

Herman Lodewyckx (Antwerpen)

# H. G. Gadamer's Hermeneutics in Intercultural Horizons and its Relevance for Texts on African Philosophy

»Wer versteht, ist schon immer einbezogen in ein Geschehen,  
durch das sich Sinnvolles geltend macht.«  
(Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode)  
Dedicated to the memory of  
Prof. Dr. em. **Alphonse J. Smet** c.p. (1925–2015)

## 1. Hermeneutics and Africa: an Introduction

In this text I reflect upon my interesting experience with »African Philosophy« ever since my stay in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where I taught philosophy of history (modern period to the present day). But when I was also asked to teach a course of hermeneutics to students in philosophy I could use my experience of my master's degree on the hermeneutics of H. G. Gadamer. Surprising, as such courses didn't exist in my philosophical education at the philosophy department of Louvain in the 70s. But very quickly the importance of such a course was clear in an African context, where my fellow African philosophy professors taught the discipline ›African philosophy‹. It was not only taught at the Ngidi-Seminary in Boma, but also at the philosophy department of the Faculty of Theology in Kinshasa and at the philosophy department of Lubumbashi.<sup>1</sup> This experience was the beginning of a long study and teaching of ›African Philosophy‹ at the Faculty of Comparative Religions in Antwerp where I'm a guest professor of this discipline.

The whole issue of »African philosophy« can be summarized as a hermeneutic or interpretation issue.

---

<sup>1</sup> These days, almost all departments of philosophy in Africa and in the USA have some courses on African Philosophy. In Europe philosophical departments often mistrust the ›academic‹ level of the discipline.

The question of hermeneutics is not entirely unknown to the history of philosophy in the West. The question of interpretation is already at the heart of philosophy, or as H. G. Gadamer wrote: *Hermeneutics is a universal aspect of philosophy. It is not limited to the methodical basis of the sciences of the mind.*<sup>2</sup> One can even say that the history of philosophy as a whole and globally is a story of the efforts of interpretation and understanding of reality, often heard in global concepts as ›world‹ (cosmos-chaos), ›man‹, ›God‹ or the ›Holy‹ (R. Otto)<sup>3</sup>. I say the ›efforts‹. It is like the word ›philosophy‹ which has its linguistic origin in the Greek language where ›philo-sophia‹ is not wisdom itself, but the quest, research, desire, love for wisdom<sup>4</sup>.

Philosophy is placed between the mytho-theological discourse and the scientific discourse: one tries to interpret / understand / explain the world and man (as such or in their origins, in their creation) through stories, called myths, in which a god or gods are involved as creators. Philosophy took over from the ›theo-logia‹ with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle continuing the search of man's salvation outside the mytho-theological discourse.<sup>5</sup>

The foundations of modern scientific discourse (›scientia‹ in Latin means ›knowledge‹), have been formulated by the English empirist philosopher Francis Bacon (16<sup>th</sup> C.) in his *Novum Organon*, in opposition to the ›Organon‹ of Aristotle, but Descartes, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and others tried to reduce science to a mathematization and mechanization of the world, which, according to Laplace's answer to Napoleon, no longer needs the theo-logical assumption for the explanation of its cosmology, although still necessary to Newton. And we also know Comte's laws of the three states

---

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960, p. 451. (We quote as WM)

<sup>3</sup> Otto, *Das Heilige*, Breslau, 1917, translated by J. W. Harvey as ›The Idea of the Holy‹, 1923.

<sup>4</sup> This implies that everywhere where people are longing for wisdom, there can be ›philosophy‹. But the idea that philosophy should be of one individual person and in written form, is what forms the discussion about the status of ›African Philosophy‹ and was the main drive of the development of the discipline. Is there some philosophy when it is only in oral form (see: Socrates whose ideas were only known by his disciple Plato) or dealt in a group (the Stoa – a general name for a group of philosophers during several centuries) or without a known ›author‹? And what makes the difference between ›opinion‹, ›wisdom‹ and ›philosophy‹?

<sup>5</sup> I refer for this to the French philosophers P. Hadot (1922–2010), J. P. Vernant (1914–2007), G. Gusdorf (1912–2000) and L. Ferry (\*1951) who wrote about these origins of philosophy in Greece.

that underlie scientific positivism in the 19th century (the mytho-theological stage, the metaphysical-philosophical stage and the positive-scientific stage) that would make theology and philosophy obsolete. His stance has its analogue in the Vienna Circle in the 20th century that largely influenced Anglo-Saxon philosophy in Wittgenstein, Russell, Moore, and Popper.

But the ›great‹ speeches, the modern ›grand narratives‹, both ideological and scientific fell into fragments: we speak of spalling or chunking of single speech. We entered a »postmodern condition«, so-called by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in 1979, with the subtitle »Report on knowledge« and thus setting a new philosophical movement, though also strongly contested.

Even the history of science shows us ›Structures of Scientific Revolutions‹ according to the American historian Thomas Kuhn, in his book published in 1962, which introduced the concept of ›paradigm‹ to show us that a scientist never looks at reality with a completely objective or neutral eye.

Thus, the ›truth‹ of many discourses and stories has become an object of suspicion, in the words of P. Ricoeur,<sup>6</sup> who sees three major masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, taken up and systematized by later thinkers of the German Frankfurt School and by philosophers of the years '68: Althusser, Foucault, Lacan, and many others.

In his short essay »On the Essence of Truth« (Vom Wesen der Wahrheit) of 1930, Heidegger invites us to reflect on truth as ›aletheia‹: un-veiling, but at the same time it is also cupping, hiding, clouding of being: ›Ent-bergung – Ver-bergung – Verborgenheit‹.

This probably explains the relativism that prevails in our societies and the renunciation of the search for THE truth or THE wisdom. Is this the end of philosophy in general in our world? In our societies? In our schools and universities?<sup>7</sup>

I have already noted that all these evolutions are leading the way now and give voice for African philosophers to affirm the possibility of an African scientificity or African philosophy / epistemology, standing out of THE science or THE philosophy, which can only be seen as a specific Western, even Eurocentric, representation, but cer-

---

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 1965, pp. 41–42.

<sup>7</sup> The problem will become more complex as we seem to enter even a post-truth period these days.

tainly not as a universal one. Side by side with the western paradigm, one can perfectly support an African paradigm to explain or interpret the scientific, ideological and political situation in Africa. Western postmodernism found its reverse in African postcolonialism and vice versa.<sup>8</sup>

Was it not already an issue among ancient Greek philosophers to question the discrepancy between a statement – that which is ›said‹ – and ›reality‹ – that which is – while seeking ›the truth‹? Greek philosophers wanted to make a clear distinction between ›philosophy‹ and ›myths‹. The question is clear: what is being said in these myths? Can we say the same thing without reference to gods? We know this from the book of Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneia* or ›About interpretation‹ (in further reference to the god Hermes, the messenger-god that interprets the commands of other gods).

This issue was to be taken up during the Middle Ages, and still later on by Christian theologians for the interpretation of biblical texts. One question they had in common with their Jewish and Muslim colleagues (Maimonides, Averroes, ...) in Spain, during the famous golden age: how to interpret the (holy) Scriptures: can we deduce a purely philosophical meaning from these texts? The Christian tradition had Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> C. But some other theologians were not so happy with his new ›Aristotelian‹ vision, leaving behind the ›traditional‹ (neo-) platonist interpretations.

We know that the schools of Islamic interpretations were quickly closed because they were considered dangerous for leaving a gap between a theological interpretation for the faithful and a philosophical interpretation (thus more secular) for the educated or insiders.<sup>9</sup>

We also know that the Christian church had to fight many heresies to safeguard its unity, but lost that fight with the Orthodox schism in 1054 and with the rise of Protestantism in the 16th century when Luther preached: *sola scriptura*: the (holy) Scripture is sufficient in itself as an interpretative authority. We do not need other theological or ecclesiastical authorities, as was the case in the Catholic Church, to understand the Holy Scriptures. But we often forget that

<sup>8</sup> See Houontondji, *La rationalité, une ou plurielle*, 2007; *L'ancien et le nouveau. La production du savoir dans l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui*, 2013; Bassong, *La méthode de la philosophie africaine*, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> The Senegalese Prof. S. B. Diagne made some efforts to re-open the interest in Islamic hermeneutics (see *Comment philosopher en islam?*) and *Islam and Open Society*, (likewise *Fidelity and Movement in the Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal*).

these disputes had rightly generated a lot of interpretations that often lead to schisms and Christian sects, as we can see these days, especially in African countries, where at every street corner there is another church with its truth about the Gospel or the Bible.

The situation is the same for almost all other religions: Islam, Judaism, Buddhism all range from ›fundamentalist‹ interpretations to say ›liberal‹ interpretations.<sup>10</sup>

In modern times, and under the growing influence of so-called positive sciences, a split occurs between the ›accurate‹ interpretations of the world by the so-called positive sciences and the interpretations of ›human‹ or ›social‹ sciences. In the 19th century this split induced W. Dilthey to introduce the distinction between »Erklären« (explanation by a chain of causes and consequences) and »Verstehen« (understanding through reasoning) to legitimize also ›human‹ sciences (Geisteswissenschaften).

But this distinction has proved untenable. Even in the so-called ›positive‹ sciences, there is a part of ›Verstehen‹ or ›understanding‹, if not already implicated in the choice of axioms and postulates that are the basis of the statements.

Interpretation is a universal phenomenon. We see it in jurisprudence and law setting, in literature, in art, in poetry, in myth or in theology/exegesis, and also in the so-called positive sciences pretending to give us the ›objectivity of reality‹ by causalistic-physical or mathematical laws: facts, data must be interpreted by specialists.

It was the genius of H. G. Gadamer to introduce us to a kind of hermeneutics that is not restricted to a simple methodology consisting in a few rules or standards of interpretation that will ultimately lead us to THE only truth, as a final result, or to THE interpretation.

Gadamer offers us a different ›reading‹ of the word ›interpretation‹: it is no longer ›interpretation‹ as a definitive result of an intellectual process, but we must take ›interpretation‹ in its active, dynamic, sense, marked by the ending ›-ation‹, which – etymologically – is derived from ›action‹: interpretation should be conceived as an end-

---

<sup>10</sup> In the line of what will be said further on: it would be interesting to investigate the reasons for those different interpretations. It would surely not only be because of the text itself, but in most cases because of the actual discussions influenced by those who are in power in the community of the ›readers‹. This is of course a political reading of hermeneutics that surpasses the philosophical reading of *Wahrheit und Methode*.

less process by which any interpretation as a result, is only one step in this long process that Gadamer calls *›Wirkungsgeschichte‹*,<sup>11</sup> an almost untranslatable term, but best rendered as *›the principle of the history of the action (or effect)‹*. It is therefore important to distinguish between interpretation as a result and interpretation as an interpretational activity by a *›reader‹* of a literary or artistic work or realisation. The same can be said about *›reading‹* a text: it is not only a superficial activity, but it can be understood as a *›deep‹* reading, because it also means *›reading between the lines,‹* looking for the *›un-written text,‹* the con-text, the unreported dialogue between different authors of different times you may find by referring to them, by using some concepts and quotes as references.

## 2. Gadamer's hermeneutics in the present situation of African philosophy

In the introduction of *›Truth and Method‹*, Gadamer states: *›The problem of hermeneutics oversteps the limits set by the idea of method, as conceived by modern science. The understanding and interpretation of texts is not only a concern of science but develops of course within the general experience that man makes of the world.‹*<sup>12</sup> Hermeneutics – as for Gadamer – is not intended to build a knowledge that meets the requirements of methodical science, but it is a knowledge that corresponds to human experience, expressed by the *›Geisteswissenschaften,‹* human or social sciences, and is an existential experience of men's finiteness. Gadamer takes experiences of interpretation of art (first part) and of the human sciences (second part) with history and philosophy as a starting point. In the second part of this section, he develops *›the outlines of a theory of the hermeneutical experience.‹*<sup>13</sup>

The keywords here are *›Wirkungsgeschichte‹* and *›Horizontverschmelzung‹* (fusion of horizons).

---

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, WM, p. 284 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, WM, p. XXVII: *›So drängt das Problem der Hermeneutik schon von seinem geschichtlichen Ursprung her über die Grenzen hinaus, die durch den Methodenbegriff der modernen Wissenschaft gesetzt sind. Verstehen und Auslegen von Texten ist nicht nur ein Anliegen der Wissenschaft, sondern gehört offenbar zur menschlichen Welterfahrung insgesamt.‹*

<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, WM, pp. 250 ff. (286 ff.).

Already the translation of the first term is an issue. The French translation proposes: the principle of the history of action (or influence), but J. Grondin refers to the history of the reception of a work or of works passed to posterity through history. So he proposes »working history«.<sup>14</sup> I think it still offers too little of the dynamics of the »receiving« of a work in a historical context, a dynamic that continues with the »reading« or the interpretational activity of the »reader«. Perhaps one should speak of an »active historicity«, or of »the historical action« or »historical process« of a work.

Too often, we wonder: what is it the author wanted to express in a text or an artwork, suggesting that the author holds THE significance, THE sense, and therefore THE truth of his/her work? The objective interpretation should be obtained only if we highlighted the original meaning, owned and known only by the author. This involves historical research, psychological analysis, a genealogy or archaeology of the meaning to use the philosophical language of Nietzsche and Foucault.

However, anyone who has already produced an artistic or literary work knows that the meaning leaves him from the moment of the publication or realisation in which the work is – literally – delivered to the public.<sup>15</sup> Comments from all sides see meanings that the author would never have seen nor wanted. People in the 19th century were perhaps relying on the masters of literary or artistic criticism for the »exact« interpretation. In the 21st century, the social media show that everyone delivers his or her opinion and the meaning given by the author is lost in the mass of diverse voices, both from »experts« as well as from common people.

Regarding African philosophy, we will use the example of the famous text of father Placide Tempels, *La Philosophie Bantoue*, published in 1949 by *Présence Africaine* – in French – but published as »*Bantu Philosophy*« in English in 1956 by the same publishing house in Paris<sup>16</sup>. Its actual history is exemplary at different levels.

---

<sup>14</sup> Grondin, *L'hermeneutique*, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> And even in creating a text or any other artistic work, many authors recognise that the work itself »leads« them to the result: the story develops itself, the language influences the author, the material drives the artist as much as the artist drives the material. So the result can also be strange to himself as well as to outsiders.

<sup>16</sup> A re-print has been published in 2016 by HBC Publishing, Orlando, USA with a brief introduction by Sam Chekwasi.

Let us first summarize the central idea. Tempels proposed a concept of a dynamic ›being‹ he finds in the implicit thinking of the Bantu (the Bantu or people of the east-southern region of the Belgian Congo in the 30s-40s), expressed by riddles, songs, proverbs: ›Being‹ must be thought of as more dynamic than in Western ontology. Being, present in all beings (men, animals, even stones), situated in a hierarchical order, must be understood as a force that can be strengthened or enfeebled by other forces. This force is not an accident (Thomistic view) but the essence of being itself (Bantu view). The created universe is centred on man. The present human generation is the centre of all humanity, including the world of the dead. This central idea has implications that Tempels develops along the other chapters (Bantu Wisdom, Bantu Psychology, Bantu Ethics ...), thus projecting his classical philosophical education in the Catholic Church of the 1920s.

Already the definite article (la – the) in the French title has sparked so many comments we sometimes forget the original meaning that the author himself has given to his book. It is thanks to the late Prof. A. J. Smet that we have a critical (French) edition of this work, because he, at least, understands the native – Dutch – language of Tempels, in which Tempels published his book as the ›original‹ edition in 1946. This means, that it is not so clear what Tempels exactly meant with his text. Even some of his concepts were not always consistent in Dutch or in the French translation<sup>17</sup>.

This critical approach maybe closer to the original ideas of Tempels, but must we restrict the meaning of the text ›Bantu Philosophy‹ to the ›original‹ text version or to the ›critical‹ one made by Prof. Smet? We forget then that this text has resulted in many positive and negative reviews so that we can no longer have a neutral or objective reading of this text. Reading the text ›as such‹ is impossible, ignoring its ›Wirkungsgeschichte‹ or historical activity. How can this text be situated in contemporary Africa?

A second idea of Gadamer that may lead us further and can help in reading and understanding (*is this tautological?*) literary or artistic works is the idea of the ›fusion of horizons‹ (»Horizontverschmel-

---

<sup>17</sup> To be clear: it was not his purpose to write an academic philosophical work, although some academic philosophers favoured this work. But he needed to do this (and stimulated by E. Possoz during a revalidation period) as a preliminary to his main objective: writing a Bantu catechesis, which he published in 1948.

zung«).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in the interpretational activity there is the horizon of the (interpreted) work (the historical and societal context of its creation); and there is the horizon of the reader: a literary or artistic work is received through various channels and it has been noticed or perceived by an actual person. There are various reasons for the interest or disinterest when this work »appears« or »unveils« itself to the »reader« or interpreter. The horizon of the »reader« consists of pre-knowledge, pre-judices, positive or negative pre-opinions. The reader is confronted by a work that submits a »question«. The consciousness of the reader / interpreter is challenged to put his pre-judice under the criticism of the work itself. But let it be clear: Gadamer says: we never will become masters of our prejudices, we never are completely transparent to ourselves or will be able to »read« the work as such. This is an experience of the finitude of our ontological status as human beings.<sup>19</sup>

An (interpretational) »reading« of an artistic or literary work presupposes that we realize our pre-judices, but also our inability to clarify them completely. Each interpretational activity remains ambiguous in this regard.

So no one will take a work as an object of interpretation without prejudices, outspoken or unspoken, explicit or implicit. A text like *Bantu Philosophy* by Tempels is never read without resonances of opinions surrounding this work throughout its historical activity. We hear about it and immediately ideas about »Africa« and »philosophy« resonate, ideas full of positive or negative bias, as we have experienced both: »Africa and African people« on the one side and of »philosophy and philosophers« on the other one, questioning what »African + Philosophy« could be.

In any case, there is always a very strange issue: speaking about »African philosophy«, many people, both in the West and in Africa, take the concept of »philosophy« almost immediately in a broad, non-academic sense, and hope to hear *what exactly Africans think*. It is very rare that someone reacts with: *and are there some interesting African philosophers?* Precisely such a misconception has been introduced by the work of Tempels and those (often called »the Tempel-sians«) who return to Tempels' project for digging up a unanimous

---

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, WM, pp. 284 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Gadamer, WM, p. 340 ff.: »Die eigentliche Erfahrung ist diejenige, in der sich der Mensch seiner Endlichkeit bewusst wird.«

philosophy of a particular people. Even these authors, named »ethnophilosophers« by Marcien Towa and Paulin J. Hountondji, identify themselves with their original people, they seem to speak in their name: »we« Dogon, »we« Bambara, »we« Diola, »we« Igbo, »we« Wolof, »we« Bantu, ... They seem to speak or write for their fellow men (rarely women).

That is why the view of P. J. Hountondji of Benin can be summed up as: Ethnophilosophy is a projection of (subjective) ideas of an author in an anonymous and collective self-styled soul of the African man, who, later, will be presented as THE philosophy of THE Bantu, Dogon, Bambara and others, extrapolated to all Africans. The black man will be fixed in a dogmatic mythic and unchanging past. This makes an explicit and critical philosophy of individuals almost impossible. (Suppose someone were to dig up the philosophy of the Bretons, Flemish, Scots ...)

»It is a sterile and an alienating activity that does not serve the interests of Africans, but only those of elsewhere. Thus, the Bantu are not the authors of »the« philosophy of »the« Bantu, but it is Tempels himself, and the author of the »Bantu-Rwandese Philosophy« is none other than its author, Alexis Kagame with his own intentions«.<sup>20</sup>

»Without any doubt, the problem of African »Philosophy« refers us back to the problem of hermeneutics«, wrote Hountondji, and further: »The discourse of ethnophilosophers, be they European or African, offers us the baffling spectacle of an imaginary interpretation with no textual support, of a genuinely »free« interpretation, inebriated and entirely at the mercy of the interpreter, a dizzy and unconscious freedom which takes itself to be translating a text which does not actually exist and which is therefore unaware of its own creativity. By this action the interpreter disqualifies himself from reaching any truth whatsoever, since truth requires that freedom be limited, that it bow to an order that is not purely imaginary and that it be aware both of this order and of its own margin of creativity. Truth is attainable only if the interpreter's freedom is based on the nature of the text to be interpreted; *it presupposes that the text and the interpreter's discourse remain rigorously within the same category, i. e. the same univocal field. Aristotle's doctrine of the »genera of being« means just this*.<sup>21</sup>

Oddly enough if we apply this quote to the interpretational activity of Hountondji himself, he projects his own criticism into the text of

---

<sup>20</sup> Hountondji, *African philosophy. Myth & Reality*, p. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Hountondji, op.cit., p. 189, note 16.

Tempels, who did not write the text in the '70s, but in the '40s. The intellectual horizon of Hountondji is formed by his own academic training as a philosopher, particularly in Paris where he presented a doctoral dissertation on Husserl in 1970, and by the post-colonial period in Africa in general, but especially of the Marxist-Leninist regime in his country, Benin (formerly Dahomey) from 1974 until 1990. So we understand some of the more active contemporary African philosophers better:

»Either way, Bantu ›Philosophy‹ is shown to be a myth. To destroy this myth once and for all, and to clear our conceptual ground for a genuine theoretical discourse – these are the tasks now awaiting African philosophers and scientists.«<sup>22</sup>, and further on: »That the responsibility of African philosophers (and of all African scientists) extends far beyond the narrow limits of their discipline and that they cannot afford the luxury of self-satisfied apoliticism or quiescent complacency about the established disorder unless they deny themselves both as philosophers and as people. In other words, the theoretical liberation of philosophical discourse presupposes political liberation.«<sup>23</sup>

Let us now look at the other ›horizon‹, that of the author, P. Tempels. A work (artistic or literary) does not appear as a thunderbolt from a clear sky. We can say that the author is the one who ›symbolizes‹ the spirit of his time (»Zeitgeist«). A work that we recognize to be the expression of its time, its surroundings, its community, is nevertheless not always accepted with complacency. It is sometimes the opposite. A work becomes ›classical‹ when it persists in history and can build its actual historicity, also called ›tradition‹, to which the interpretations of ›readings‹ help in its formation and its transmission to new generations. »*The horizon is the field of vision which understands and includes everything we can see from a specific point.*«<sup>24</sup> The (historical) horizon allows us to step into the shoes of the other for a better understanding, like when we are with someone in a conversation. This horizon is not closed. It is something which we penetrate and that gradually changes. The historical horizon is always moving, as Gadamer says.

If we consider Tempels' »Bantu Philosophy«, this book is the result of the dissatisfaction of Tempels himself, with the colonial pol-

<sup>22</sup> Hountondji, op.cit., p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> Hountondji, op.cit., p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Gadamer, WM, p. 286.

icy of ›civilizing‹ by the Belgian government in place, but also with the evangelizing work of the Catholic Church. But he is not alone. This dissatisfaction reigned not only among his colleagues but also among the colonial officers in charge as among the colonized. When he talks to the Bantu they would say, »*you understand us: you now know us completely: you know in the way we know*«.<sup>25</sup>

Even the term »philosophy« in its sometimes ambiguous meanings was commonly used in ethnological publications of that time to indicate that there is a logic, a rationality underlying the customs, stories and customary laws, despite the negative vision created by the work of the French philosopher, Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), who said that ›primitive‹ men have only a pre-logic, a magical mind, which is insufficient to philosophize.<sup>26</sup>

We know the genealogical complexity of the work of Tempels from brief articles he wrote some years ago, but mostly from his correspondence with G. Hulstaert<sup>27</sup>. It makes us glimpse at the discussions with other contemporaries, including E. Possoz who almost prompted him to write this book, which has made so much ink flow.

Despite harsh criticism<sup>28</sup> from African authors like A. Césaire, and later on in the 70ths from F. Eboussi Boulaga, P. J. Hountondji and M. Towa, »*Bantu Philosophy*« has been seen as a ›political‹ document against the colonial ›order‹, which caused the return of Father Tempels to Belgium ordered by both ecclesiastical and Belgian administrative authorities, later on he called it »*his banishment*«. His ecclesiastic authorities forbade him to speak in public about his book.

The violent criticism of Hountondji, who wants to eliminate this text of Tempels from the history of African philosophy, »*because not written by an African*«,<sup>29</sup> is in itself a questioning of the historical

---

<sup>25</sup> Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> Lévy-Bruhl, *La mentalité primitive*, republished with new introductions by other anthropologists and other works, most translated into English. In his Carnets (›Notebooks‹, published posthumously in 1949) he writes that ›primitivity‹ may not only be attributed to one people, but is an attitude of all men in certain circumstances of fear, war and uncertainty.

<sup>27</sup> Bontinck, *Aux origines de la philosophie bantoue. La correspondance Tempels-Hulstaert (1944–48)*.

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly those African authors criticised Tempels for that his book became a better instrument to the colonial powers to subjugate the people in their colonies: »*Now, they know us really*« (Aimé Césaire).

<sup>29</sup> Hountondji, *African Philosophy. Myth & Reality*, p. 64: »A work like ›Bantu Philosophy‹ does not belong to African philosophy, since its author is not African. [...]

horizon of Hountondji. It is the refusal to enter into this fusion of horizons meant by Gadamer. It is the refusal to put himself in the place of another, to understand the other from his horizon, the refusal of dialogue that would bring into broad daylight the prejudices and previews of the interlocutors. Let us quote Gadamer at this crucial point:

»A truly historical consciousness never loses sight of its own presence, so as to see itself and what is historically different in proper perspective [...]. We have [...] the constant task to curb a hasty assimilation of the past to our own expectations of meaning. Only then do we hear the voice of tradition, as can be heard in his own otherness.«<sup>30</sup>

A particular point raised in the debate on African philosophy is the issue of languages. One can easily recognize the problem Gadamer expressed in the third part of *Truth and Method* on language as the ›medium‹, to be understood as the ›mediator‹ and the ›middle‹ of the hermeneutical experience. *Understanding is a linguistic process*: understanding the meaning of a work can only be done in a language-langue and a language-langage. Meaning seeks a language (›langue and langage‹)<sup>31</sup> to express itself. For too long the language question has been restricted to a ›langage‹ issue: the expression in French, German or any other (spoken) language.

Here we touch upon the subject of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language is not simply interchangeable with any other language to express ideas, but it influences the message by its own character.

Again Gadamer:

»In the extreme case of translation, there is no doubt that, whatever the familiarity of the translator with life and feelings of the author, the translation of a text is not the simple resurrection of the original psychological process of writing but a resumption (Nachbildung), guided by the under-

---

Tempels' work, although it deals with an African subject and has played a decisive role in the development of African ethnophilosophy, belongs to European scientific literature, in the same way as anthropology in general [...] is an embodiment of Western science, no more and no less.«

<sup>30</sup> Gadamer, WM, p. 289.

<sup>31</sup> It is a pity that English has only one word for the difference made in French: langue et langage is only rendered by ›language‹. Langue = a spoken language as English, German, French, ... Langage = a kind of speaking in a professional or particular context: for instance legal, medical, philosophical, ... language.

standing of what it says. No one can doubt that this is an interpretation, not a single co-operation (Mitvollzug).«<sup>32</sup>

Early on it was recognized that Tempels' text presents the ideas of Bantu in Dutch or French, in a vocabulary and grammar formed by the particularities of these languages of that time, but which are not always adequate to ›translate‹ the statements of Bantu. Tempels himself is aware of it in an article he published in Dutch, translated later on into French.<sup>33</sup>

Alexis Kagame, Rwandan philosopher, made it the starting point of his critique of Tempels. He tried to reconstruct Bantu philosophy from the categories of the Rwandan language, Kinyarwandi,<sup>34</sup> as Aristotle did with the Greek language. In his research of the Rwandan language he finds – strangely – the same categories of the Bantu-Rwandese thought as Aristotle did within his language.

This becomes an essential feature of many ›followers‹ of Tempels and Kagame: how to find a common language between the experience of their native language and the legacy of the philosophical languages of the colonizing countries: French, English, even German sometimes, but rarely Portuguese.

But there are other African philosophers who are inspired by Heidegger, who tried to extract philosophical thought from his own language, German, (as did the Greek philosophers starting from their Greek language), which became almost a horror for translators into non-Germanic languages. These (African) philosophers are trying to rebuild a ›philosophy‹ from the peculiarities of their language.

Note for example the initiative of Ch. Jeffers who, in 2013, published an anthology of philosophical texts written by African philosophers, but in their native language. But fortunately for us Westerners: with English translation.<sup>35</sup>

But the linguistic aspect is more than of language as ›langue‹: it is also the language as ›langage‹ used to express an idea in various literary genres in the same language. These genres are more than a form to express an idea. The form is already communication. And according to the laws of communication of P. Watzlawick nonverbal communication can have more influence than verbal communication.

---

<sup>32</sup> Gadamer, WM, p. 363.

<sup>33</sup> Tempels, *De studie der Bantoe-talen in het licht der Bantoe-filosofie*, p. 73–78.

<sup>34</sup> Kagame, *Bantu-Rwandese Philosophy of Being*.

<sup>35</sup> Jeffers, *Listening to ourselves. A Multilingual Anthology of African Philosophy*.

A philosophical treatise is different from a novel or a proverb that has the same idea. So by transposing the stories, riddles and proverbs into a philosophical statement, these can lose their original meaning (as far as there could be only one original meaning), not only in their contents but also in their interaction with the speaker and the interlocutors.

Here we return to the idea expressed by Gadamer: Language-langage / language-langue creates a ›medium‹ (a ›middle‹ and a ›mediator‹) in which the speaker, interlocutors and meaning meet each other.

The linguistic nature of the interpretative experience may not, however, exhaust the meaning of a statement. The hermeneutical experience is about the experience of the human existential finiteness according to Gadamer. But such an experience has to be repeated continually. This constitutes its ›Wirkungsgeschichte‹ or its actual history.

Note about this the attempts of the so-called hermeneutical school of Kinshasa where especially Tshiamalenga Ntumba and Nkombe Oleko tried to reopen the question of languages in African philosophy. In particular it was Nkombe Oleko (1946–2014) who tried to develop a hermeneutics for proverbs, taking seriously a word from Paul Ricoeur: a pro-verb gives something to think, and it is precisely in the middle of the intersubjectivity that this proverb finds its meaning.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. Some consequences for African philosophy

For Hountondji Kagame »should have renounced Tempels' whole project instead of his naiveté and carrying it out slightly differently«.<sup>37</sup> But between the rejection of the work of Tempels, or an

---

<sup>36</sup> Nkombe Oleko refers to the idea of P. Ricoeur: »le symbole donne à penser«, but transfers this ›symbol‹ to the proverbs he is analysing. See Nkombe Oleko, *Méta-phrase et métonymie*, p. 137–146, referring to P. Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interpretations*, namely the chapter on *Herméneutique des symboles et reflexion philosophique*, (p. 387–446) and to P. Ricoeur, *La symbolique du mal*. See also P. Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, Ch. III: Méthode herménéutique et philosophie reflexive, p. 48: « Le symbole donne à penser, disais-je, reprenant un mot de Kant dans la *Critique du jugement*. Il donne, il est le don du langage: mais ce don me crée un devoir de penser. »

<sup>37</sup> Hountondji, P. J., *African Philosophy. Myth & Reality*, p. 51.

imitation of his investigation by philosophers in other regions of Africa, it must be possible to find some other ways that take into account hermeneutics and the historical horizon of the work of Tempels.

It is like someone wanting to become a ›philosopher‹: (s)he enters the historical hermeneutical horizon of philosophy by reading the philosophers in their horizons or historical situations, from Greek antiquity until contemporary times, but taking also into account the subsequent critiques, thus trying to understand the project of philosophy: the understanding of the world and of man in all its complexity.

Recent publications of African philosophers are proof of it. First of all there are some African authors who reflect on hermeneutics itself presented by P. Ricoeur, H. G. Gadamer or others.<sup>38</sup>

More interesting are the authors who, by distancing themselves from the quarrel between Hountondji and the so-called ›ethnophilosophers‹, start from the questions that arise from this dispute. Such as M. Kebede (2004), who analyzes the issue of sameness and otherness that tracks the various speeches since colonial times, even in the writings of Tempels, Hountondji, Senghor, Mudimbe, Serequerberhan and others. Their focus lies on this question: Are we, Africans and Westerners the same or are we ›others‹? How do we share human nature? How can we use our peculiarities?

There are the non-answered questions in J. O. Chimakonam (2015): can we take up the idea of an ontology, an epistemology, a particular logic?

We are aware that Western philosophy is based on texts of past generations. The situation in Africa is quite different: apart from the Timbuktu texts, or the texts of Zara Yakob in Ethiopia of the 17th C.,<sup>39</sup> we have only oral literature. V. A. Anoka (2012) tries to find out if hermeneutics or ordinary language philosophy can help to render the richness of this oral literature. One can easily repeat with P. Ricoeur: »*The (pro)-verb gives something to think about*«, but the whole question is precisely: how to interpret this ›thinking‹, especially if the

<sup>38</sup> f.ex.: Serequerberhan, Tsenay, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy. Horizon and Discours*; Okere, *African Philosophy: A Historico-hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of Its Possibility*,

<sup>39</sup> Published by Cl. Sumner in the '70s. It would be an interesting excercise to do the same hermeneutical analysis on the texts of Zara Yakob as we did on the text by Tempels.

author of this thinking disappeared in the nebulosity of the past? There is perhaps only the (social) functioning of this oral literature that can give an indication of the meaning of these texts.

To my knowledge there is only one author who has really taken over the project of Tempels in a critical way: E. Wreh-Wilson in his book *Beginning African Philosophy. The case for African Philosophy. Past to present*. He sums up, chapter by chapter, the issues raised by Tempels, but in the knowledge of previous critiques. Well yes: we must reflect on what philosophy can be without becoming a simple ethno-philosophy; we must reflect on the difference between an academic philosophical discourse and a popular philosophical one; we must reflect on Tempels' own project and on the problem of concepts to express the ideas that he believes to find in his conversations with the Bantu; we must think about the mythological, metaphysical, social and moral dimensions of popular narratives; we must reflect on the conceptions of man and his place in society and the moral ideas arising therefrom; and yes, we must reflect on the question of God and religion that take an important role in the lives of many Africans. Wreh-Wilson is listening each time: what does Tempels say? What do his critics say? And finally he cautiously gives a provisional conclusion that can encourage the reader to continue his own research and his reflections on the taken positions.

Renouncing Tempels' project is to deny his questioning. But entering the hermeneutical and philosophical horizon he opened up in the field of African philosophy discloses unexpected perspectives. We lose the certainty, or should we say, the arrogance of Eurocentric particularism in Western philosophy, but we gain a horizon that discovers a world of thoughts, even philosophies of other cultures. But above all, we return to our own philosophical tradition by comparing the answers given by these different thoughts and philosophies on issues that are often universal: what is it to be a human being in this world? Why are we in this world? Is reasoning without reference or mytho-theological authority possible? And how different are we as Africans and Europeans, or are we almost the same as (wo-)men?

#### 4. Conclusion

Taking the two key concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutics, ›Wirkungsgeschichte‹ or actual history of a work and ›fusion of horizons‹ as a

basis for our reflections on African philosophy, we believe to give some keys for a better understanding of the debates that currently govern the area of »African Philosophy«. But this approach can also be successful in all intercultural encounters in today's world.

The hermeneutics of Gadamer is only a window for the interpretation and understanding of a thought *that comes from elsewhere*.<sup>40</sup> With Tempels' *>Bantu Philosophy<*, we have an exemplary phenomenon that teaches us to quit a reading from the viewpoint of *>us<* and *>them<*, to gain a reading that leads to a *>fusion of horizons<* of the author and the readers, by its actual history. And as Gadamer wrote: entering such a hermeneutical process makes us discover that »the« truth of the interpretation will always be partial: sometimes unveiling, sometimes veiling, symbol and expression of the existential finitude of every man.

There are a lot of texts that constitute the larger part of what can be called *>African philosophy<*. They can be read and reread. And somehow it facilitates an awareness of what African philosophy can/ may be.

But a text is only part of the cultural heritage of a people. (Wo-)men express themselves also in a culture of objects, rituals and stories. In sub-Saharan Africa we find more of oral culture and a lot of storytelling to explain the origins of rituals, objects and their own existence as a family or group. Those objects and rituals are in the intersection of social, aesthetic and religious contexts (for instance initiations, divination, masks, dances, language tom-tom (!) ...) and the original author-creator is completely absent. Gestures and rites are done, and there are only a few people, recognized as *>wise<*, who can sometimes clarify their origin and functioning and, in doing so, give their interpretations.

We can remain at the surface with the exotic and touristic anecdotes (V. Mudimbe) or we can enter the *>medium<* described above to start a dialogue and try to find a common meaning with the interlo-

---

<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to see how the idea of *>otherness<* of a text that comes into our horizon, developed by Gadamer, joins the idea of *>otherness<* of Mudimbe who asks what to do with models of social sciences, that are developed to serve the colonial powers and that are even continued in African studies, pursued by Africans themselves. Even the language is from elsewhere. What will we, as Africans, do when we try to use our own languages? See Mudimbe, *l'Odeur du Père*, p. 36 ff. Even the discourse of L. S. Senghor on *>négritude<* joins the western paradigm in returning the old ideas.

cutors on the issues raised by these gestures and rites in our own existence. But let us not forget the trap of language as ›langage‹ and the language as ›langue‹ that leads us to an understanding that is too easy and too fast: understanding is not only a question of knowing a particular language as ›langue‹ (Swahili, Kiluba, ...) but also of entering the particular language as ›langage‹ of story telling in an African context. In itself, it may not be ›philosophy‹ in our sense, but it is an important window to open up new perspectives on what philosophy may be as an activity that is open for every (wo-)man.

## Bibliography:

Anoka, Victor Ahamefule, *African philosophy. An overview and a critique of the philosophical significance of African oral literature*, Frankfurt/M. 2012. (ch. 4: Hermeneutics and African Philosophy)

Bassong, Mbog, *La méthode de la philosophie africaine. De l'expression de la pensée complexe en Afrique noire*, Paris 2007.

Bontinck, Frans, *Aux origines de la philosophie bantoue. La correspondance Tempels-Hulstaert (1944–48)*, Kinshasa 1985.

Boulaga, Fabien Eboussi, *Muntu in Crisis. African authenticity and Philosophy*, Trenton (NJ) 2014 (originally in French, 1977).

Chimakonam, Jonathan O.(ed), *Atuolu Omalu. Some Unanswered Questions in Contemporary African Philosophy*, Lanham 2015.

Diagne, Bachir Souleymane, *Comment philosopher en Islam?*, Paris 2014.

Diagne, Bachir Souleymane, *Islam and Open Society. Fidelity and Movement in the Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal*, Dakar 2010.

Ferry, Luc, *De Homère à Platon. La naissance de la philosophie*, Paris (coll. Sagesse d'hier et d'aujourd'hui) 2012.

Ferry, Luc, *Mythologie & Philosophie*, Paris 2015.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Wahrheit und Methode (WM). Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 41975.

Grondin, Jean, *L'herméneutique*, Paris 2006.

Gusdorf, Georges, *Mythe et Métaphysique. Introduction à la philosophie*, Paris 1984.

Hountondji, Paulin J., *African Philosophy. Myth & Reality*, Bloomington 1996.

Hountondji, Paulin J., *The Struggle for Meaning. Reflections on Philosophy, Culture and Democracy in Africa*, Athens (Ohio) 2002.

Hountondji, Paulin J., *La rationalité, une ou plurielle*, Dakar 2007.

Hountondji, Paulin J., *L'ancien et le nouveau. La production du savoir dans l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui*, Bamenda 2013.

Jeffers, Chike, *Listening to Ourselves. A Multilingual Anthology of African Philosophy*, New York 2013.

Ntumba, Tshiamalenga (ed), *Langage et Philosophie. Actes de la 4ème Semaine Philosophique de Kinshasa 1979*, Kinshasa 1981.

Ntumba, Tshiamalenga, *Le réel comme procès multiforme. Pour une philosophie du Nous processuel, englobant et plural*, Saint Denis 2014.

Kagame, Alexis, *La philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l'être*, Bruxelles 1956.

Kebede, Messay, *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization*, New York 2004.

Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien, *La mentalité primitive*, Paris 1922 (republished in 2010 with pref. of Fr. Keck).

Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien, *Carnets*, Paris 1949 (republished in 1998 with pref. of B. Karsenti and M. Leenhardt).

Mudimbe, Valentin Y., *L'autre face du royaume. Une introduction à la critique des langages en folie*, Dole 1973.

Mudimbe, Valentin Y., *L'odeur du Père. Essai sur les limites de la sciences et de la vie en Afrique noire*, Paris 1982.

Mudimbe, Valentin Y., *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Indianapolis 1988.

Nkombe Oleko, *Métaphore et métonymie dans les symboles parémiologiques. L'intersubjectivité dans les »proverbes Tetela«*, Kinshasa 1979.

Okere, Theophilus, *African Philosophy. A Historico-hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility*, (Cl. Sumner, ed.), Michigan 1983.

Otto, Rudolf, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Breslau 1917 (engl.: *The idea of the holy [an inquiry into the nonrational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational]*, transl. by John W. Harvey, Harmondsworth 1923).

Ricoeur, Paul, *De l'interprétation*, Paris 1965.

Ricoeur, Paul, *Le conflit des interpretations. Essais d'herméneutique*, Paris 1969.

Serequeberhan, Tsenay, *Hermeneutics of African Philosophy. Horizon and Discourse*, New York 1994.

Tempels, Placide, *Philosophie Bantu*, augmentée du huitième chapitre inédit. Avant-propos et Edition critique de la traduction française par le Prof. Dr. A. J. Smet, c.p., Wezembeek-Oppem 2008 (see <http://www.aequatoria.be/tempels/FTCriticalEditionFR.htm>).

Tempels, Placide, *Les écrits Ethnographiques (1935–1943)* éd. par A. J. Smet, Wezembeek-Oppem 2008.

Tempels, Placide, *Mélanges de Philosophie Bantu (1943–1949)*, éd. par A. J. Smet, Wezembeek-Oppem 2000.

Wreh-Wilson, Elliot, *Beginning African Philosophy. The case for African Philosophy Past to Present*, New York 2012.