

Understanding African cultures and philosophies

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The study aims to explore the development of a pan-African philosophy and system of thought while relying on the premise suggesting that the values and attitudes of a community determine how it relates to individuals from outside and how it builds trust and loyalty both inside the community and beyond. The paper shows how the development of a pan-African philosophy was based on a wish by Western academics to impose their principles on Africa by positing a single system of thought representing all African societies. The article goes on to describe research by European and African thinkers and the emergence of studies recognising the individuality and originality of systems of thought in African communities. The author stresses the importance of understanding the values and attitudes and philosophies of individual countries and communities and shows how generalisation leads to stereotyping and dominance, and that teachers and trainers need to treat communities individually and recognise their values, especially in the African sub-continent.

KEYWORDS: *ethno-philosophy, national philosophy, pan-African philosophy, conceptual decolonisation, the Bantu, Tempels, Bidima*



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1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Sub-Saharan Africa was considered by Europeans the complete opposite of the West, a continent without 'culture' or 'civilisation'. The tragedy is that Africans themselves became infected with this mistaken belief, due partly to colonisation and their exploitation by white slavers. Westerners failed or refused to understand that Africans had an aptitude for conceptualisation and the practice of philosophy and that, as elsewhere, different communities had different attitudes and different philosophies.

19th century Europe was the kingdom of

philosophical thought and the history of ideas, the *telos* (goal) of Europe, which believed that its intelligence and knowledge authorised it to hold sway over other peoples. However, following the Second World War the movement towards decolonisation by the West was accompanied both in Africa and Europe by a change of thinking, constituting a rupture in the belief in the history of ideas that had gone before. In 1945, a book written by Father Placide Tempels (1945), a Belgian missionary, created a fundamental break with the past. As Diagne (2000) recalled, '1945 is considered to mark the beginnings of the spread of

a new theory: Bantu Philosophy by Placide Tempels published in one of the two main colonial languages, French, was seen as the first to acknowledge that an African tribe had a developed philosophy – the Baluba tribe of the Congo in Central Africa’ (Diagne, 2000, p. 44). However, Tempels’s work, which attempted to describe a ‘black ontology’ (Mangeon, 2010, p. 73-75) – defined as the philosophical study of being – aimed above all to characterise African philosophy as an inferior system of thought. Not only was there no single African philosophy, but rather a rich diversity of philosophies, each philosophy influenced by a history of oppression or forced to adopt concepts and categories imposed from outside. Without going exhaustively through examples, this paper attempts to present and explain the stages of the fight to establish studies of African culture and philosophy, examining the work of key African thinkers in the field. Unfortunately, their work is too little known in France and in Europe at large. This paper hopes to redress the balance and share some major lessons of their cultures and ways of thinking.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Ethnophilosophy or ‘Black Ontology’ explained

Bantu Philosophy was first published in 1945 and was the first to apply the term ‘philosophy’ to African thought. The author, Father Placide Tempels (1906-1977), is one of the most famous

but also controversial thinkers in sub-Saharan Africa. He lived in the Congo from 1933 to 1962 and his book was first published in Flemish, but translated into French and published in 1949 by Presence Africaine, a publisher whose name became famous through the Presence Africaine journal, launched in 1947 (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2013, p. 26). The book was an immediate success in France and a number of intellectuals saluted its appearance, including Albert Camus. Translated into English in 1959, *Bantu Philosophy* is still in print.

After only a few pages it is clear that Tempels was less concerned with the Bantu peoples of the Congo than with using their philosophy as a generic African or ‘black’ philosophy. Tempels used the Congolese as a characteristic example of African thought. For Tempels, what mattered was the comparison between ‘Bantu thought’, as a microcosm of African thought, with European thought. For him, ‘African’ thought was not only structurally different to European thought, but also inferior to it.

In his first chapter Tempels, recognising his affiliation with Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857-1939), attempts to ‘*dive into the Bantu mind, psychology and even the life of the Bantu ... to become a Bantu among Bantus*’ (Tempels, 1945, p. 9). His approach is based on the contrast between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in a series of opposites. For example,

he believed that European thought was based on the self, whereas Bantu thought was based on a dynamic relationship between the self, the natural world and the spirit. Europeans had Christianity, whereas the Bantus had their own Bantu philosophy, and as a result, *'Europe seemed to be the master of the natural world. It had to be admitted that Europe was senior, a superior human force surpassing the vital force of any African'* (Tempels, 1945, p. 45).

Tempels also compared the Bantu and European styles of talking. *'Their language,'* he wrote, *'is not like ours. They talk in such a concrete way, using words to express things. These people talk ontologically'* (Tempels, 1945, p. 173). Tempels's remarks apply to the way people talked about each other, describing their characters by the level of 'natural force' or vitality. A person with a perceived very low level of natural force was called *mufu* (dead). At the other extreme, a person perceived to have a high-level force was an *mfumu* (chief). Tempels observed that to be a chief was a natural state that might be confirmed by institutional recognition or through self-awareness (Tempels, 1945, p. 101). A *mntu's* (human being's) force and power was internal (not external) according to Tempels, but also depended on a person's relationship with the divine, the family, the descendants and the clan to which he or she belonged, as well as the value of ownership of land, used for farming or animals. A *mntu's*

force or power could increase or decrease according to the extent and value of land ownership, not just in social status but in personal value and self-belief. Using this ontological ladder determining personal force and power, Tempels built it into an ethical and finally a legal code. If something was ontologically good, then it was ethical and also just in legal terms.

In no way was Tempels describing the role of 'vital forces' among the Central African Bantu as an anthropological or cultural study. His aim was to demonstrate that Bantu philosophy was primitive and inferior and that this inferiority was characteristic of all African thought. In doing so he ignored the importance of community and of respect for nature, virtues we sorely need to be able to call on today. The sign of Bantu primitivism, for Tempels, was that their philosophy was elevated to the status of a legal system whereas more 'evolved' societies placed the law above the workings of society. The notion of an 'internal name' perfectly illustrated for Tempels the concept of the 'word' itself being the essence of what was described. A Bantu could have different types of names, a European name, a baptismal name, a name given during initiation ceremonies, and an 'internal name' (Tempels, 1945, p. 101). The 'internal name' was considered a person's real name. So Tempels identified a number of key features of African culture and thought, namely: (1) the importance of the

concrete above the abstract; (2) the importance of self-image and self-awareness expressed through the internal name; (3) the importance of social group, family, descendants and clan; (4) a respect for nature; and (5) a recognition of the divine.

He also stressed the importance of the abstract in European philosophy and described it and the people who followed it as more evolved, and the Bantu peoples' thinking as more 'primitive'. Tempels, as well as many of his followers, such as Mulago, Lufuluabo, Kagame and Fouda, believed that the beliefs, attitudes and values of the societies they studied and for which they represented themselves as spokespersons was not just a permanent and unchanging set of beliefs but was common to all African societies. If Africans aren't aware of these facts, it is because they 'live' their philosophy rather than 'think' it (Hountondji, 1977, p. 58-60). The role of researchers therefore was to understand this unconscious philosophy and to explain it, since Africans themselves could not.

Many of Tempels's African followers were members of the Christian church, who saw philosophy as a system of permanent belief, a perennial philosophy. According to them, the existence of an African philosophy was of advantage both to the Christian church and to lay people. It allowed the church to define a psychological and cultural identity that made it

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easier to root Christianity in African spirituality. For lay people, it allowed a comparison between 'African' traditional philosophy and the Western approach.

Alexis Kagame (1912 -1981), a Rwandan philosopher, historian and linguist, explained that African philosophies were invariable and unchangeable: *'It doesn't matter what is analysed, as African philosophy will be present in everything'* (Kagame, 1966, p. 17). Language, he said, was one such area of analysis. African philosophy was present in proverbs, fables, folktales and poems of all types. African culture, explained Kagame (1966), rests on a substructure, which is permanent and unalterable.

2.2 Ethnophilosophy – the counter attack

In 1969, the Beninese thinker and writer, Paulin Hountondji, launched a personal attack on Tempels and his followers, describing their work as 'ethno-philosophy', a term still used by African thinkers and in Western universities. Criticising

'ethno-philosophy', Hountondji described it as *'imaginary research into a collective, unchanging system of thought, common to all Africans, although in unconscious form'* (Hountondji, 1977, p. 14). The limits of the definition of an African system of thought by ethno-philosophers calls into question the scientific rigour of the definition: African philosophy being seen as a collective system of thought common to all Africans yesterday, today and tomorrow, a collective and unchangeable way of thinking.

Ethno-philosophy shouldn't be considered a simply methodological error or the result of a taste for the exotic among Western ethnologists or certain Africans seeking Western institutional recognition. Ethno-philosophy is a serious blow to African dignity. Tempels, but also Brelford (1965), Nkrumah (1973) and Danquah (1928), all had their brief hour of glory before they were faced with an avalanche of criticism from all over Africa, gradually convincing Westerners that their taste for the exotic had led them not to interpret African philosophy but to create something which didn't exist (Mudimbé, 1988, p. 27).

In *Négritudes et Négrologues*, the Beninese writer Stanislav Adotevi saw what he called 'ethno-anthropology' simply as a 're-duplication of primitivism' (Adotevi, 1998, p. 27). Ethno-philosophy was developed for a European public and to improve the status of some African elites

(Africa too has a philosophy) based on western ethnocentricity that sought to 'mummify' African civilisations, with the objective of making them a 'commodity for public consumption' (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2013, p. 32).

The ethno-philosophers aimed to prove the difference and originality of African philosophy, studying it with methods and concepts derived from Western philosophy. One can ask, as does Mudimbé (1988), whether this was a construction rather than a re-construction. Formulated mainly in European and American universities, the ethno-philosophers developed their own discourse about Africa, using language, concepts and grammar they had learned at their own universities (Mudimbé, 1988, p. 27). Hountondji (1977) explains it like this.

'They believed they could reproduce pre-existing philosophies in the same way as they produced them. They believed they were retelling a story when they were actually creating one.

Commendable modesty, without doubt, but also treason. The self-effacement of the philosopher in his own discourse is inseparable from a projection which attributes to people their own theoretical choices and their own ideologies' (Hountondji, 1977, p. 60).

For the first president of an independent Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, it was above all important to have

an African voice to explain African thinking.

'I know that there are lots of thinkers and readers who would be happy to hear the African point of view. At the same time, I don't ignore that it is impossible for me to discuss this subject objectively without upsetting my professional African friends. They are ready to assure us of their undying friendship on the one condition that the African continues to assume the role of the ignorant savage which will allow them to continue to interpret African thought and speak in the name of Africa. An African who speaks of Africans undermines their prerogative. It's a rabbit becoming a hunter' (Kenyatta et al., 1960, p. 25).

The multitude of African thought systems contains huge riches. It is not evident that the analysis of supposed mechanisms of a system of thought relies on an ethnological enquiry criticised by Hountondji (1983) when he launched his attack on Tempels (1945) and his followers. Blyden (1994), Horton (2011) and Sarbah (1904), all brilliant thinkers and pan-African militants, who completed meticulous studies of different African tribes. Later on, philosophers like Abraham (2015), Idowu (1966), Gyekye (1987) and Gbadegesin (1991) based their work on detailed anthropological investigation. As a result, contrary to Tempels's ethnological investigation into a methodology which represented a universal model of African thinking, these enquiries shone light on

a wide variety of ways of thought.

3. NEW PERSPECTIVES ON 'AFRICAN' THINKING AND VALUES

3.1 'Philosophical Sagacity' project

In this respect two more recent pieces of research have profoundly marked the recent history of African philosophy. First was the Philosophical Sagacity project of Odera Oruka in Kenya in the early nineteen seventies, studying traditional philosophy among the Kenyans. Oruka (1990) consulted the councils of elders, who he termed *the sages*, and published his records of discussions on the nature of God, liberty, justice and equality in *Sage Philosophy and the Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. In their book *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft*, Hallen and Sodipo (1997) worked with Yoruba traditional medicine specialists called *Onisegun* in Ekiti state in southwestern Nigeria, studying the Yoruba language to understand concepts of Yoruba philosophy. Their aim was to propose a complementary course in Yoruba philosophy for Nigerian universities. Their study compared the criteria regulating the use of certain terms in Yoruba with their equivalents in English, in consultation with the *Onisegun*. In a subsequent book, Hallen (2000) revealed the extremely original Yoruba thinking on how to construct and interpret one's individual destiny (*ori*). In these two books the authors demonstrated the original traditional thought among different peoples and

‘Ethnophilosophy failed not just because it failed to address the multiplicity of African societies and cultures, but also because it reflected purely European values and methods of investigation, ethnocentric and, frankly, racist’

also showed discrepancies in points of view between the ‘sages’ in the community regarding the same subject.

3.2 Conceptual decolonisation

‘Ethnophilosophy’ failed not just because it failed to address the multiplicity of African societies and cultures, but also because it reflected purely European values and methods of investigation, ethnocentric and, frankly, racist. However, following this period, African thinkers began to distance themselves from European thinking and writing about Africa and Africans and refocus the debate upon themselves and by themselves and the first step was ‘conceptual decolonisation’ (Wiredu, 1996). Decolonisation deals with politics and economics but also technology, science and philosophy. As Mudimbé (1988) explained, decolonisation should allow former colonised peoples to escape from ‘Western ideology’. Social sciences should be decolonised because *‘up to now both Western and African analysts have used categories and conceptual*

systems depending on a Western ethnocentric epistemology, which is not acceptable’ (Mudimbé, 1988, p. 15). *‘We have been experiencing ‘an epistemological hiatus’, which is no longer acceptable. It is time for Africans to examine African thought and culture with their own philosophy’* (Orika, 1972, p. 23-24).

Orika (1972) and Wiredu (1996) both exposed the ‘demons’ of neo-colonialism, that is neo-colonial thinking that opposes the real freedom of different African thinkers and provokes a process of acculturation by African communities to western values. African societies had to rediscover their own cultures, which needed to emerge through the study of African thought and cultures through philosophical investigation (Orika, 1972; Wiredu, 1996). However, as Kodjo-Grandvaux (2013) wrote, this was no easy task as the philosophical concepts and methods involved in this process of deconstruction and conceptual decolonisation were based in African universities which were themselves based on US and European universities (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2013, p. 109).

3.4 The influence of deconstructivism

African thinkers have seized on one school of western philosophy which some Europeans and Americans have used to distance themselves from the epistemology they inherited. Conceptual decolonisation has been nourished by the work of thinkers such as Althusser (2006), Derrida (1997),

Dewey (1991), Foucault (1988) and Rorty (1989) in the movement known as deconstructivism. Lucius Outlaw, Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University in the US, for example, has been largely influenced by Rorty but also by Foucault and Derrida. In a chapter on deconstructive and reconstructive challenge in Oruka's *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous thinkers and modern debate* (Oruka, 1990), Outlaw explains how he uses western authors' tools to launch himself on a vast enterprise of deconstruction and creates parallels between his African 'conceptual deconstruction' and Derrida's work (Outlaw, 1990).

Outlaw proposed inverting the metaphysical oppositions by over-estimating what had up to now been underestimated in order first to neutralise them and then to replace them with new concepts. We have to 'get past the western dichotomy which divides reality into a binary opposition between civilised and primitive, modern and traditional, written culture and oral culture, etc.' (Outlaw, 1990, p. 228- 230).

Outlaw takes up the idea that concepts are constructs inscribed in a particular context of production. He explains that it is possible to disentangle the texts to entangle them in a different way, to 'de-sediment' them and to 'radiograph' them to re-construct them differently and elsewhere. It may be thought, however, that

these attempts at deconstruction function mainly as counter-constructions in that they sometimes react epidermically to European constructions, but do not necessarily attack the foundations of these Western characterisations and would tend to reproduce them but differently. African philosophy seems to find the weapons of its emancipation in Western philosophy itself. Mudimbé, who made Foucault the essential reference of *L'Autre Face du Royaume* (1973) to deconstruct Western thought about Africa, was fully aware of this dependence and wished to distance himself from Foucault in *L'Odeur du Père*. He explains:

'Really escaping from the West presupposes knowing, in what allows us to think against the West what is still Western; and of measure in which our recourse against it is still perhaps a ruse which it opposes us and at the end of which it waits for us, immobile and elsewhere' (Mudimbé, 1982, p. 44).

According to Wiredu (1980), the pragmatism of Dewey draws inspiration from experimental science methodologies to perform philosophical exercises. More concretely, it proceeds through an applied work of deductions, hypotheses and logical reasoning. If Wiredu (1980) claims a scientific methodology, it is to show that in his attempt to build a new African philosophy he would return to the very foundation of the methodology capable of producing a

philosophical discourse.

It seems to me that Wiredu is actually less concerned here with what Western philosophy says about Africa than about the mechanisms of production of this discourse, which he considers irrelevant and oppressive. The attack is likely to be all the more powerful. Thanks to 'conceptual decolonisation' Africans could shape tools to empower themselves. African philosophy had the wisdom to take into account the limitations and weaknesses of Western philosophy in its substance and its mechanisms to design coherent epistemic systems.

Western philosophy had a very difficult time trying to apprehend the essence of contemporary African philosophy.

'These counter-speeches have shaken university institutions for at least twenty years, they have challenged conceptual certainties and situations acquired. But the strength and relevance of these texts has probably more to do with their status than with their content. They are, indeed, problematic: the official institution cannot integrate them into the scope of its reflexivity but cannot, at the time, disregard them. This was very well illustrated by the intense efforts invested to refute C. A. Diop's work' (Mudimbé, 1988, p. 94). Thanks to the 'conceptual decolonisation' of African philosophy, it has been possible to observe

and examine how the works of great Western philosophers have been received in Africa and how African philosophers have been able to analyse and enrich these works. I am convinced that it is possible to 'read Africa with Foucault' but also 'read Foucault with Mudimbé'. African philosophy is not only the recipient, the analyst and the critic of the great Western philosophers, it is also a fantastic source of original philosophical reflections that Western philosophers can use in their own work. Obviously, the value of these works is not limited to their origin, and they can be a source of inspiration and innovation.

4. AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AS A 'CROSSING POINT'

In his article *L'idée de 'philosophie nationale*, that has received a lot of attention, Crépon (1998) explains that the idea of national philosophy could actually be the necessary condition for a reflection on the diffusion of philosophy through languages and cultures. *'National signs are not to be taken as marks of cultural allegiance or replication of an identity, but the vectors of the transfers, the conditions of a passage between a point of departure and a point of arrival'* (Crépon, 1998, p. 254).

National or continental philosophy is not considered here as an enclosed space but rather as a 'land of welcome'. For Bidima (1993), African philosophy must prevail not as an original

ethnographic object, but rather as a necessity for the enrichment of philosophy. It is impossible not to mention Bidima's concept of 'crossing'. This concept itself, according to Bidima, is the fruit of an exchange, since he designed it following the seminars of Louis Marin at the School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences in Paris. If the concept of 'crossing' is present in a large part of the work of Bidima, it is in his second book *La philosophie négro-africaine* (1995) that this concept is largely developed.

Bidima proposes to capture what he in his work calls *le mouvement de la rencontre* (the movement of encountering) to fight identity drifts that are eventually turned to the idea of both 'the origin' and the 'sacred past'. He appropriates the past without criticising because he is convinced that that there is, in reality, no such thing as original African purity. Therefore, his philosophy 'does not privilege assignable places, but non-places, interstitial spaces, transient displacements, the mobility of passages and the ultimately transpicuous fleetingness of events' (Bidima, 1998, p. 267). For all intents and purposes, the notion of 'crossing' is conceptually the tool to free African philosophy from certain African philosophers' obsessions with essentialism. The movement, the encountering, the fusion and the emotional overflows are more important than 'the origin (*unde?*), the place (*ubi?*) and the destination (*quo?*)' (Bidima, 1998, p. 267).

5. DISCUSSION: VIEWS OF LAW AND LANGUAGE

5.1 African and Western attitudes to law

What does Bidima invite us to do if not to nurture the immense treasures of African philosophies? It seems to me personally that our reflection on justice would have everything to gain from the experience and success of African traditions. It is estimated that between 75% and 90% of the population in Africa uses an informal mode when it comes to conflict resolution.

What if we accept that we too can learn and can apply elements of African thought? There is a deep gap between Western and African logic, both of which have a different conception of justice. Le Roy (2004) explains that differences in Africa are commonly resolved through the groups in which the differences arose. '*Justice is dealt within the group where the problem started* (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2013, p. 130-134). On the whole, the interests of justice are best served by cutting the dispute, that is to say, separating the parties in a conflict and re-establishing links between them. '*Judgement is linking and separating at the same time*' (Murungi, 2004, p. 523). What matters is not placing blame, but preserving social cohesion. The preservation of the common good is an absolute imperative. The appeal of this approach is that the search for consensus is a very rich source of ideas and innovation and is being put together in France in the law of MARC (Alternative Methods for the

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Resolution of Conflict) and is also being explored in Anglo-Saxon countries through ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution). It is an important development which shows the influence of African cultural traditions of mediation.

5.2 The symbolic code and the role of the judge

The symbolic codes used in Western lawsuits are not the same as those used in large parts of Africa where people have little respect for it (LeRoy, 2004). The perceived hermeticism and elitism of European law in Africa, particularly in the former French colonial territories, is unacceptable to African populations who are in large part non-literate and for whom it is difficult to understand over-complicated and out of date opinions emphasised by judges' uniforms (wigs and gowns) and their objectives. A Western judge's aim is to interpret the law. They are above all legal specialists and technical experts. The perception of the African judge is completely different. As Kodjo-Grandvaux (2013) explains, *‘for African judges to be credible they have to show honesty*

and morality in their judgements. Traditional law produces a level of efficiency that is not true of the legal system today’ (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2013, p. 132-134). The traditional judge's credibility depends on each case as viewed by those assembled. There is therefore a deep divide between the African legal elites, trained in the West and basing their legal practice on western codes, and people who see a rupture between traditional western and traditional practice.

5.3 The role of the defendant

Finally, the two approaches see the defendant in a case very differently. As Bidima (1997) explains, traditional African justice sees people less as individuals than as members of communities growing in size. This is why an individual brought before a tribunal is almost always accompanied by his or her family. Sometimes family members can intervene in the trial and actually speak on behalf of the accused. There is something cathartic about this process not just at the level of the individual, but also of the community. African societies *‘are not more conflict-oriented or more consensus-oriented than western societies. They seek to establish harmony not just for the individual and property or goods, but for the cohesion of the community as a whole’* (Kodjo-Grandvaux, 2013, p. 132-134).

Murungi (2004) explains that whereas Western justice seeks above all to compensate the plaintiff,

African justice seeks to repair social damage. Collective rights are extremely important as they are seen to protect individual freedoms.

5.4 The importance of language

Language plays a particularly important role as it is seen as *'a way of reducing conflict by expressing disagreement humanely through discussion'* (Bidima, 1997, p. 37-40). What many Westerners may see as a disorganised exchange of words without obvious aim or intent is actually the use of language to reflect true social organisation. Language serves the purpose of slowly elaborating and explaining the complexity of the situation to dissolve conflicting viewpoints and find a single path. Eboussi-Boulaga (1993) recognises the use of language to reduce conflict but rejects the concept of 'consensus language', preferring 'the language of Aporia', meaning *'the ability to uphold the values of society while also representing the positions of those involved in the case'* (Eboussi-Boulaga, 1993, p. 153). We can understand the importance of language use that aims at compromise while respecting differences and specifics. In this sense, we need to allow for a 'dissensus' or disagreement which allows us to respect the 'resistance of singularities' (Bidima, 1997). Language is pre-eminently a civic phenomenon which involves all of us, those who speak, those who stay silent and those who just observe. Language is where our sense of the collective is constructed and maintained.

'Language is pre-eminently a civic phenomenon which involves all of us, those who speak, those who stay silent and those who just observe. Language is where our sense of the collective is constructed and maintained'

6. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to contrast Western and African cultures by looking at modes of thought, attitudes towards law and the community and the use of language. It establishes that mainly through the work of a generation of African thinkers and writers in the second half of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries an understanding of some of the underlying cultural values and attitudes of African communities has been reached which allows to rethink African society and how it works on African rather than Western terms. The discussion particularly contrasts the conflict between legal practices and principles imported from the West and traditional African legal practice, which supports communal harmony and cohesion. It also examined the way the use of language supports the different approaches to justice. It is also important to understand the move towards MARC (Alternative Methods for the Resolution of Conflict) and ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) in the West directly reflects

African community legal practice. The paper also dwells on the patronising and in many cases even racist attitudes of some Western writers on Africa, including the breakthrough 1945 study of the Bantu peoples by Father Placide Tempels, and how it gave rise to criticism by African scholars writing after Africa's independence from colonial rule. Generally, the paper makes the point, through the study of some African cultural

traditions, that European and American scholars must pay much more attention to what Africa and other societies say about themselves and about the world, not what we say about them. Only then can we hope in a globalising economy dominated by the information age to build better world understanding and to help Europe and America build better institutions and more harmonious practices.

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NOTE: This article has been translated from the original French by Barry Tomalin and Jean Langlois, which includes the translations of authors' quotes.