands on the method used to invent the “white man.” All the ingredients are found in the thinker who is universally believed to have codified the colonial discourse, namely, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. One of the leading French ethnologists of his time, Lévy-Bruhl is the author of *Primitive Mentality* and *How Natives Think*, two books in which by an array of arguments and alleged facts he endeavors to draw a line of demarcation between the West and non-Western peoples. The leitmotif running through his analyses is that the dominance of logical thinking distinguishes the “white man” from the rest of humankind. Let us briefly review the main arguments.

To herald the radical nature of his study, Lévy-Bruhl begins by stating the need for a new terminology. If we suppose that similar mental functions are found in all human aggregates, the same terminology can be used with the
understanding that "‘savages’ have minds more like those of children than of adults." But if we assume that otherness instead of immaturity characterizes the non-Western peoples, then the terms and classifications derived from the mental study of Westerners "are not suitable for those which differ from them; on the contrary, they prove a source of confusion and error." Confusion dissipates if the notion of "mystic" or "prelogical" mental activity is opposed to the logical thinking of the West.

One reason for not assimilating the thinking of non-Western peoples to childlike mentality is their similarity to the "white man" in terms of physiological development. "Undoubtedly they have the same senses as ours . . . and their cerebral structure is like our own," concedes Lévy-Bruhl. Better still, outside the collective representations, that is, when the primitive is taken as an individual, he finds that the primitive "will usually feel, argue and act as we should expect him to do." To get hold of the difference, we must venture, beyond the physical constitution or properties, into the manner of thinking, into the strange laws governing the mind of the primitive.

What is most striking to Levy-Bruhl about the mystic, prelogical character is the subsequent inability of the primitive mind to think of the physical as physical. This means the prevention of pure cognitive representations in favor of collective representations in which the cognitive element "is found blended with other elements of an emotional or motor character, coloured and imbued by them, and therefore implying a different attitude with regard to the objects represented." Whereas in the West pure intellectual concepts are obtained through the retention of the cognitive element to the detriment of the affective side, in non-Western societies some such purification is not sought so that a cognitive attitude toward objects is never achieved. The mixture of intellectual elements with affective reactions postulates occult forces, which hinder the apprehension of material phenomena in a physical and causal fashion. Not only are these mystic entities imperceptible to the senses, but they also induce the mind to arrange concepts with a total disregard for the elementary laws of logic. Thus, the same entity can be classified both as a person and an animal, just as the same person can be simultaneously in two different places, or be objectively active in reality as well as in dreams.

For Lévy-Bruhl, prelogicality and mysticality are "two aspects of the same fundamental quality, rather than two distinct characteristics." The first aspect refers to the contents of the thought, that is, to the permeation of the physical with mystic powers incarnating the fear, hope, and religious awe of the primitive. The second aspect concerns connections between ideas, which because they implicate occult forces, operate independently of logical laws. The social and technological retardation of native peoples is wholly due to this inability to think physically and logically. Some such turn of mind is adamantly opposed to scientific thinking and technological orientation; it is
only fit to wallow in magic, thereby perpetuating the subordination of natives to mysterious forces. In the words of Lévy-Bruhl, "the prelogical mind does not objectify nature thus. It lives it rather, by feeling itself participate in it, and feeling these participations everywhere."  

The statement according to which colonialism portrayed Africans as an inferior race to justify the need for a tutor, however disparaging, was somewhat optimistic and condescending. Through prolonged tutorship, Africans could hopefully acquire, though in a reduced version, the moral and intellectual virtues of the West. In refusing to derive the inferiority of colonized peoples from immaturity, Lévy-Bruhl, for his part, ascribes their backwardness directly to alterity. Their mind does not work like its Western counterpart; nor does it follow the same principles. The whole purpose of colonialism becomes problematic, since the possibility of closing the gap with the West, the so-called civilizing mission of colonialism, is thereby lost. The service that inferior races owe to the superior one is all that is left. The idea of other races being slaves by nature to the superior race could not have been better intimated.

What is quite astonishing is the existence of scholars—African or Western opponents of colonial methods—who readily endorse the claims of the colonizer. In the debate over the existence of African philosophy, the term ethnosophy designates the position of those African scholars who assert, directly or indirectly, to the idea of African otherness. Because it provides "a revamped version of Lévy-Bruhl's 'primitive mentality,'" ethnosophy is accused of being nothing less than a "secret accomplice" of colonial and neocolonial designs.  

Be it the idea of vital force as the supreme ontological principle of Bantu thinking, as expounded by Placide Tempels, or the predominance of emotion in the African thinking process, as upheld by Léopold Sédar Senghor, the truth remains that these definitions of African mental attitudes do no more than bolster Lévy-Bruhl's allegations. What is to say that for the Bantu force "is inseparable from the definition of 'being'" if not to soak reality in a mystical ambience? In what sense does Senghor's statement that the European has toward the object "an objective intelligence," whereas the African Negro "feels it," differ from the descriptions of Lévy-Bruhl? In all these assertions, emotion and occult forces do pervade the African perception of reality to the point of obstructing the rise of rational thinking.

The coming chapters will deal with the real meaning of this apparent endorsement of the colonial discourse. In the meantime, let us concentrate on the task of exposing the considerable part of self-illusion inflating the belief in the exclusive rationality of the "white man." For prior to the attempt of refuting what colonialism and anthropology said about Africa, we face the question of knowing whether the self-portrait of Europe is not itself an invention. The question sets the proper stage for revealing the strengths and side-
slips of the ethno-philosophical discourse, given the correlation between the Western definition of the "white man" and the African response.

B. The Myth of the "White Man"

Limiting again my investigations to Lévy-Bruhl's formulations, many instances show that we are dealing with an illusive idea of the West. To begin with, his definitions abound with contradictions denoting now his hesitations, now his involvement in pure fantasies. Already, the rage with which the idea of the distinction of the "white man" is pursued betrays so idiosyncratic a notion that it repels rationality by abjuring universality. Hardly is it possible to pin the label "rational" on an entity that so loudly cries for exclusiveness. Further, the theory of primitive peoples frankly hesitates between linear and divergent conceptions of evolution.

When Lévy-Bruhl dismisses the identification of the primitive with a child, his conception seems to espouse the idea of different types of human beings. However, sometimes he reverts to a linear, stage-type of difference. Such is the case when, speaking of the perception of reality, he says: "ours [the Western perception] has ceased to be so," that is, of being impregnated with mystic notions. It cannot cease to be mystic unless it was once mystic, and this brings back the usual evolutionary gap between the civilized and the primitive. Likewise, the provision that without the collective representations, the primitive, taken as an individual, is quite able to behave rationally seems to conceive of primitiveness less as a natural state than as an accumulated product of bad habits and misguided thinking.

Though Lévy-Bruhl expresses the need to forge new concepts to portray the primitive, he comes up with commonplace notions, such as, collective representations, mystic and prelogical thinking. Is not prelogical a stage-notion, implying lateness, immaturity in lieu of alterity? As a matter of fact, Lévy-Bruhl does not succeed in thinking the otherness of the primitive: his comparative method cannot but translate difference into superiority and inferiority. Because the primitive is constantly defined negatively, the purpose of the exercise is not so much objective apprehension as the elevation of the "white man" to the rank of the chosen race.

Where the part of invention becomes overwhelming is in the attempt to reduce, if not eliminate, the influence of irrational, mystic thinking in the West. Consider, for instance, what Lévy-Bruhl says about the place of dreams. Unlike civilized Europeans, primitives have full faith in dream. For them, far from being illusory, dream is even "a provision of the future," and so has "far greater significance than to us." The tendency to minimize the part of the irrational to decorate the "white man" with the honors of rationality becomes obvious when we recall how little the affirmation is supported by facts. Whether we take the Bible, the foundation of European Christianity,
or the ordinary belief of the Westerners, the role of dreams as revelation of profound truths is largely accepted.

What, then, should we say when a thinker, such as Sigmund Freud, who is the product of Western rationality, pleads for the need to take dreams seriously? Interestingly, Freud notes, “the view of dreams which came nearest to the truth was not the medical but the popular one, half involved though it still was in superstition.” So his purpose is not to question the relation of dreams to reality; it is to wipe out the part of superstition by raising the interpretation of dreams to the level of science. While this may mean that dreams are not caused by demonic and divine powers, still it preserves the important idea of dreams being revelations of deeper truths that are inaccessible to conscious life. Through his conviction that dreams are “disguised fulfilments of repressed wishes,” Freud salvages much of the popular belief of the West, which is similar to that of “the primitive.”

In addition to refuting the assertion that the “white man” does not give credit to dreams, the position of Freud suggests that the attribution of greater significance to dreams, and not its dismissal, is rationally justified. In light of rationality turning out to be the acceptance of irrationality, Lévy-Bruhl’s attempt to lessen the place of dreams in the “white man’s” thinking appears as an overstatement of rationality that is backfiring. Blaise Pascal warns: “he who would play the angel plays the beast.”

We can call upon the critical views of Karl Marx as well as those of Friedrich Nietzsche to strengthen the idea that rationality begins with the acceptance of irrationality. The merit of both philosophers is to have exposed how much of the history of the West is the story of irrational beliefs putting on the mask of rationality. Take the history of philosophy itself: does it not relate the manner occult beliefs are paraded as rational statements, as exemplified by the rationalization of religious beliefs in all idealist philosophy? To brag about being rational on top of being unable to recognize the initial irrationality of Western thinking constitutes a double failure that throws the thinking far away from rationality. Genuine rationality begins with the recognition of irrationality, not its denial. This genuineness is then understood as a conquest obtained by the development of a critical relationship with oneself. The main condition to achieve such a critical view is the surrender of all self-flattering images, a condition that Lévy-Bruhl hardly meets.

Similarly, the emphatic affirmation that primitives do not obey the principle of non-contradiction does not pay attention to the controversies generated by the same principle in the history of Western philosophy. Just as many philosophers considered the principle of non-contradiction as a sacrosanct law of correct thinking, so too philosophers who disclose its limitations, some going so far as to suggest the creation of another logic, are not hard to find. A case in point is Heraclitus, who is famous for defending the unity and struggle of opposites, saying, for instance, that “the path up and down is one
and the same,” or “as the same thing there exists in us living and dead and the waking and the sleeping and young and old: for these things having changed round are those, and those having changed round are these.”17 Closer to our times, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the Marxists contrast metaphysics with dialectics, which they credit with superior intelligence and consider as the apex of Western thinking. Unlike metaphysics which, to quote Friedrich Engels, declares that “a thing either exists, or it does not exist,” or that “it is equally impossible for a thing to be itself and at the same time something else,” dialectics holds:

motion itself is a contradiction: even simple mechanical change of place can only come about through a body at one and the same moment of time being both in one place and in another place, being in one and the same place and also not in it.18

Granted that those called “primitives” did not have the same understanding when they were transgressing the law of non-contradiction, nonetheless under pain of relegating much of Western philosophical breakthroughs to primitive thinking, the apparent flexibility of “primitives” about contradictions should not be called prelogical.

The mere neglect of the various facets of Western thinking is not the only issue. The strong impregnation of idealist concepts with mystic notions can be established without endorsing the Marxist critique of idealism. For example, what else is at work but a mystic thinking when Plato speaks of the objective existence of a world of ideas? In general, the constant references of idealist philosophers to the role of God and the autonomy of the spiritual together with the use of such notions as the “noumenal world,” “the vital impetus,” the transcendence of “the idea,” show to what extent Western philosophy is fraught with mystic notions, to say nothing of the truth contained in the accusation that much of Western philosophical energy originates from the necessity of rescuing Christian mysticism and ideals from the attacks of science.

The reality about the West is not so much rationality versus irrationality as the coexistence and interaction of the two. May it not be, then, that in the primitive mentality too the two coexist, maybe with the difference that the dominion of irrationality is greater over the “primitive” than the “civilized.” At any rate, the denial of irrationality, the stubborn care to reserve rationality for the West and irrationality for the rest of humankind, authorizes us to speak of the invention of the “white man.” What is more, the more obstinate the denial, the higher is the irrationality of the classification.

So great is the blinding power of the alleged Western specialness that it prevents Lévy-Bruhl from asking simple though essential questions. If primitive peoples are so completely shrouded in mystic notions that they ignore the
laws of logic and causality, the crucial question becomes that of knowing how they manage to survive in so inhospitable a natural environment. From the descriptions of primitives, what we gather is their total powerlessness vis-à-vis nature, given their failure to take into consideration its most elementary laws. Had this been true, they would have been wiped off the face of the earth long ago. Lévy-Bruhl cannot recognize this fact because it objects to the myth of the unique rationality of the West.

This survival is exactly what Henri Bergson underlines in his refutation of Lévy-Bruhl’s thesis. Without the confidence in the invariability of natural laws, the primitive, according to Bergson, “would not rely on the current of the river to carry his canoe, nor on the bending of his bow to shoot his arrow, on his hatchet to cut into the trunk, on his teeth to bite, on his legs to walk.”19 In all the cases discussed by Lévy-Bruhl, none really stipulates the indifference of the primitive to causal laws. Instead, occult causes are supervenient phenomena: they intervene to explain, not the physical effect as such, but “its human significance . . . its importance to man, and more especially to a particular man.”20 Bergson concludes: “there is nothing illogical, consequently nothing ‘prelogical’ or even anything which evinces an ‘imperviousness to experience.’”21 Better still, he asks us to take note of the “striking . . . resemblance between the mentality of the civilized and of the primitive man when dealing with facts such as those . . . [of] death, illness, serious accident.”22

Nowhere in the world has magic ever been a substitute for causality. In reality, concerning things that are within their mechanical reach, human beings rely on mechanical laws to obtain or counter material effects. As these effects depend also on wider material connections that are outside their control, they tend to evoke occult forces whose significance is to humanize nature. To be susceptible to human solicitations and influenced by rituals, reality “must appear animated with a purpose.”23

The function of spiritual entities is this provision of reality with purpose. As scientific knowledge progresses, the mechanical circle grows to the detriment of the magical one, without however displacing it entirely. In short, as an expression of the natural, irrationality remains the forced companion of rationality. Lévy-Bruhl’s attempt to draw a hard and fast line of demarcation between the rational and the irrational comes under the heading less of objective study than of self-deceiving thinking. Apart from being a falsification of reality, the rejection of irrationality particularizes and isolates “the white man” from the rest of humankind. So exclusive a rational attribute shakes off universality, and contains its refutation.

C. Anthropology: Myth and Reality

Nietzsche’s critical study of Western idealism shows how an ideal world is constructed and projected onto the real world. The result of this projection is
the depreciation of the real world: termed "appearance" as opposed to truth, the visible world becomes the realm of change and deceit while the ideal world is described as eternal and perfect. Nietzsche finds that moral ideals provide the ultimate justification for the separation and opposition of the two worlds. Behind the construction of the ideal world as unchanging, immaterial, and perfect is a moral aspiration of an ascetic type that takes delight in declining sensuous life. What knowledge portrays as the opposition of truth to falsity, of essence to appearance is, therefore, the aspiration for a morality hooked on an ascetic ideal. The visible being untrue, the good cannot reside in the senses. The purpose of metaphysics, and by extension of its main product, the concept of reason, is to refute the reality posited by the human body. Nietzsche recapitulates the thinking of the metaphysicians thus:

The senses, which in other things are so immoral, cheat us concerning the true world. Moral: we must get rid of the deception of the senses, of Becoming, of history, of falsehood. . . . And above all, away with the body, this wretched idée fixe of the senses, infected with all the faults of logic that exist, refuted, even impossible, although it be impudent enough to pose as if it were real.24

Lévy-Bruhl's analyses are all impregnated with the same type of evaluation. Primitives are peoples dominated by passions; their body occupies the central place in their thinking to the extent of stifling rational thinking. Reason has not yet established its power over the body so that emotion dominates even in operations that are supposedly intellectual. According to Western canons of evaluation, this preponderance of the body denotes a lower rank in the hierarchy of being. To call primitives prelogical is the same thing as saying that they are sensuous. Their inability to control sensuousness explains their failure at dissociating the intellectual from the emotional. The superiority of the "white man" is thus supposedly first and foremost moral. Instead of being a question of more or less, such moral superiority involves the quality of the mind.

In thus harnessing Lévy-Bruhl's position to the mainstream of idealist thinking, we secure the means to solve the riddle of anthropology. When African scholars criticize anthropological discourse, more often than not they consider it as a deliberately falsified discourse intent on justifying colonialism. For Paulin J. Hountondji, anthropology is a "pseudo-science."25 For V. Y. Mudimbe, anthropological statements "speak about neither Africa nor Africans, but rather justify the process of inventing and conquering a continent."26 The notion of invention brings out the confounding dichotomy between the claims of anthropology as a science and its unsubstantiated findings. So fixed a dichotomy is bound to raise numerous questions.
The dichotomy does not, for instance, explain why European thinking could be so lured as to give credibility to a fictitious discourse. The question is legitimate as African scholars borrow much of their critical weapons against anthropology from Western scholars. Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and the various schools of structuralism are known to provide the critical apparatus. This raises the question of knowing how the same Western culture could at once produce the imaginary discourse on Africa and the critical concepts exposing its fallacies. More generally, seeing that the same culture produced both anthropology and the scientific method with its tested objective results, under pain of losing a coherent view of the human mind, we must show how anthropology fits into the scientific practice.

To resolve the problem, the first condition is to cease contrasting science with myth. Just as metaphysics inspired rationality and science, so too the myth of the "white man" can set off a scientific practice intent on validating its belief. This suggests that the same process of construction and objectification is active in the scientific study of nature as well as of human societies and cultures. However, while natural objects passively conform, in the Kantian sense of the word, to the process of objectification, human beings can protest against objectification, thereby nullifying its procedure and outcomes. Through such protest, human beings invent themselves anew so that transcendence defines them better than the possession of fixed characteristics.

Jean-Paul Sartre gave a striking formula for this transcendence when he said that in the case of human beings "existence precedes essence." Unfortunately, more often than not people let themselves be defined externally; in such cases, they surrender their freedom and give in to submission. For the purpose of objectification is to bring the object under control, which when applied to human beings amounts to the negation of subjectivity. Even so, subjectivity does not go away. Sartre judiciously remarks, "if I do not choose, I am still choosing" by refusing to choose.

The ineluctability of choice sets the purpose of Lévy-Bruhl’s dichotomy: it elevates the white race above the other races and calls for a hierarchical combination, the very one that justifies the ascendancy of the logical over the prelogical. That is why going beyond mere difference, his definition establishes a contrast between the primitive and the "white man." Such a binary opposition invites an articulation in which the hegemony of the logical race supplements the deficiencies of the primitive. According to most theories, economic reasons explain in the last instance the colonial conquest of Africa. Far from me to deny the importance of economic drive, still some theories suggest that Europe could have obtained higher economic returns if it had avoided the cumbersome and inhuman practice of political and cultural subjugation and opted for the development of the continent through free economic exchanges. The soundness of the argument indicates how feasible the idea was. But, the theory of colonialism retorts, the rivalry between the major
European powers obstructed the option for free economic relations with Africa; the protection of economic interests favored the possession of colonies. No sooner is this argument accepted than it goes counter to the principles of liberalism. When, in the name of the free market, some people praise Europe for having destroyed all internal barriers, strange is the way they say simultaneously that Europe had encouraged colonization.

To avoid the contradiction, theoreticians of colonialism must concede that the "white man" is a myth, an invention, and as such in need of substantiation. The trend toward colonial conquest and anthropological discourse thus crops up from the core of the myth. One thing cannot be taken away from the myth, to wit, its compulsion to look for validation. So that, the justification for subjugating non-Western peoples instead of engaging in free economic exchanges emanates from the perceived otherness of these peoples, which otherness justifies the hegemonic position of the West. The myth of the "white man" calls for the attribution of otherness to non-Western peoples, and subjugation constitutes its validation following the scientific criterion of successful practice as a confirmation of truth. While anthropology establishes the otherness of non-Western peoples, conquest confirms materially the superiority of the "white man."

To understand the possibility of this inversion of myth into rationality, we must brush aside the idea of a deliberate falsification of reality. The concept of ideology, of false consciousness, as conceptualized by Marx and Engels, is liable to bring clarification into the matter. According to Engels:

ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process.²⁹

Ideology is then an internal deception unnoticed by the author. It is no lie because individuals who lie know they are lying. Ideology is not a mere fantasy either, since it has connections with reality. The illusion is not about the object; it is first of all in the consciousness thinking the object. This consciousness has illusions about itself, about its motives and nature. As a result, what such a consciousness does materially does not coincide with its thinking. The thinking interprets practice differently, more exactly, ideally. Thus, it veils economic pursuits with lofty ideals, and private property becomes a natural right, the state of the ruling class the defender of the general interest, and colonialism a civilizing mission.

This concealment was apparently the state of mind of Europe when it undertook the conquest and study of native peoples. The myth of "the white man" invents otherness as the lower rank of human essence while anthropological studies and colonialism provide the concrete practices of its confirm-
tion. This false consciousness explains both the sincerity of the belief in the
superiority of the white race and the possibility of an objectification of Africa.
After all, the achievement of objective results in the pursuit of mythical ideas
is not infrequent. The development of rational thinking in an atmosphere
heavily loaded with idealism is the very history of Europe. The ideality of the
false consciousness explains the birth of an objectivist and conquering prac-
tice. Thus, through the dualistic conception of mind and body—an idea that
goes back to Christian beliefs—Rene Descartes fostered the necessary
detachment enabling him to grasp matter as a mechanical reality.

This idealist inspiration of Western philosophy highlights the main
purpose of my approach, which is to exhort Africans to reconcile themselves
with mythical thinking if they mean to play any meaningful role in the world.
W. E. B. Du Bois wrote: “no people that laughs at itself, and ridicules itself,
and wishes to God it was anything but itself ever wrote its name in history.”30
The realization that the so-called European exclusive rationality is more an
invention than a distinct characteristic should liberate Africans from the need
to define themselves in terms acceptable to the “white man.”

African critique of anthropology boils down to a denial of its descrip-
tions of Africans on account of nonconformity with the criteria set by the
“white man.” As a result, the illusion of the “white man” is reproduced;
worse, Africa is suppressing all its driving impulses just to conform to an idea
of humanity whose censorship of irrational drives is anything but true. The
characteristics of the “white man,” such as, wholly rational, ascetic, and
conquering, become models of behavior that Africans must imitate by surren-
dering their right to freely define themselves. Some such exhortation tran-
spires in Hountondji when, refusing the notion of African alterity, he asks for
the inauguration of philosophical systems which are African only by “the
geographical origin of the authors rather than an alleged specificity of con-
tent.”31 Is it surprising if, as a result of this ideological emasculation, Africa
becomes unable to cope with the modern world?

Take the critique of ethnophilsophy by those African philosophers
called “professional philosophers.” Whether they refer to Tempels’s attribution
of the notion of vital force to Africans, or John Mbiti’s exclusion of the
future from the African notion of time, or Senghor’s view on the predomi-
nance of emotion in African thinking, none of these thinkers escapes the
charge of endorsement of colonial discourse. Instead of inciting further
research, the slightest suggestion of African difference arouses indignation.
Yet such should not have been the reaction of African scholars, given their
propensity to liken the idea of the “white man” to a false image. Whatever the
idea may otherwise signify, for sure it cannot be used to define the humanness
of Africans. In return, Africans should have suspected that what the “white
man” despises probably contains a grain of truth for everybody else. Once the
idea of the “white man” is taken seriously as an invention, a wide possibility
of defining themselves in a creative way opens to Africans. As we shall see, despite its numerous shortcomings, negritude was the first attempt to bend the anthropological discourse in the direction of self-creation.

2. Western Attempts to Make Sense of Africa

Lévy-Bruhl’s assimilation of primitive mentality to a prelogical form of thought was bound to generate objections in Western academic circles. Though few in number, these objections represented remarkable efforts to intersperse the triumphant march of Eurocentrism with a pluralist notion of human beings. A clear demarcation of these efforts from the evolutionist trend of thought helps to bring out the remarkable influence that these Western scholars had on African thinkers in their responses to the colonial discourse.

A. Demystifying Reason

No sooner had the Western triumphant and confident march toward progress recorded its first impressive victories than doubts were heard as to the intrinsic validity of the whole project. The two notions on which the Enlightenment had build its philosophy of history, to wit, the idea of reason and the progressive march toward freedom, which stood for the unquestionable superiority of the Western model of life, were never entirely successful in dismissing doubts and interrogations. A most memorable moment of this skepticism is the dissenting position of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the notion of progress. To the question in 1750 by the French Academy of Dijon of whether the restoration of the sciences and the arts had served to purify or corrupt manners and morals, Rousseau flatly responds in a notorious discourse: “our souls have become corrupted in proportion as our Sciences and our Arts have advanced toward perfection.”

Rousseau defends his objection against the belief in progress by a comparative study of modern life with the life of those called primitives whose noticeable trait is their apparent indifference to the ideal of science and the refinement of civilization. While these peoples, “protected against this contamination of vain knowledge, have by their virtues wrought their own happiness and the model for all other Nations,” modern civilization merely multiplies and expands the vices of greed, luxury, and inequality. Consequently, the modern human being is completely unhappy. The submersion of human life in ever-increasing vices simply annuls the benefits of technological advances. The proliferation of vices and the engulfment in an artificial and frenzied style of life give evidence of estrangement from the right path to human fulfillment.

Rousseau’s defense of the primitive peoples rests on the assumption that nature created human beings good so that the closer human societies remain
to nature the better their chance is of fulfilling the end of human life. Hence
the need of the modern person to fall back on the primitive peoples to under­
stand the real aspirations of human nature. Let alone being a retarded race,
primitive peoples represent the prototype of the human essence, the pure form
before the deformation imparted by the so-called civilization. Rousseau
insists: “it was not owing to stupidity that they [simple peoples] preferred
other forms of exercise to those of the mind.”

The claim that native peoples are good because they are ignorant or
innocent, as children are, does not see their goodness as a positive and
deliberate choice. The truth is that while modern human beings opted for the
artificial life called civilization, thereby biding farewell to the advantages of
natural life, wiser peoples have preferred to stay close to nature, which
harbors the secrets of human happiness. Their goodness is not due to their
undeveloped nature, but to the positive understanding that since “man is
naturally good,” the best mode of life is the one that follows nature.

Anticipating the dismissal by some contemporary anthropologists of the
Western discourse as a tissue of inventions whose purpose is to marginalize
non-Western peoples, Rousseau reiterates his suspicions about the credibility
of the description of primitive peoples given by Western travelers. In one of
his replies to objections, he characterizes these travelers as “more interested in
filling their purses than their heads,” and adds that “all of Africa and its
numerous inhabitants, as remarkable in character as they are in color, still
remain to be studied; the whole earth is covered with Nations of which we
know only the names, and yet we pretend to judge mankind!”

Contrast this appeal to study other peoples and learn from them with the Eurocentric arro­
gance of Hegelianism and evolutionism. By insisting that the alleged superior­
ity of the West only hides moral degradation and a wandering course, Rousseau imputes the major omission of human happiness to the whole Western
civilization.

With deep roots in Rousseau’s thinking, the other tradition of Western
philosophy that challenged the haughtiness of the West is the spiritual move­
ment known as romanticism. One facet of this complex movement believes
that Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason correctly establishes the limits
of rational knowledge while corroborating the existence of a true reality
beyond the phenomenal world. The main upshot of this limitation is that
rational knowledge is only a superficial, external view of the world, exclu­
sively driven by the need to manipulate objects from outside. However,
though Kant is right in saying that the deeper reality of things escapes reason,
he forgets that human beings have other possibilities as well, for instance,
sentiments and intuition. The latter seem perfectly equipped to penetrate the
deeper reality of the noumenal world better than the faculty of reason. Thus,
for Arthur Schopenhauer, unlike the superficial view of perception and reason
in which the world appears as discontinued collections of separate objects,
intuition grasps the world as will, and so views objects as integrated and coordinated sources of activity.

The best illustration of this will is our body. As an object of representation, our body appears as a thing existing in various spatio-temporal relations with other objects. As apprehended from within, we feel it as will. "This will constitutes what is most immediate in his [the individual] consciousness, but as such it has not wholly entered into the form of the representation, in which object and subject stand over against each other," says Schopenhauer. This immediateness involves a different faculty than the intellect, and is properly called intuition. The revelation of the power of intuition protests in advance against the hierarchy established by Lévy-Bruhl: rational thinking is not the highest mental ability; intuition or feeling obtains a deeper view of reality, especially of spiritual realities. This role of feeling endows art with a greater cognitive dimension than science and speculation.

The romantic inspiration has continued through various forms in the West right up to the twentieth century. A case in point is Bergson’s philosophical stand in favor of the irreplaceable role of intuition, which alone can go beyond the limitations of rational knowledge. After a series of systematic contrasts, Bergson finds that "the intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life," while "it is to the very inwardness of life that intuition leads us." Another important trend is the existentialist protest against the dominance of rational thinking. From Søren Kierkegaard to Sartre, the protest insists on the extent to which reason has little (or no) concern regarding the important questions related to the meaning of life.

To limit the protest to Kierkegaard, he notes that the ideal of objective knowledge excludes, by definition, the subject; none of the terms used to describe the world objectively answers the deep concerns of the subject. Hence the imperative to become subjective: it counters the tendency of objectivism to turn the truth into an object. In this way, meaning returns to truth, since "for a subjective reflection the truth becomes a matter of appropriation, of inwardness, of subjectivity, and thought must probe more and more deeply into the subject and his subjectivity." The existentialist drift into subjectivism was spurred on by the spectacle of the civilized world being dragged into the insanity of two successive and most destructive world wars, with at its peak the rise of fascist theories and regimes. In light of the butchery of these modern wars, the naive belief in progress became indefensible; nay, the harrowing question of knowing whether Western civilization is really representing an ascending and progressive course came into sight. This doubt persuaded many scholars into challenging the characterization of non-Western peoples as inferior and arrested peoples.

Both the rise of the romantic inspiration and the multiplication of protests suggest that the issue of rationality versus non-rationality is a debate
internal to the West itself. The diverse outcries against an excessive rationalist trend suppressing the role of sentiments and intuition together with the attempt to rehabilitate the so-called primitive peoples attest to the internality of the debate. The dispute has to do with the place of reason and, by extension, of science in the complex issue of civilization and human fundamental aspirations. That Western trends of thought rose against the dominance of reason pleads for a nuanced reception of the identification of the West with rationality.

B. The Discovery of Western Idiosyncrasy

Predictably, the thinkers who judged the trend of Western civilization as far from being satisfactory were warming to the idea of other civilizations as alternatives. The notion of a Western breakthrough was not for them a convincing idea, for they noted progress in some directions but also regress and loss in other equally important aspects of life. So released from the belief in the civilizing mission of the West to which most Westerners were attached, they came to conceive of ethnology as a spiritual voyage, an acquaintance with the diversity of human nature, and a discovery of new and alternative modes of life. As one author explains, “dissatisfied at home and questing abroad,” the anthropologist “is a scout sent out by a civilization in turmoil to find a resting place and learn the lay of the land.”

Implicit in this quest for the primitive is the belief that what in the West passes for universal is only an idiosyncratic development. After the arrogant glorification of Eurocentrism, comes the time of critical evaluation and radicalism. No school of thought incarnates better this critical project than postmodernism, given that “the most general characterization of postmodernism is that its emphasis is on calling into question the foundational concepts at the heart of Western philosophy.” For many scholars, the origin of postmodernism lies in “the profound influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger on contemporary Western intellectual life.” This influence grows stronger as many Western intellectuals become increasingly disenchanted with socialism and Marx’s ideas of socialist revolution without, however, recovering any attachment to capitalism. Postmodernism essentially reflects the “sociopolitical pessimism” stemming from the clear impression of a civilization caught in a deadlock. In addition to undermining the confidence of the West, the conviction encourages the belief that Eurocentrism offers no other outlets than the frenzy of capitalist pursuits. In light of this disillusionment, the trend of thought so far followed has to be altered: abnormality shifts from other cultures to that of the West and it becomes “increasingly tempting to contrast the West as a whole with the rest of the world as a whole.”

Such repeated references of Martin Heidegger to “the end of philosophy” and to the primacy of “questioning,” together with his recurring allu-
sions to "the oblivion of Being" and his diagnosis of the West as having "exhausted its possibilities," describe a situation of deep crisis that reaches a stalemate. Instead of extolling Europe's advanced stage—behind which the rest of the world is lagging—the diagnosis depicts an abnormal trend, which, on top of being singular, forces the rest of the world into a futureless process. The Western deadlock entails the rehabilitation of Africa by stripping the West of its pretension to be a model. No need for Africans to engage in the defense of Africa: the West is pleading guilty and the disparagement of Africa is only a misrepresentation of its phantasms.

Heidegger corroborates the idiosyncrasy of the West by a sustained analysis of its mode thinking. For him, the essence of the West lies in its particular way of thinking being, which explains its uncommon technological leaning. As Richard Rorty elucidates, this particular way flows from

the separation between the "what" and the "that." This separation between what a thing is in itself and the relations which it has to other things engenders distinctions between essence and accident, reality and appearance, objective and subjective, rational and irrational, scientific and unscientific and the like—all the dualisms which mark off epochs in the history of an increasing lust for power, an increased inability to let beings be.

These dualisms inaugurate the age of the world picture, an age in which Westerners entirely surrender all other possible relationships with being except the one targeting power and conquest. This pathological lust for power and domination defines the essence of Western idiosyncrasy. As such, the lust invalidates the promotion of the West to the rank of the most advanced stage, just as it rejects the idea of a unilinear process of universal evolution. That the goal, the raison d'être of humanity is the conquest of nature can never be proven. Other cultures define humanity's relationships with nature in different terms, and their definition is no less valid than the goal of conquest. The definition is even wiser, given the Western impasse.

Specifically, what explains the shift in the West of the question of ontology from the fact of being to that of a picture or a representation is none other than the precedence of the preconceived idea or project to the bare reality of being. In the words of Heidegger, world picture

does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture. What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth.
Even the approach most committed to studying things objectively, namely, the scientific approach, implicates this kind of projection. Contrary to the received idea describing scientific experiment as the process of learning from nature, Heidegger shows that the particularity and power of modern science derive from studying nature through a projected plan. The whole purpose of an experiment is to see the extent to which facts of nature either verify or deny the preconceived idea. This precedence of the plan in the Western dealings with nature demands the reversal of the historical order. Though modern technology is admittedly a product of modern science on the grounds that science chronologically preceded the production and use of machines, from the viewpoint of imparting the inspiration, modern technology is “historically earlier” to science. How otherwise could we understand the primacy of the world picture over the fact of being if not as evidence of nature being interpreted through a preconceived project, the very one handing it over to a Promethean inspiration?

What is wrong, we may ask, with this desire for empowerment? According to Heidegger, its major drawback is that the way being is conceived impacts on the manner human beings understand themselves. The desire to conquer nature entails the conception of human beings as a subjectivity whose consequence is that everything appears as a human construct. The revelation at the heart of knowledge of a preconceived plan turns all human conceptions into subjective views with no bearing on reality and truth. Such is the adversity of the lust for domination that “it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself.”

To admit that the price for domination is the relativization of knowledge is to open our thought to the idea that other ways of relating with the world exist as well as to acknowledge the different choices that sustain them. Though these other ways may not be as efficient in providing control over nature as the Western orientation, they may reveal ways of being and thinking that drag human beings out of their narrow subjectivity. For instance, unlike the conquering model, poetry suggests a different mode of revealing being: by letting things be, it discovers and glorifies their inner beauty, and so incites the mind to transcend the mere desire to control and dominate. This incitement to transcend subjectivism reconverts the human essence from “the lord of beings” to “the shepherd of Being.”

This Heideggerian analysis draws much of its inspiration from Nietzsche’s anatomy of the Western mental orientation. What makes Nietzsche’s insights particularly original and illuminating is the demonstration of the extent to which the lust for domination engulfs the human person as well. Western ethical and religious ideas are so many ways of establishing within the human person the antinomy of domination and servitude. The dualisms of mind and body, pleasure and duty, nature and culture, good and evil, are nothing but the manner one aspect of the human person, considered
superior, noble, and good, is set against another part, considered inferior, low, and evil. In this uninterrupted conflict between the two components of the same person, ethical life is how the superior part maintains its dominance over the lower part. The opposition of true being (soul, spirit) to false or apparent being (the body), characteristic of the metaphysical form of thinking, authorizes this mode of evaluation. Thus metaphysicians say:

things of the highest value must have a different origin, an origin of their own—in this transitory, seductive, illusory, paltry world, in this turmoil of delusion and cupidity, they cannot have their source. But rather in the lap of Being, in the intransitory, in the concealed God, in the “Thing-in-itself”—there must be their source, and nowhere else!—50

The goal of dominance has brought about the admiration of the warrior, but even more so the veneration of the priest. With his resolution to achieve a complete victory over sensuous life, the priest represents the highest model of mastery, the greatest demonstration of the power of the immaterial and the abstract over the material and the sensuous. What is venerated through the priest is the highest value of the West, to wit, the “ascetic ideal.”51 Because asceticism combines metaphysics and morality, it is the consummation of the victory over false being and sensuousness. No better way exists to denounce falsity than to say no to life even as it promises pleasure. The secret of this denial is none other than the achievement of a greater sense of power through the generation of an inner conflict that unleashes, in the words of Nietzsche, “the resentment of an insatiate instinct and ambition, that would be master, not over some element in life, but over life itself.”52

C. Postmodernist Inferences

The understanding of Western culture as a particular and aggressive drive reiterates the eccentricity of Western mental orientation and mode of life. In particular, if, as emphasized by both Nietzsche and Heidegger, what passes for reason and universality is a product of an idiosyncratic inspiration, the conclusion that knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is an objective apprehension of things can no longer be made. This lack of objectivity is not caused by a faulty usage of the mind; it is due to the fundamental fact that all knowledge is a construction, that the so-called objective reality is a made up, subjective product. Alluding to the deconstruction theory, Michael Paul Gallagher writes:

all reality is like a text, open to a myriad of conflicting interpretations. Instead of the “modern” assumption that objectively correct answers are possible, we are all caught in a “prison house of language,” where rela-
ativism replaces any rationally ordered world. Meaning, if it exists at all, is created by us and is always in flux.53

If a material fact implicates construction, then how much more so may it be with social and cultural realities. Such a deep-going relativism of concepts and views spares nothing; it even challenges the entrenched belief in personal identity. In place of the humanism of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, both based on the centrality of human beings and on the permanence of individual identity as source of human freedom, “postmodernism proposes the ‘death of man’, in the sense of a radical scepticism about subjective approaches and about the importance given to personality and self-consciousness in Western culture.”54

Once personal identity as a defining feature of individuals is challenged, the very foundation of Western religious and ethical ideas as well as political systems is seriously shaken. The challenge is greater to the foundational beliefs of modernity. Notably, the universal and progressive course of history by which the Enlightenment had justified and popularized the view of human history as a goal-oriented process implicating distinct stages of realization becomes an untenable belief. Branded universal, these stages were believed to denote the transition from the simple and inferior state of human freedom and knowledge to complex and superior moments of realization. This gradual scheme led to the supposition that Europe represents the highest stage of this evolution with the consequence that European history reveals the course that lagging societies must follow to resume the progressive course of history. Stated otherwise,

Third World cultures are falsely identified as moving along the same historical evolutionary path as the West, propelled by the same cultural ideals and the same dynamic forces. Both the liberal and Marxist systems subsume Third World cultural processes under universalist theories of evolution that do not apply universally.55

The reduction of concepts to constructs seriously undermines this scenario by suggesting that the vision of a universal and unilinear evolutionary course is nothing else than the fraudulent manner Europe so constructs its continuity as to assume the exclusive leadership of the historical process. Otherwise known as Eurocentrism, the true essence of this vision is usurpation, which usurpation is caused by the phantasms of a culture greedy for self-glorification and conquests.

The denunciation of Eurocentrism entails the untenability of the concepts used to describe non-Western societies. As noted by D. A. Masolo, “the historical merit of the postmodernist critique arises out of its questioning of the validity of taking the Western model of rationality as the yardstick for
judging others.” Such expressions as primitive, backward, and traditional express the fact of other cultures being forcefully taken in tow by the Western path, arbitrarily elevated to the rank of advanced model. Besides decentering other cultures, the towing has the characteristic effect of misconstruing their understanding. In light of relativism urging us to speak of “Western categories,” “Western episteme,” and “Western principles,” other cultures emerge “as ‘creations’ or representations of Western social science.”

Because these representations take the West as the model, a major consequence of this usurpation is that “the traditional approaches in Western philosophy systematically exclude and marginalize some stories and experiences.” The net result of erecting a model can only be the marginalization of other cultures, their depiction as inferior and lagging cultures. The promotion is a malicious construct in that it authorizes the characterization of non-Western peoples as primitive and savage by placing Europe at the center of everything.

From the marginalization of non-Western cultures, there emerges the justification of domestication, the civilizing mission of the West. This domestication promises the progressive removal of the accumulated obstacles to progress through the assimilation of Western methods and values. Be it noted that the project does no more than revive the premises of Western episteme and ethical principles. Just as the separation of essence and appearance in knowledge prepares the dethronement of the apparent being, so too Westernization replaces the false “man” of native cultures with the real “man” as revealed in the West. The operation is how the spiritual principles and rational norms of the West endeavor to take control of a life engulfed in sensuousness, magic, and emotion as a result of failing to emancipate itself markedly from nature and instinctive behaviors.

The highly auto-critical impact of postmodernism achieves more than the disgrace of colonialism through the denunciation of its phantasms; it also moves toward the rehabilitation of the marginalized cultures. Once the universality of the Western trend is contested, the way is wide open to understanding other cultures as legitimate and equally valid alternative forms of life. According to Rorty, once more Heidegger shows the way by suggesting that “the opposite of metaphysics is Openness to Being, something most easily achieved in a pretechnological peasant community with unchanging customs.” The paradox is that postmodernism becomes a backward movement that calls for the reevaluation of traditional societies: the disillusionment with the West entails a de facto rehabilitation of other cultures. Instead of being backward, these cultures represent different modes of life, other ways of connecting with Being. In misreading and colonizing these cultures, the West was obeying its impulsive urge to make things conformable to its representations. This urge should not come as a surprise: the West could not let these cultures be, any more than it let things be.
All these critical views on Western modernity converge on the major discovery of postmodernism, to wit, pluralism. By denouncing Western universalism and the subsequent imposition of sameness, “postmodernism has rediscovered ‘difference’ as a key value and relishes in the seeming anarchy of cultural diversity.”60 The radical nature of the postmodernist discovery must be clearly stated. Especially, we must distinguish the discovery from the type of pluralism that refrains from characterizing other cultures as false or backward while considering them as largely commensurate. Because this mitigated pluralism still harbors universalist creeds, it takes differences as superficial deviations against the background of deeper similarities.

Radically different is postmodernism: it takes other cultures as valid alternatives to the Western course. Thus, Ruth Benedict spoke of cultures as being “incommensurable,” for “they are traveling along different roads in pursuit of different ends.”61 The rehabilitation of other cultures is thus total, without any restriction, for no culture has a universal status. The commitment to radical relativism implies that all cultures are views taken from different perspectives, and not from different spots or moments of the same line of evolution. As such, they are incommensurable. Postmodernism denounces all forms of reductionism as well as all forms of ranking. The ranking of cultures becomes impossible once the unilinear and evolutionary scheme is rebuffed. When the basis for the defense of Western superiority is removed, a pluralistic view of history forces its way. This pluralistic view of history says that third world countries were following their own course until they were brutally interrupted by the West and taken in tow. May it not be, then, that the explanation for the great difficulties that these countries face in coping with modernity lies in this fundamental disorientation imparted by the Western intrusion?

The discovery of relativism and pluralism gives a strong backing to ethnophilosophy. From the viewpoint of postmodernism, it makes sense to speak of non-Western philosophies, better still of the philosophies of cultures alien to technological drive. The irony is that such philosophies may well be more authentic than the Western one, given their endeavor to escape subjectivity, to let being be. At any rate, besides setting aside the temptation to deny any philosophical dimension to traditional cultures, the rise of postmodernism shows how ethnophilosophy crops up from the heart of Western philosophy, from the tear generated by the encounter with relativism. Other ways of knowing and being inaugurate the plurality of philosophy, and so their equal dignity in a decentered world. This filiation of ethnophilosophy to Western philosophy testifies to the seriousness of the African ethnophilosophical school. The precipitation to dismiss ethnophilosophy as an endorsement of colonial discourse should be resisted. The next chapters study some representative moments of African ethnophilosophical trend.