

---

# From the Ethnoscience to Ethnophilosophy: Kwame Nkrumah's Thesis Project

---

Paulin Hountondji\*

Many have believed and continue to believe that the word *ethnophilosophy* is a neologism created by Towa and myself. It is true that the term applied perfectly to our critical and polemical intentions. I used it in an article published in 1970, in order to show that a certain type of discourse commonly considered philosophical, of which Tempels seemed to me to give an excellent illustration, arose in reality from ethnology and needed to be recognized as such. I warned against a widespread confusion of genres that imposed as a norm, in Africa, what was actually a deviation in relation to the theoretical practices predominating in Europe itself, in the native cultures of the promoters of this supposed norm (Hountondji, "Remarques").

It was by accident that during the same period, one year after the appearance of the *Diogenes* article, Marcien Towa in his turn used the same word with the same pejorative connotation, the same critical intention, the same need to substitute intellectual practices, marked by their own kind of coherence and responsibility, for this dominant form of African philosophy (in *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle*). We did not plan this. Upon close inspection, numerous differences between the arguments and other aspects of our two critiques become apparent. Nevertheless, on the whole these remained in convergence.

However, I quickly realized, upon rereading *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*, that the word already had a history of its own. In this work, published in 1957, the first head of state of independent Ghana tells anecdotally of how, after having obtained his MA in Philosophy in February 1943 at the University of Pennsylvania, he had immediately undertaken a doctoral thesis in "ethno-philosophy" at the same university. The word was uttered without further explanation. "Ethno-philosophy" was thus the name of a subject, of an academic discipline, and could, in the eyes of the author, be understood on its own. Meanwhile, Nkrumah points out that the thesis remained unfinished until 1945, the year that he left for England.

\*This article includes partial excerpts from the author's work in press: Paulin J. Hountondji, *Combats pour le sens: Un itinéraire africain*, Cotonou: Flamboyant (forthcoming).

In a lecture presented to the Sorbonne on 23 May 1987, for the Société française de philosophie, I mentioned this occurrence of the English word *ethno-philosophy* in Nkrumah's work. I recognized that this neologism must have been connected to the growth, during this period in the United States, of what today are called the ethno-sciences. Ethno-philosophy could only be "the extension to the domain of thought in general of the inventory of so-called 'primitive' bodies of knowledge, an inventory already undertaken during this period, for the study of plants and animals, by two pilot disciplines: ethnobotany and ethnozoology" (Hountondji, "Le particulier").<sup>1</sup>

The critique of Tempels's project was no newer than the word *ethnophilosophy* in the late 1960s. In the *Diogène* article, I had mentioned Césaire's reaction, in the *Discours sur le colonialisme*, which I qualified as political, and the critique of Belgian logician Franz Crahay, which was of a more theoretical nature. In addition, I made mention at that time of the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek's commentary, and the entire debate that Tempels's book solicited upon its publication, both in Belgium and in the former Belgian Congo, and to which Father Smet had called attention. In particular, I considered the articles by Fathers Boelart and de Sousberghe to be remarkable. It was necessary to do justice to these precursors, to appreciate their contribution at its full value, simultaneously with the attempt to appropriate, enrich, and draw all possible conclusions from it with maximum rigor (see Césaire; Crahay; p'Bitek; Smet; Boelart; de Sousberghe).

I thus concluded that neither the word *ethnophilosophy* nor the critique of the corresponding project, was new: "What is new . . . is neither the word nor the thing, but the conjunction of the word and the thing, the usage of the term 'ethnophilosophy' to designate no longer a future project or science, but a discipline in the process of construction, the initial forays of which immediately raised doubts regarding its viability and theoretical consistency; consequently, this usage was no longer prospective and optimistic, but rather retrospective and polemical."

With the proper chronological perspective having been established, it remained to be seen what meaning Nkrumah himself ascribed to the term. I was unable to ascertain this, as I did not dispose for this purpose of a single text relating to this author's thesis, nor, clearly, of the thesis itself. Nevertheless, having recognized that this word referred to the generic concept of ethno-science, I could not avoid a question concerning the relations between ethnophilosophy and the other domains of ethno-science, between ethnophilosophy and philosophy, thus concerning the status of ethnophilosophy and its articulations with other disciplines, its presuppositions, its theoretical and ideological underpinnings, its range and its limits.

In order to respond to this question, I needed first to focus on the very notion of ethnosience. The simple enumeration of the disciplines that pass today for subcategories of this domain suffices to bring to light an essential ambiguity. If ethnosience is in fact defined, in the most classic case, as an inventory of preexisting knowledge (thus ethnobotany, ethnozoology, ethnobiology, ethnominalogy, etc., are understood to be the inventory of knowledge about plants, animals, living things, minerals, etc., in civilizations based on orality), there is another usage of the word that

designates rather the application of a given science to the study of a particular aspect of so-called "primitive" culture. Thus ethnolinguistics is not the study of some indigenous linguistic theory, but rather the application of modern linguistics to the ways of speaking observable in oral traditions. Ethnodemography also is not an inventory of preexisting demographic knowledge, but the application to supposedly primitive peoples of theories and methods of investigation handed down by demography. These two uses are irreducible and the ambiguity insuppressible: "In the first example, ethno-science passes for a descriptive knowledge, a knowledge of pure restitution, a kind of knowledge about a kind of knowledge . . . . In the second case, by contrast, one is faced with an active knowledge, a knowledge of a practice that is itself supposed to be unconscious, a construction for which the ethnologist alone remains responsible" ("Le particulier" 151).

The ambiguity thus recognized requires the positing of a question, that of the location of knowledge. Where, in fact, does this knowledge reside? Where does this theoretical construction operate in order to produce a corpus? In the very culture being examined? Or in the work of the ethnologist? While pointing out that things are never that simple, and that aside from a few extreme cases an ethno-science is always, necessarily, an original construction of the ethnologist that accounts for preexisting "indigenous theories," while recognizing "that at base, the knowledge resides nowhere, or rather it is everywhere, on both sides," in perpetual circulation, passing incessantly "from the culture-object to the erudite corpus of anthropologists providing, in certain cases, that a new task of theoretical elaboration be undertaken" (152), I persisted in raising the question by formulating it more specifically: "How, according to what modalities, why, in whose interests does this circulation of knowledge operate? Where does it end? Is there a complete circulation . . . a final return to the point of departure, or on the contrary dispossession, an irrevocable leakage?" (152).

These questions, which seemed alien to Nkrumah, appeared to me unavoidable. In order finally to shed light on the critique of ethnophilosophy, it was necessary to inquire into the status, the range, and the limits of ethno-science, its theoretical and practical effects, its actual relation to the fields of knowledge for which it claims to account, its place within the general economy of modern science. It was necessary to examine the origin, the mode of functioning, the mode of transmission and the development of "traditional" forms of knowledge and of other so-called indigenous theories, their place in the ensemble of intellectual practices and techniques in Africa and elsewhere, their actual relation to official science, within and outside of ethno-science, their current vocation, their destiny.

Neither during the lecture itself nor in the extended version that was published could I draw all the possible consequences of this inquiry into the uses of the word "ethnoscience." The intention, however, was clear. The semantic play was indicative of an unresolved question, or more precisely of a repressed question. By identifying this question as I had just done, I found, at the heart of ethnoscience in general and in its areas of specialization, the same ambiguity observable in ethnophilosophy. Further, I suggested that the logical relation of the two was probably the inverse of

their chronological relation, and that ethnophilosophy, making a late appearance on the scientific landscape after other ethnosciences, is logically anterior to them. Daughter of ethno-science, ethnophilosophy would thus also in a certain sense be the mother. It is "the common foundation of the ethno-sciences, the system of theoretical and methodological presuppositions, indeed of the ideological presuppositions that render them possible, and the point of intersection at which all of the difficulties of ethno-science become crystallized and visible to the naked eye" (153).<sup>2</sup>

I went no further. I could not continue to gloss a thesis that I had not read. William Abraham, author of *The Mind of Africa* and the rumored co-actor of Nkrumah's *Consciencism*, had simply assured me in 1982 that this thesis did indeed exist.<sup>3</sup> It was only recently, in May of 1996, when I was in California visiting Stanford University, that I was able to obtain the copy, stamped "confidential," that William Abraham himself had procured from Ghana's National Archives, and which included the following remark on the first page: "This copy is supplied on the condition that no reproduction of it by any photographic process may be made without permission of the chief archivist."

The word that interests us here appears first in the title: "Mind and Thought in Primitive Society. A Study in Ethnophilosophy with Special Reference to the Akan Peoples of the Gold Coast, West Africa." The document contains a total of 226 pages, the majority of them typewritten, 7 of which are numbered with Roman numerals, 212 of them bearing Arabic numbers from 1 to 212, and an appendix containing three pages of handwritten diagrams pertaining to the tribal State, the army and the tribal organization of the Akan, and four pages of summary and acknowledgments.

From the preface forward, the author expresses reservations regarding the word "primitive," which, like its synonym "uncivilized," is "a vague and meaningless one" to the extent that the peoples thus qualified possess their own, at times highly complex customs and thus constitute a culture. It is thus in a very special sense, free of all pejorative connotations, that the word is used in this thesis, "to designate something that is primeval, original and has not been exposed to any outside influence, or modified into something more complex." Thus he will not follow on the evolutionist prejudices inspired by Tylor and so brilliantly refuted by Franz Boas and his followers.

The goal of the thesis is precisely to show, in opposition to commonly received notions about prelogical mentality, the fundamental identity of the human race. Nkrumah wished to

postulate a synthetic ethno-philosophy by which problems of anthropology will not only concern themselves with the reconstruction of human history, the determination of types of historical phenomena and their sequences, or the dynamics of change, but but an endeavor to go beyond these, into the basic and fundamental meanings underlying all cultures so as to arrive at a basic *Weltanschauung*, by which mankind may realize that even though race, language and culture may be separate and distinct entities yet

they are *one* in the sense that there is but one race: *The Homo Sapiens*. (vi-vii)

After the preface, the introduction develops three points: 1) Anthropology and the peoples of primitive societies; 2) Basis and reason for ethnophilosophy; 3) Boundaries of modern philosophy.

The body of the text is organized into five chapters grouped in three parts. The first part, devoted to "The Theories of Mind," analyzes the very notions of mind and thought and the question of the relations between the individual and the group. It refers to discussions arising from psychology, philosophy, epistemology, sociology, and anthropology, among other disciplines, and includes two chapters.

The second part is entitled: "Primitive Mind in Society," and includes chapter III on "Mind and Thought in Social Organization," and chapter IV, on "Mind and Thought in Political Organization." This second part no longer proposes solely a clarification of concepts, but a study of Akan society, from the triple viewpoint of social anthropology (chapter III, section I), cultural anthropology (chapter III, section II) and political anthropology (chapter IV).

The third part is entitled: "Mind and Philosophy in Primitive Life and Culture." While again refuting the sophistry and incoherence of doctrines of prelogism, this part aims to bring out the philosophy of Akan culture, with a particular focus on the conception of man, educational practices and their theoretical bases, philosophy and religion, ideas of God and immortality, and Akan esthetics.

The conclusion repeats the call for a joining of anthropology and philosophy, indispensable for a less fragmentary, more synthetic perception of the facts and data of ethnology. It reaffirms the fundamental identity of the constitution and psychic processes of the so-called "civilized" individual and the so-called "primitive" individual, the latter being always already a fully rational human being, and the former, sometimes, a primitive who does not recognize himself as such.

This would not be the proper place to further analyze or comment on this text. I cannot, however, avoid one question: would I have formulated my critique of ethnophilosophy had I known earlier of Nkrumah's thesis, or if, having read his *Autobiography* more attentively, I had only remarked the existence in his work of such a project? Must I admit that in this case, as sometimes happens, ignorance will have been more fruitful and productive than an excess of information?

This question is not as difficult as it appears. The critique of ethnophilosophy was no doubt facilitated by what must be called the naïveté of an author like Tempels, who thought he was doing philosophy when in reality he was doing ethnophilosophy; and by the naïveté of his cohort of disciples. But beyond this naïveté, something else was at stake: namely, the total silence surrounding the possibility of a living philosophy, of a plural philosophy in the societies appropriated by the ethnologist, the stated or tacit belief that for such societies only an ethnophilosophy passing for philosophy was thinkable, in other words a type of discourse constructed by

the ethnologist and impossible without his/her active intervention. Thrown into question was the unanimist hypothesis that, whether explicitly or not, effectively erased all internal tensions, neutralized all dialectical contradictions in the intellectual heritage of cultures of orality, and discounted entirely, as the case may be, their known written traditions. Under question above all was the strategy of exclusion which instated the ethnologist as a spokesperson for an ensemble of peoples, in order to express for them that which was supposed, wrongly, impossible for themselves to express, and, even more severely, the fact that the African intellectual, anthropologist or philosopher, perpetuated and reinforced this strategy in setting himself up, in his turn, as the spokesperson whose task it was to reveal the treasures of his own culture to the external world.

Nkrumah's thesis does not resolve these troubling problems. In spite of its coherence and conceptual solidity, which would suffice to distinguish it brilliantly from a good number of published works, one question needs to be asked in order to situate this thesis in relation to our current preoccupation: to whom is it addressed? There can be no doubt regarding the answer. By virtue of its very object and of all the energy deployed in the task of refuting the clever falsities (for it is thusly that Nkrumah considers them) of Tylor, Frazer, and Lévy-Bruhl regarding animism, magic, prelogical mentality, and other prejudices of the same kind disseminated in the Occident, Nkrumah's thesis clearly addresses itself to a non-African public. It is on this public that it attempts to act. It attempts to have an impact on Western opinions, and not on those of Akan or African communities. This is indeed a form of extroversion that is not tied to an accidental circumstance like the language of expression, in this case English, or other factors of the same kind, but to the very object of discourse. It is this form of extroversion that precisely characterizes not only ethnophilosophy, but ethnoscience in general, when these are appropriated by intellectuals and the peoples in question themselves.

It is perhaps not by accident that, beyond his abbreviated stay in the United States and his political activities in Great Britain, beyond his battle for the independence of the Gold Coast and his election first as Prime Minister, then as President of the new Republic of Ghana, while he never ceased to voice his thoughts and to write through all these turns of events, Nkrumah never resolved to publish this thesis. Scheduling difficulties, urgent preparations for the Pan-African Conference at Manchester cannot by themselves explain this refusal. Nkrumah liked to publish, and he had an excellent editing staff during his political career. It would thus not be unreasonable to consider that once he was fully engaged in political life, he was no longer equally interested in this type of argumentation, and must have considered work on scholarly opinion, and by ricochets on public opinion in the West, to be a rear-guard battle. From this point forward, priorities were elsewhere: at home, in work on and including the "masses," in efforts to mobilize them according to necessary developments.

As far as philosophy was concerned, it would no longer be useful, in Nkrumah's eyes, to pursue the sophisms of others, but rather to propose to his own compatriots a "philosophy and (an) ideology for decolonization



and development." *Consciencism* will contribute to this new project. The work of 1964 would continue to facilitate, in its own way, as I have shown, the unanimist prejudice. At least it would no longer be as massively extroverted as this thesis, which remained unfinished for more than simply accidental reasons.

—trans. by Roland Racevskis

---

## NOTES

1. I had not at all attempted, at the time, a systematic study of the concept of ethnoscience. Meanwhile, some such works were in existence, though I did not yet know of them. I did, on the other hand, take pleasure in reading a small collection of interviews, published a few years later by Ruth Scheps, which included specific remarks on the origins of the concept and the term, given by Jacques Barreau, Professor at the National Museum of Natural History. Botany seems to have been the first of the natural sciences to be given the prefix *ethno-*, from 1895 forward, by an American agronomist and botanist named J. W. Harshberger. The more recent *ethnozoology* would appear to date from 1914. The generic term *ethnoscience* can be traced to the 1950s, when a team of young ethnologists launched it in order to promote a "new ethnography," taking pains to develop under this aegis a methodical study of "popular" knowledge and know-how, which they also called *folk-science*. I am indebted to V. Y. Mudimbe for having approached the question in a more systematic fashion. In 1992, from Duke University where he was teaching at the time, he sent me a list of ten terms for which he requested entries, to be included in his forthcoming Encyclopedia of African Religions and Philosophy. Who would refuse anything to Mudimbe? Alas, this was nonetheless one of the many promises that I have never been able to keep to this day, except for one of the ten articles: "ethnoscience." I was thus able to discover, or, as the case may have been, to rediscover a few important works on ethnoscience, sometimes within works of ethnoscience, such as the articles by W. Sturtevant and M. Fournier, the books published under the direction of Dell Hymes in the United States and Geneviève Calame-Griaule in France, the pages devoted by Nicole Revel to the history and to the theory of the discipline, in her erudite thesis on Palawan natural history, or the seminal book by Peter Murdock, in which the word *ethnoscience* was formally used for the first time in 1950. As I continue to benefit from these works, I see in them, on the one hand, the confirmation of the priority of certain ethnosciences in relation to ethnophilosophy, but also, on the other hand, the necessity of zeroing in more precisely on the meaning of the generic term *ethnoscience*. In 1943, this was not yet a common term in the American scientific vocabulary. This circumstance, however, does not throw the basis of my analysis into question. We will simply say that Nkrumah attempted, in the early '40s, and with the approval of his thesis advisor, E. A. Singer, to promote a new discipline—ethnophilosophy—in taking as a model certain areas of specialization already recognized in cultural anthropology, notably ethnobotany, ethnozoology, and ethnobiology, of which the generic concept would only appear formally at a later time (see Scheps; Barrea; Sturtevant; Fournier; Hymes; Calame-Griaule; Revel; and Murdock).

2. The information from the preceding note regarding the late appearance of the word *ethnoscience* changes nothing, of course, regarding the general thrust of this thesis. In the absence of the word, the idea of an ethnoscience existed by all accounts across numerous individual disciplines, like ethnobotany and ethnozoology, that abundantly illustrated it.
3. William Abraham, a Ghanaian, as we know, and the former chair of the Philosophy Department at Legon, Accra, was at that time at the University of California-Santa Cruz. He stayed there until his recent retirement. I had the pleasure of having him invited to Düsseldorf by my host in Germany, Alwin Diemer, for a seminar on "Africa and the Problem of Its Identity," while I myself was coming to the end of a stay as a Fellow of the Humboldt Foundation. The acts of this seminar were to be published three years later (see Diemer and Hountondji).

---

### WORKS CITED

- Barrau, Jacques. "Savoirs naturalistes et naissance de l'ethnoscience." *La science sauvage* (1993) 15-27.
- Bitek, Okot p'. " 'Bantu philosophy.' A review of Fr. Tempels's book." *Transition* 13 (1964).
- Boelart, Edmond-Eloi. "La Philosophie bantoue selon le R.P. Placide Tempels." *Aequatoria* (Coquilhatville) 9 (1946): 81-90. Rpt. in A. J. Smet. *Philosophie africaine: textes choisis I, II et bibliographie sélective*. 2 vols. Kishasa: Presses Universitaires du Zaïre, 1975.
- Calame-Griaule, Geneviève, ed. *Langage et cultures africaines. Essais d'ethnolinguistique*. Paris: Maspéro, 1977.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Discours sur le colonialisme*. Paris: Reclame, 1950.
- Crahay, Franz. "Le décollage conceptuel: conditions d'une philosophie bantoue." *Diogenes* 52 (1965): 61-84.
- Diemer, Alwin, and Paulin J. Hountondji, eds. *Afrika und das Problem seiner Identität—Africa and the problem of its identity—L'Afrique et le problème de son identité*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1985.
- Fournier, M. "Réflexions théoriques et méthodologiques à propos de l'ethnoscience." *Revue française de sociologie* 12 (1971): 459-82.
- Hountondji, Paulin J. "Remarques sur la philosophie africaine contemporaine." *Diogenes* 71 (1970): 120-40.
- . "Le particulier et l'universel." *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 81.4 (1987): 145-89.
- Hymes, Dell H., ed. *Language in Culture and Society: A Reader in Linguistics and Anthropology*. New York: Harper, 1964.
- Murdock, George Peter. *Outline of Cultural Materials*. 3rd rev. ed. New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1950.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. "Mind and Thought in Primitive Society. A Study in Ethnophilosophy with Special Reference to the Akan Peoples of the Gold Coast, West Africa." Unpublished thesis, 1945.
- . *The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1957.
- . *Consciencism*. New York: Monthly Review P, 1964.
-



- Revel, Nicole. *Fleurs de paroles: histoire naturelle palawan. I- Les dons de Nogsamad*. Paris: Peeters-SELAF, 1990.
- Scheps, Ruth, ed. *La science sauvage: des savoirs populaires aux ethnosciences*. Paris: Seuil, 1993.
- Smet, A. J. "Les débuts de la controverse autour de 'La philosophie bantoue' du P. Tempels. Quelques lettres inédites." *Revue africaine de théologie* 5.10 (1981): 165-81.
- Sousberghe, Léon de. "A propos de la philosophie bantoue." *Zaire* 5 (1951): 821-28.
- Sturtevant, W. "Studies in ethnoscience." *American Anthropologist* 66.3 (1964): 99-131.
- Towa, Marcien. *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle*. Yaoundé: Clé, 1971.

Copyright of Research in African Literatures is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.