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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 7(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1977

DOI

10.5070/F772017421

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AN INTERVIEW WITH MAZISI KUNENE ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Chipasha Luchembe

Professor Mazisi Kunene is a well-known African scholar who handles the academic, literary and activist roles with consummate ease. Because of his political struggles he has been banned from South Africa. He has spoken on African literature at numerous conferences in Africa, Europe, America and Asia. In all these conferences he has articulated and championed the quality, range and dimension of African thought.

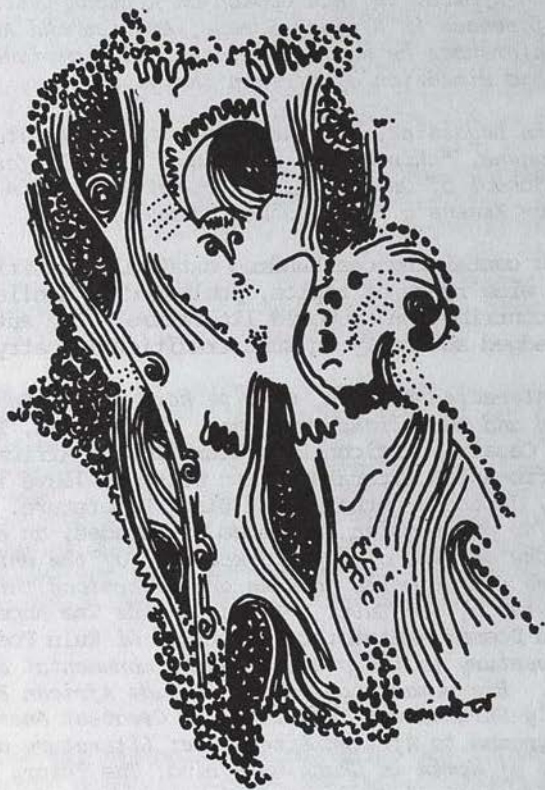
Dr. Martin Legassick, renowned South African historian, proclaimed of Kunene, "this man is a genius." And Professor Rycroft of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London said of Professor Kunene's first volume of poems:

this volume containing one hundred extremely sensitive poems on a wide range of topics, published in English, is a notable contribution to world literature. The author is an acknowledged authority on Zulu traditional poetry.

For our interested readers, we give here a selected list of his published and unpublished writings: Zulu Poems, Introduction to Aime Cesaire, African Literature Today, African Modern Poetry in Afro-Asian Literature, You Better Believe it, Poems of Black Africa, Japanese Anthology of Black Literature. He also has ready for publication an Anthem of Decades, an epoch-making epic on the origins of life, conception of the universe, ethical structure of the world as seen and understood through the theogonic myths of the Zulu. Others include The Ancestors, a sequel to Zulu Poems; A Historical Critique of Zulu Poetry (from the 15th century to the present) and a monumental epic of Shaka the Great. His remarkable essays include African Ethical System and Family Structures; Magolwane the Greatest Ancient Zulu Poet; Background to African Literature; Literature and Resistance; Role of Women in Changing Africa; The Theory of Civilizations; Ideological Basis of African Literature.

The list goes on. One has to read Professor Kunene's works or hear him speak to be convinced that here is an illustrious and meritorious son of Africa who is opening new vistas of literature to Africa. In September 1974, by public acclaim, he was one of two African authors invited to address a UNESCO Conference on African literature in Helsinki.

We are glad to publish this interview so that his voice can be heard. As he would characteristically say "Let the people speak and be heard."



Ufahamu: When we discuss philosophy what are we talking about?

Kunene: That's a very difficult question which is particularly complicated by the fact that we're talking of two different societies. We are using the English language some of whose concepts have molded our thinking. So to define African philosophy in a foreign language is in itself one of the problems of our discussion. Some of the concepts which may be very significant to the African society may sound very common place if they're phrased in the English language. It is the same kind of thing if you were to go to Africa and translate some of the philosophies of Europe—Kant, Leibnitz or whatever—to any of our people. They would most likely say 'what nonsense is this?' or 'what use is all this talk about transcendental knowledge, transcendental aestheticism and all those things? They are of no use.' That is precisely because the philosophy expressed is inherent in the economic and political structure of the European society. It expresses particularly that it is, in my view, a summary of a type of thinking which does not have any immediate function. A man can sit and say "I'm a philosopher," and this is particularly true of universities where people sit and say "My function is to philosophize, to define things, to look around and see the relationship that exists in the cosmic factors," but that is not the case in African societies. The African point-of-view fundamentally requires that such a person must not only define life mentally but must experience it and express the experience. So that the philosophy itself must have a relationship to the functioning of the society. I think that's a fundamental difference between European and African philosophy. Of course one must mention that early European philosophy, particularly the Greek philosophy originates from African philosophy. The Greeks derived a lot of their philosophy from Egypt where they were taught by the Egyptian people who were African. This went through periods of modification because the structure of society in Europe was changing, taking different forms and it had to respond to those different forms.

U. Is there any way we can then express what philosophy is?

K. It depends upon the point-of-view. It can be a reflection on life without any immediate need to use that body of reflection. But the reflection must be fundamental and profound enough to deal with life in a context of timelessness. You're not just talking about what to use a cup for, but you're talking about man, life and those relationships that are much more fundamental. But of course some people feel that this is a total waste of time and I think judging from some of the things that come out of the academic world which claim to be examinations of the truth they are quite right, they're a total waste of time. Language can actually be cut up and turned into different kinds of units and people can argue about a cup until doomsday.

On the other hand, philosophy can be quite a profound examination of life, a reflection on its meaning. Most of the philosophies are contained in mythologies, in the beliefs of people about life or even in their own image of the world.

U. Professor Kunene, do you think there is such a thing as European philosophy? And if there isn't, are we really right to look for an African philosophy?

K. Your question is very important. There has always been the tendency to compare Europe and Africa. As you know Africa is a continent, a very vast continent. And Europe is really a very small region...actually an extension of the Asiatic land mass. Owing to recent nationalisms which have arisen in Europe, she has tended to be defined in comparison with some very big and elaborate beliefs on the African continent. I think it is possible to talk of European philosophy in terms of history, because you can actually talk of its growth from the Greeks and the philosophers that arose--German and Germanic philosophers and some philosophers of England. Because Europe is, as I said, actually quite a small region, its quite possible to travel through its entire length in one day. Human beings in this region have a more or less common history--as in Nigeria for instance, would have in future a more or less common history. Or even West Africa which is larger than Europe. So ideas have tended in Europe to travel quite fast and fashions have tended to be passed on quite easily, especially in academic circles. In the period of Kantian philosophies there were other philosophers in different universities in the same region who argued against or for Kant. But in Africa you have a different situation. One is talking of a very vast continent, so you have to talk of different philosophies of the continent. However, although the continent is so vast it has one very great advantage which other continents do not have--accessibility within itself. You can actually travel in the African continent right through, up and down. Whereas in other continents this is made difficult by inaccessible mountains and so on. In Africa people have travelled from the north to the south and east to west, so that although it is a big continent you have to accept that there are certain fundamental, common beliefs which have operated throughout the continent. You can go to many parts of north Africa and still get a similar kind of response as you'd expect in the southern part. So that when we talk of philosophies we're talking of the emphasis that exists in different regions. In the nationally different regions we have had different histories according to different economic circumstances. The Saharas had an impact which produced a kind of land scarcity and a certain kind of economic or political history. The plentifulness of land in central Africa, produced a different kind of phenomena--a different kind of fundamental belief.

U. So, we can then say that African philosophy studies the fundamental beliefs common to different African societies?

K. Yes, you can approach it that way. But you see, fundamental beliefs should not be defined in terms of the symbols that are used, because the symbols will naturally differ. There is, in West Africa for instance, an emphasis on the individual gods such as Ogun, among the Yoruba, which doesn't exist in southern Africa where there's a belief in the importance of the ancestors. Yet the belief in the ancestors is found not only in the south and the north but in the east and the west part of Africa. I don't mean this as a casual phenomena but as a very important phenomena in relation to the society. And so, rather than to ask whether there is a phenomena of gods in West Africa and none in other parts of Africa, you should ask, what is the function of the gods in West Africa, what is their role, what aspect are they meant to emphasize in society? Because you are starting from the position that there is a fundamental layer of belief which is African and I truly, deeply believe that there is, having experienced many different parts of the African continent.

U. It seems you concentrate on looking at the functions of fundamental beliefs in the life of the people?

K. I do, because you're dealing then with a different direction. In Europe they developed a cult of specialists, who produced people that concentrated on nothing but just to reflect! But in addition to reflecting they participate very immediately in the general functioning of the society. Their reflections are therefore never too distant from the overall drama of life. I think African philosophy is very close, in terms of strategy to Chinese philosophy. Both of them aim at using knowledge not in the pursuit of it as an end in itself, but in putting it to practical use. That's why when Westerners look at Chinese philosophy--they say "but this is not philosophy--its just a lot of statements about what people should do. They are moral statements." Many of the philosophies from the African continent also sound like moral statements in translation. Now we know they are not moral statements because African societies are very secular. They're not geared to a lot of fantasizing for its own end, but to concrete systems that relate to the functioning of society.

U. Is philosophy the study of the function of knowledge or the pursuit of knowledge?

K. I think the function of philosophy is the pursuit of knowledge. I thought that was really the key aspect--the pursuit of knowledge, for its own sake.

U. You mean in Europe?

K. Yes. You must remember that African society is a human society composed of people, human beings, and European society is also composed of human beings. There are certain directions and emphases which originate from histories, some are negative and some are positive. So long as they do not ultimately produce the maximum beneficial results for the society itself, it is necessary for each society, African, Indian or otherwise learn from the beliefs and strategies of other societies. Society can do that not necessarily by leaving its way of life but by actually learning the principles that can be applied to itself. There are a lot of things that European societies must learn from the African societies. Similarly there are some things that African societies must learn from the European societies.

U. I have a question about the method of learning those things. If its hard to express African thoughts in English, how can Europeans learn them?

K. Well, the limitation in expression doesn't mean that we are unable to learn the way of life of the Europeans. Sometimes we learn by pure observation which eliminates the problem of language. If we are interested enough in finding out how a particular society functions we can do so even if we are limited in our knowledge of its language. What is difficult in terms of defining African philosophy in English is the use of words. As I said some of the words sound extremely moralistic when translated into English, something like "love your neighbors, love yourself" which is an ideal Christian viewpoint or philosophy. In the African context, however, the relationship between families is taken for granted to such an extent that when somebody says you must love your neighbors, it is not a moral statement. It means that somebody has done something negative against the neighbors. So even if you don't have the instruments of expressing the philosophies of other people accurately you still can observe and feel the absence in their own style of life of something the other society has been able to meet.

U. How about transferring that knowledge through literature, such as plays, poetry and stories?

K. Well, knowledge can be transmitted in various ways. What we're doing now, exchanging ideas is one of them. It's not necessarily that it should be formalized and called philosophy.

U. Professor Kunene, one thing still puzzles me about what you said earlier. None of us here is of Greek or Latin extraction, yet we can claim to have read Plato and Aristotle in English not in Greek or Latin. Are you then saying that we haven't understood Plato and Aristotle because we read them in translations? Does it mean that nobody, except the Greek or somebody

who reads Aristotle in the original has really understood him?

K. I did not understand myself to have said that--this may be the problem of language again. I understand myself to have said the exact opposite--that we can have a glimpse into the Greek society or into Socratic or Platonic philosophy either by observing how that society functioned or by studying Greek history and some of the literature by Homer and other Greek writers. Putting all this together we can have a general understanding of the philosophy. And I only said that the language itself is a limitation in so far as it does not fully define for us the various strategies of the society. This does not mean that we cannot fully experience by observation how that society lives. But speaking of understanding fully the philosophy of Socrates I doubt if you can really claim to do so just by reading him. It seems to me that Socrates and Platonic philosophy are not only a body of knowledge but also the function of a particular society. As an African, I strongly doubt you understand the totality of the strategies of that philosophy. Sometimes you may say that you do--academically you may feel that you do--but you may not really comprehend it fully. I've met many Africans who have said, well this philosophy is really quite childish--it's not philosophy at all. It's crippling. And so I think the forms of knowledge of the society must be learned and understood in the context of, not in isolation to the society since they define how the society functions and intends to function. Each philosophy defines a society's present and the strategy of its future.

U. From your definitions of African philosophy what do you think underpins African thinking with regards to the individual and the family?

K. This is a rather difficult thing to express in English. I wonder if you could translate it mentally, in your own mind, into an African language so that you can really see what you're saying. As you know the size of the African continent necessitates that Africans create societies whose whole concept of life arises out of the immensity of the African continent. To them life is in a state of continual expansion. The unit itself is the potential that contains many possibilities realizable only if they expand outwards. So that the center itself is only important as a point of reference. Now if you translate that into the role of the individual in a family, African belief doesn't put the emphasis on the biological individual. The biological individual is not central. He does not make society. Neither does a biological family constitute a family. If, for instance a mother and father and their children are walking down the street with loads on their heads, people would not ask where is that family going to? Rather they would say, where are those people going to? Because those people are not a

family although biologically they may be one. They are not in the region which is definable as a region of their family--that is the family as a kin unit. And so they are only potentials, not central, because the center actually is the family as a whole. So there is a fallacy, for instance in the definition of the African family as extended family. It is not extended. It is the family as it is defined by Africans. This is why the African in looking at the European asks with surprise, this is a family? Where are the rest? Where are the others? The uncles? The cousins? Someone may then say "oh, we have those... but they are remote." How can an uncle be remote? How can a Brother be remote? How can someone be remote or distant? You are either a member of the central unit, that is, a relative or an outsider, which doesn't mean there is hostility to you as an outsider. I think that this goes into defining the African concept of life in which the universe is seen not as some confined region but as one that is always expanding. Africans would not be surprised if you told them that there are people in Mars or other planets--in fact they feel that there should be--because that is how life is--life is always expanding from the minimum. And the maximum is inconsiderable, an endless point as opposed to the European belief where it is possible to confine things to certain categories. "O.k.," they would say, "as far as the family is concerned this is the limit. Beyond this you have intermediate stages--immediate relatives, remote relatives..."

U. Speaking of the individual himself, what do you see as his embodiment? In other words what attributes concretize him?

K. African philosophy recognizes that there are people who are biologically individual. But it wants to go beyond that. It wants to define you in relation to a much more closely knit potential of the individual. That is, the family not as a biological unit but that kind of unit which we call the family on the African continent. So it's very difficult to answer that question because I don't think African philosophy has itself gone into the definition of the individual as much as the European philosophy has. In fact, I think that the concentration on the individual by European philosophers is a much later phenomenon. It's not something that has always been a European belief. It describes more the confrontation between the merchants and the aristocracy, or rather the confrontation between people who have no rights and those who have all the rights. It seems to me to be a description of that kind of phenomena.

U. I have two questions. First, what really does the African philosophy as you conceive it, say about the relationship between the community and the individual? Some people have thought that when you have answered that question you have got something that distinguishes the African from the European way of looking at the community and the individual. Secondly, is

there, in your view, any significant difference between what Marx says about the community and the individual and your own view of how the community and the individual are related in African philosophy?

K. I think I tried to emphasize that the individual does exist in African society...either philosophically—that is in the sense the society requires to define how this individual must relate to other individuals in society, or as a biological phenomenon, because that's a reality. As a biological phenomena the individual gets most attention from society when he or she is unable to cope. So, the society says what should be done should the individual fail to function within the group. There are various solutions which African societies advocate that are not acceptable in European societies, especially in dealing with mental patients. Should the individual be biologically defective, crippled or old, no longer able to function at a maximum creates a philosophical function which is no longer definable in terms of the biological potential. This philosophical role that the individual can no longer function biologically is as important in the African society as the biological potential—they are both extremely important. Sometimes the philosophical position of the individual is regarded as extremely central—so central that the individual is given almost a sacred status. The question that you're asking is how does this belief in the role of the individual differ from Marx. Let me see. I think you are aware of course that African society is very old. Africa has been settled for a long time and some of the things which are regarded as radical in the younger society of Europe are things which are already normal beliefs in Africa. And so what Marx said at that time is a critique or evaluation of the function of European society as seen by him. And the remedies he suggested already exist in Africa. But there's a different dimension which you have to look into in the case of Marx. It is the existence of a large population concentrated in the towns who are there as potential labor units. This is not the case in the African continent. So that although there are coincidental points of belief or definition between these two ways of looking at things, there are some differences which are specific, which are created by the conditions which existed in Europe at the time. And so I think one should always go back to examine the original base of conversion. Of course we cannot compare a continent with the expostulations of an individual. There are some things that coincide but there are those that don't and some things are responses to the needs that exist in Europe but not in the African continent.

U. If I may go back a little bit before Marxism. What do you think is the impact of the two main religions—Christianity and Islam—on African thought?

K. You know of course that these two main religions originated from a region which is within the cultural base of the African continent. That is, in the area which is called Middle East, which is not really "middle east" but actually the meeting point between the Asian and African populations. You know, of course that the Christianity of Europe is different from Christianity as it was originally. Christianity has gone through various changes--nationalism, economy factors and being taken up by the administrators, Roman, Spanish, Dutch, British and so on. It now reflects particular periods of European societies. What was exported into the African continent was never the same thing as the original belief which was similar to the belief in the African continent. Islam is very much a religion that comes from a part of the African continent. It is actually an African belief with only a different dimension. But, it originates from an area which was experiencing a land crisis. So, the individual heroism which combined itself with a belief that people must live in communities tended to produce a contradiction. If you believe that all people are created by and belong to our land and should live in the communities and relate to each other, it is a contradiction if you go and force them to believe in another religion. Separating now what people did with the religion, I think, in terms of its concepts and beliefs, the Islamic religion was much more at home in the African continent. And people merged quite easily--you became a member of the Islamic religion and that's what mattered. But it was not so with Christianity. You were a Christian but you may still be black, green, white, yellow and separate. So, there's a stronger sense of nationalism in the Christian ideology as it is now interpreted in the European situation, whereas Islam still retains a togetherness, a sharing in most social activities. Somebody put it very aptly--the Christians did not practice their Christianity in Africa but their nationalism. The Islamic expansion actually won its converts by practice.

U. Can you enlighten us on the African world view? Some African philosophers have talked about it. Senghor, for example, saw the African as one who sees the world in cosmic harmony. Then there are those who think Africans are synthetic, not analytic thinkers, while others say Africans see everything in terms of religion.

K. Interesting. You realize of course that the last two views have a grain of truth in them. If you define African thought as non-analytic, then you must see the total implication of that definition which is that it is actually purely instinctive and therefore not thought. It is only an emotional reaction to the situations with maybe some kind of guiding nod from where the brain should have been. Its very difficult to define systems of thought before defining the societies they come from. So if you make a statement like 'the African society sees things in

in harmony' it sounds very odd. It is very beautiful. But it is also very odd. Because you have not really analyzed the origin or the consequences of thinking. It seems to me that societies evolved their philosophies not *a priori* (before experience) but from their experience. In European societies an emphasis on analysis is only the glorification of a technique which arises out of the categories of thought, economic and social function of the society. So we can even say that the emphasis on analysis in Europe corresponds to the periods when there is actually a need to define categories of things and possessions. It is related to a crisis of the land, for instance, people begin to want to look for units of knowledge which are themselves not only of philosophical value but have also social and commercial values.

U. I think I agree with you on that. What Senghor calls synthetic thinking, is what you see in Hegel, and Fichte and all those people who came at a time when there wasn't really a requirement for analysis in Germany's rural kind of economy.

K. You must not use that word rural. You must try to use the relationships which are based on the availability of land.

U. I mean an agricultural kind of economy.

K. Land based civilization, it seems to be. The tendency has been since the industrialization of Europe to regard terms describing anything in the land as having negative features in them. "Rural" is in opposition to "urban" which in recent times has been glorified as the high point of European expression.

U. I see your point. But when I say rural or agricultural I mean non-industrial.

K. I understand but I have in mind Senghor's definition of the separation of description--that the African sees things in harmony--and African thoughts are synthetic. There is some truth in that--but if you say it in a language with a different history you have to look for the opposite and the opposite is not often positive. And that is why I say it is better to define first of all what is meant. Senghor's statement does imply that there is no real analysis of thinking?--that there is only a kind of co-agulating function, that the mind only unifies? I think if you're aware that these are not abstracts--abstract structures of the mind which cannot be changed--we know that they arise out of a history of the society. So there is no problem in relating the cosmic harmony which is seen as the point of view of the African in relation to the plentifulness of the land. There is no need for the African to reach that same kind of strategy in his thinking as the European because it does not describe his social or political history. Now,

coming to the people who say that the African sees things from a religious point-of-view, I will say they are not really thinking of the African society. By that statement they are already imposing a system, having created two separate functions—one, the religious strategy and two, the other strategy which is different. But in African society religion does not have the excess of fantasy, it is related to some very concrete functions of society.

U. Why is there no separation in the literature by African writers, between religion and philosophy?

K. The problem is that to publish a book on African philosophy of course you need a market. If you examine most of the ones that have been published, you find they were underwritten by religious groups in Europe. Since these groups are not interested in African philosophy but in the relationships between African philosophy and African religion, that is belief, they tend to sponsor books that deal with the philosophy of African religions. I think one of the problems in the African continent is that anybody who can write, who has been to school, regards himself capable of making profound statements, but that is not necessarily so. I think in the coming years there will be more and more specialization--those people who are capable of expressing philosophical thoughts will do so--and I think one of the most profound philosophical documents I have seen from the African continent is actually a translation by a Frenchman, an anthropologist who went to West Africa and translated everything this man not conditioned by Western values, was saying. Remember of course that the anthropologist is not a scholar. Anthropology is a kind of pseudo-academic way Europe sees other societies. Pseudo because the world-view must be defined by the people themselves, and not some stranger. It is just like Africans coming here to describe how this society came into being.

U. So far you have commented on and criticized other peoples' notions of an African world view, but you haven't given us what you think is the African world view.

K. Yes. It is very difficult. You really cannot define the African world view. You have to deal with the different aspects that constitute its totality. And these aspects have to be forecast on different regions of thinking. Are we talking about the origin of life, the cosmic concepts of love, the African people, what the African people believe in, what they think of the world around them or what they think is its function? We find ourselves defining different things. We have to define the world as a function, as a physical function. We have to define the world as a philosophical union. Then we find ourselves going into the beliefs and say, the world is not now...the world was yesterday...the world will be...and so we have to look at the

importance of the world that was. Now if we discuss the world that was then we have to discuss the religious beliefs. Well, this is a very unfortunate term--to say the religious beliefs--because it is actually the philosophical beliefs that emphasize how the society must be today. So we would say that we are trustees for the next generation. What we have is not ours. It belongs to those who came before and who will come after. Then, you see, we are dealing with one aspect that may exclude a whole number of things--where do we go as African people from this community? What is beyond this region? What is beyond the beyond? What do we conceive as beyond the beyond? That's why I touched earlier on the belief in the expansion of life, because not everybody believes in the expansion of life.

U. There's been various theories on that.

K. Yes. If you define what is our *own* way you make a lot of distortions, a lot of mistakes. And that is also because of our context. Just in the period after being occupied by foreigners, our views, our ideas have been reduced in significance, sometimes even to our own selves. So, we are not talking about ideas that are current--"You can make assumptions about other fields, this is our world view"--do you see what I mean? We need to go into the origins of things, to do a lot of homework and then say, consequently, this is our world view--and our world view differs from people in Europe, from people in India, people in the Americas. But you see we have to come to that conclusion after actually re-emphasizing or restating the factors in our own history. For instance, some people make up elaborate stories about how the world originated. But, I mean, Africans would say, "Nonsense, they were not even there. This is only a tale for children." Africans will not make up elaborate stories because of their own belief. Then the foreigner will come and say, "oh, they did not even have elaborate mythologies." But from the point-of-view of the African, these mythologies are just tales for children. So these different kind of strategies force us to make a much more profound examination of the histories of thought in the African continent. And then afterwards somebody will say "I am now defining the world view of the African." There's no problem now for us I hope, because this world view--we already exist in it--it is part of our heritage. We don't need to succumb to the confusion arising out of a need to define, imposed by the advent of the colonial occupation. The result will be hasty definitions that will confuse us even further.

U. I have found a reluctance amongst wise, old Africans, experienced people, in passing information to the younger ones, especially when you come armed with the paper and the pen or the tape. They would quite readily impart the information to a foreigner, especially a white person, take him into the secret

houses, show him the secret symbols, tell him anything he wants, answer all of his questions, even through an interpreter. Why is this?

K. You were wrong, yourself. Your methods were those of a foreigner and you had become one at that time. That's why people did not respond to you when you were looking for that information. You're an African. Why do you want to know about these things? In a foreigner it is acceptable--he could even be given some information for certain reasons. Did you know in some parts of the African continent there are lots of things that were released by old men immediately after independence--"Now I can talk," they say. "Now I can say." But a lot of information they never release. But your methods--you are an African, you went to the African, you went with a recorder and camera--with this camera you wanted to take pictures. You did not join in your own beliefs, become part of it--you were examining, you were a foreigner in fact at that moment. So it was correct that our people must find it contemptible that we can go to them in the manner of the Europeans. There are ways of knowing by being initiated. Those are the ways that you should learn.

U. But those ways take time.

K. Yes. You are talking, in a hurry, and your mind is already foreignized by that concept of hurry. Of course the foreigners that get these things get summaries, because they're in a hurry, because they don't speak the language and the man is interpreting and so on...But imagine what you could come out with if you're not in a hurry.

U. Since we have learned and been conditioned by European philosophy, do you think we can really write African philosophy the way it should be?

K. You see now, being conditioned is not a biological state of mind--it is a state of learning. What you learn you can unlearn. Once you've discovered that it is wrong--it's an error--you can correct it. Many Africans, even if they go to a university and get conditioned still have the fundamental experience of their own philosophy. If the African people in America still retain the elements of African thinking and thought--how much more those people who are in the African continent? So the conditioning is extremely superficial and the occupation of the African continent is very temporary. The African continent has been occupied for four or five hundred years. This is a very short period of history. It can't destroy all the past contributions that stretch over thousands of years. So when you ask if we can really write African philosophy, you are actually talking about your own fear that you may not be able to

reorganize. But you can reorganize yourself, you can begin to see or create certain significances of thought in your own system. And you can see the big lie that your thought system does not or did not have a significance.

U. Do you think African philosophy can be practised? Most of its exponents seem not to practice it.

K. But you're not talking about people who seriously want to examine it. In the colonial period there emerged a certain group of people who were trained in western institutions and with western responses to questions and they got privileges according or in relation to their training. And so when there's a crisis of liberation in the African continent these people begin to talk very fiercely about how proud they are that they are Africans. Which means that there was a time when they were not proud of it. If you go to a man in the country in Africa and say "I am proud to be an African" he will think you are crazy. So you see we must say that these people reached the stage of being proud to be Africans, but it also creates a kind of duality in their thinking. They may praise the virtues of being African but they live a different style of life. Now that's only because in the course of praising African values they are only protesting that they were not accepted fully by the colonial regime as belonging to that particular group or race. So they had to say I AM PROUD I AM BLACK, because they are people who have been formally alienated from their own culture coming back to it. It is a slow process. Some will succeed, and some will never come back. They will only say "I shall make an attempt to come back" but they never really do. So we must understand ourselves that we are actually at the crossroads of history--not the African continent--but the various thinking peoples of African origin. We must not be in a hurry. We have to spend years to listen to one word. Maybe this one word will be more significant than all the different things what we can learn. So it seems to me we must be able to distinguish those people who are temporary, some of them very important, public figures. Africa is old, and it will be here many centuries hereafter.

U. Most people are surprised when they hear European stories about how Africans exchanged human beings for a piece of cloth, glass beads and distilled spirits. Since there is no doubt that it happened, it poses fundamental questions about African sense of values and yardsticks such as, is a human being worth only a handful of glass beads? Can you comment on that?

K. First of all I think I must very seriously try to diffuse the claim which has been made that Africans sold Africans. This is very dangerous. Somebody comes to the African continent--first of all he wants to trade in normal goods and indeed we sell him goods, including gold. Then he concocts a plan.

Because he wants to use people, in America, in Europe he uses ships which he had specially made to carry thousands of his own people (indentured servants and convicts) to America and exports from the African continent not thousands but millions of people. He does this through various techniques. He captures people sometimes when they are just working in the fields. There are several stories that tell us about this. People in the field are surrounded and captured. He gets some corrupt rulers, especially on the coast who are appointed and armed by him to collaborate with outsiders who are equally bandits to come and take the African people under the pretence of their being invited to a festival on board ship. Then the ship sails away with everybody. This same person comes afterwards to distort history and say "the fault was not mine. These people sold you to me." I mean it is incredible. It is adding insult to injury especially since we neither sanctioned nor glorified the bandit armies of the corrupt rulers on the coast. I would like to emphasize one thing...amounts, quantities and the like become significant in the process of exchange. There is a description of an amount which is purely social, not for trade, but just purely descriptive. This description or measurement must depend on the society. For instance there's been trade in gold going on in this early period between west and north Africa. The value of gold was not naturally as high to the Africans as it was to the Europeans. It did not have the same kind of importance and yet they were able to establish a point of significance and say okay, we can exchange so much quantity for that. Obviously Europeans were bargaining for it...in terms of what the Europeans were using the gold for they were getting more, but gold itself was not important to Africans. It was more a thing for decoration. People in West Africa up to this day put on bracelets and gold rings. They've got so much gold. A girl wearing earrings of gold and so on, is safer in the streets of a West African city or village than those in a European city. In Europe she may never get to her house because of the high value of gold in that society. So now measurements describe things that have value. And the value of things depend on the social and economic history of that particular society. For instance, we know that a shirt is of no value, but what some of the missionaries used to do in South Africa to build up the sense of demand for clothes, for shirts, was to a shirt the prize of winning a race involving many people. And so there would be only one person in the whole reason who has a shirt, and the value of that shirt would be very high because there's only one of it. So the measurements in the African continent can not be the same as in Europe. Europe is not a continent it is only a promontory of the Asian continent. And for that reason trade became very important because they had to feed the population that was sedimented in a small area.

U. As a result of our western schooling we have come to be influenced by the European notion of the separation of the body, the mind and the spirit. How does this relate to the African thinking?

K. I would doubt very much that is part of our thinking. Maybe it is part of our vocabulary in English. But you must always try to think in your own language and see whether it is so or not. The separation of course originates from the social and political history of Europe. The emphasis on the soul, the disembodiment and recreation of the person as in the east, is the fantasy. So you have, for instance, the European god, that is the ultimate creator. He could be created, rather fantasized into existence, but this is not the case in the African continent. The actual ultimate creator cannot be represented. Gods can be represented because gods are in fact in their history people who may have lived as ancestors long ago. But it is not possible to represent the ultimate creator. You see a difference in the strategy of thinking...the European way of thinking tends to create a reality. The fantasy is in itself a separate reality. But this is not the case with the nature of fantasy in the African continent. The fantasy is anchored—it is not separated, not disembodied from the society. So the fantasy and the ideal become kind of related to each other. So when you talk of the mind and body—these ideas existed in the African continent. People said that people have got the mind and the body. And they separated the other persona, who survives after this person has died, has decayed. So, the people who are no longer alive possess the qualities of themselves when they were alive. They become the ancestors, the people who came before. If they were heroes they become very important ancestors, points of reference that arose out of the society. They are not angels—they are not people who have been made up—they are concrete people whose history can still, in some cases, be traced. In African society the soul exists only as a complementary persona. One persona complements the other. When the totality of the reality now is destroyed, the other persona continues to function, continues to exist in a different kind of reality. In the case of Europe, creating life after death, with fantastic trumpets and music, even describing the life as if in fact it existed, as if they actually had seen it, that's only a fantasy transferring itself into reality. It is in the same way that they concretize and make real the mythologies about the origin of life. Again I think that describes the history of their society, describes the degree of their need to have a separate reality. And that degree of need, I think, would arise if the present reality is not very satisfactory. And so you find in the colonial period, for instance, even in Africa people begin to live the fantasy and make the fantasy into reality even at the expense of the reality that exists now.

U. Can you enlighten us on some African beliefs of how the world came about?

K. There is no uniform African belief--there are various beliefs. But what is uniform, what is common to all the beliefs is that whatever speculation is expressed about the creation of the world is mere speculation. It cannot be elaborated in detail. You cannot say 'on such-and-such a day this was what happened.' The descriptions of the origins of life are either tales for children or very serious restatements of what must be permanent in the society. For instance, one tale of the origin of life involves a salamander and the chameleon. The chameleon was the first to be sent by God to tell humankind that it must live forever. But the chameleon was very slow. In the meantime the creator changed his mind and sent the lizard to tell humankind that they must die. With incredible speed the lizard rushed to earth and told man he is going to die. So when the chameleon came later on and said "you are going to live", man said, "listen we're not interested in your story." This is a good story and a very important one. It describes the relationship between speed, which symbolizes death and the timelessness of life which moves very slowly, (as you the chameleon move very slowly and has the ability to see all around the universe.

It also describes the permanent cycle of life. We are only in the inner cycle, like the lizard, which goes with great speed, but the permanent cycle itself goes on and on, very slowly. Thus in many of these African mythologies, you can find a very fundamental description of the permanent values that are expected of the society. The relationship between speed and death is one of them. When a man is hurrying a lot, people usually say 'this man will be the death of us all.' He may not be doing anything wrong, probably only talking too fast or rushing from here to there, but his speed is very dangerous, capable of killing, of destruction. So you see these mythologies are symbolic reference points.

U. A Ghanaian philosopher in a recent article, made a recommendation for Africans studying philosophy. He said we must teach our students what he called scientific philosophy. And the reason for this according to him, was that we must apply the right kind of philosophy to the task before us. In his own view, the task before us is to adapt ourselves to the so-called modern world--in the sense that we want to be able to solve our developmental problems. So, according to him the task of our teaching philosophy is to teach our students, our youth, people in our society, scientific philosophy. Although I think what he actually means is analytic philosophy, because there is nothing like scientific philosophy, can you comment on his thesis?

K. First of all I should say whether a time is *modern* depends on the society that says it is. If of course they define their society in terms of machines, then the improvements in their machines determine the modernity of their society. But then that is a measurement against the machine. But if you are talking about a whole lot of things--beliefs, way of life, the human makeup of the society, then you have to look into the society and find out from the society what period we are in. And I think in many cases the society will say the present is the modern period. I am only elaborating on that because of the danger of using descriptions rather flippantly. What is the meaning of scientific? I would guess that a philosophy of this nature must be a functional philosophy. I much more prefer a description like that because it relates to the evolution of our society. In that case we would not have to dismantle our own ideologies but reinstate them. Our ideologies describe, *par excellence*, our own society, our own relations. It is not the function of African philosophy merely to academize, to say we are thinking about thinking. It is concerned very much with the function of the society. In itself it demands that there should be periodic change, symbolized in many different forms, in festivals and so on. We cannot be made to have a prejudice against our philosophy by somebody who claims that it belongs to the past as against a foreign philosophy that belongs to present and so the modern. Our philosophy is not unscientific and academic as opposed to the philosophy that is active and functional. It is not inaccurate. I must also emphasize that technology responds to the ideologies of different societies. They use it and mold it according to their own belief, history and culture. Technology in France has produced a different kind of city from that produced by technology in America or in England. So I don't agree with the statement that claims African philosophy is academic and useless. On the contrary, I think that many of the problems of development in the African continent are as a result of lack of understanding of what the African people want or what they want to do with that particular form of technology.

U. There are arguments about the differences between African and European notions of space, time, and movement. Can you enlighten us on that?

K. I would not like to be too abstract because sometimes it could be obscure, laughable and kind of phony. I would like, as much as possible, to be concrete. Then I am nearer to a description of African thinking. There is a claim that we Africans and our conception of time is different from other people in that we don't really distinguish time--time is continuous for us--we don't distinguish the past--the future and the past are all for us part of the present. I think this is a completely false claim. In the first place what creates time,

what is the function of time? The function of time is primarily to describe the differences between periods, periods when things happen. This seems to be the most fundamental thing. Yesterday, today or tomorrow. There arises in the society a need--like in the European society--to trade and they have to split the units of time because they can now be measured not only in terms of the general description but in terms of the productivity of the individual. What the individual can produce at a particular time and its commercial value leads to the belief that time is money. The concept of time must differ in the African continent. Time does not have the same commercial value because there is no need for it to do so. It describes the differences in the periods of action

Despite the propaganda, the African, of necessity, has put an emphasis on the expansion of the society and takes time as peripheral. Time is therefore merely a description of being or not being here. It is a description of that relationship. You are here in the past, you are here in the future. It is not a description of the production that you are capable of making, it's not a measurement of what your physical output can be. In Europe, especially in the period of Kant and others they began to talk of space-time relationships. But I would suspect that the African would not see it as an extended reality. He would see it as a continual reality to which there is a relationship with the earth. The earth exists--it is a reality--and as an extension of the earth there is space but it is an extension of the earth. So if we take many of the words describing, for instance, the universe in African society, they would be the same words that would describe the earth. The European, on the other hand, describes space as a separate existence which has either to be occupied or unoccupied.

U. How about movement or motion?

K. Movement is of course extremely important in African society, as you know. Movement is descriptive of growth. Things grow in movement. It is also descriptive of rebirth and the permanence of people. If you start from the family, it can only expand in movement. And if the family is seen as units in motion, then each unit is separate from the other unit. Let us look at different symbols that are used in the African society to describe this movement. For example, the snake. In some societies the snake becomes the messenger of the gods. It also combines movement and time--the past and the present--because the snake can separate itself from the snake of yesterday and the snake of today. Also, you know movement in dance can only express the solidarity of the group if the group moves in a direction that complements the others--the circle and the movement within the circle. There are those movements which are contained in plants, for instance and for diviners who throw bones, the

different shapes of the bones describes a certain kind of phenomena, of relationship. The society then describes itself in relation to its physical environment. But in describing movement it is actually describing its growth, its rebirth, its permanence.

U. There seems to be some mysterious force in that movement. But talking about movements in a very broad sense--like dancing--can it not be used as a healing device?

K. Yes it can. African societies believe that when somebody is ill, when the biological individual is ill, he is defective in the sense of the normal functioning of society. He can not relate normally to other people in the society. So what the society does is try to restore the mental and physical well being of the person, by making him dance in a normal setting. So in a way, the sick person is actually being told "you are normal, like us." And you may have noticed that such people usually dance faster and very vigorously. Now the reason for that is they themselves are trying to re-generate the energy which they lost and re-start their own internal force. This internal force, which society itself may refer to as mysterious because if it was to reduce it to a biological function, it would lose its value. Being concerned with the mind is mysterious in so far as you can not explain it by just saying, 'oh this person was cured by a herb or by a certain drug.' The person was cured, in fact, by a re-establishment of the balance in the human situation. In the psychiatric treatments in the African continent, a person is never alone, when he goes to the traditional doctor. On the contrary one goes with a family. After describing what happened, the doctor examines the ill person, and tries to find out how the illness started. The prescription normally concerns all kinds of things which restore relationship with society. Movement as in dance therefore becomes symbolic of the person's relationship with society.

U. Can you comment briefly on African ideas concerning growth and death?

K. You must realize that all the time there are two levels at which you can discuss this question. There is a biological level which is common to all human beings. People are born, they live and they die. It is the biological dimension. Then there is the philosophical dimension, how the societies look at growth and death, which we have to look into. The African society obviously has to have its own interpretation which will not be the same as in the European society. In the latter individuals can be removed by death, which is not as great a crisis as in the African society because the African society functions as a group or as units of a group. So the crisis is not so fundamental. In the European society, someone can bury his mother in

the morning and go to work in the afternoon. This is inconceivable in the African society because the period of mystical reinstatement of the person, that is the period of mourning, is not only long but very serious. During that period we are looking for a replacement so that the society will continue to function. When we now look at the cycle in reverse and say birth instead of death, we are looking at the replacement of the individuals that have died. So we talk of the ancestors and of our being an extension of our ancestors, of those that have come before. When a family doesn't have many children, for instance, that family is said to be very unfortunate, but in the European society sometimes the fewer the children the better because then you have got more property. The people in the European communities will sometimes say "let's cut down on the number of children," or "let's not begin having children until we have money." In the African society you start off by just saying "let's have children," for the people must be re-born again. This is true also for the native American. One native American put it to me very dramatically; he said after his last child was born, 'you're now an ancestor', which describes very dramatically the relationship between those that have gone on before and those that are present now. So the different periods of life that a person leads are not seen as separate from this whole movement, the whole life cycle, but can be fragmented into a young, middle, and high cycle and the last is the highest cycle...and they're called the ancestors because they have reached the highest cycle. It is the opposite in European society. Since European society describes people in terms of physical production--you are very important when you are productive, that is when you are young. But when you reach what is called middle-age, it is a crisis point because it is the point at which you are just about to stop being productive. So people begin to have all kinds of problems, and when the person is old he is of no use at all. They can now be taken into some kind of asylum or home for the aged.

U. Foreigners often describe Africans as superstitious and hence vulnerable to psychological manipulation. Can you comment on that?

K. Is it really necessary all the time to look at what is said by foreigners about Africa, when we understand that the foreign society is not normal either? I don't think it is, because foreigners try to divide African society in order to prove that their thought systems are superior while African systems are irrational. You know of course the same kind of "superstitious" beliefs, less systemized and more confused are held by Europeans. You have been in America yourself and you know there are a lot of things they give new names like "psychic", "ESP", and there are those madames on *Sunset Boulevard* in Hollywood doing all kinds of magical things. You know in Africa we would

call some of them 'divine ones', because they are followers of the divine one. Compared to the African society the American society is very young, so it experiments with many things, many beliefs. Not so long ago Western society said it would only accept things that can be measured scientifically. It caused a great deal of confusion, because obviously there cannot be this one dimension to reality, and it is unscientific since it claims that those realities which we do not have instruments to measure, do not exist. There are a lot of things you know yourself cannot be explained. I'm sure you've seen a lot of things on the African continent that you cannot really explain, but they still have a reality. You can call them mysterious, strange but you cannot explain them. It seems to me that when they claim in fact it is a lion that killed him--they are ignoring a real dimension that African society is aware of. We are aware that there is a physical reality. A man can be killed by a lion. He can drown, he can fall, all these are physical realities. We accept them without seeking for any other external causes. However, it is possible to create a crisis in the mind of a person either by what you say, a threat that you make, or by all kinds of things that undermine the ability of this person to react normally. That is why the psychiatrist or diviner in African society, wants to know how the mental crisis of sick person started. And the members of the society help to explain how it started. They may say, "so-and-so said this when the victim's physique began to deteriorate." The impact of what the person said caused the victim to be mentally unbalanced when he went to the hunt in which he was killed by a lion. And if you notice in African societies they don't choose anybody, but always somebody who has uttered a threat or is at odds with his neighbors.

Also there is a very important belief in African society that everything has got potential. The potential derives its power from that of the human being or from itself. If it derives it from itself then it can be generated by the potential which you have, either to act positively or negatively. In the ruins they are no longer there. For instance, when a new family moves into a house that was previously occupied they make ceremonies in order to establish the fact that they have utilized the force of the people who lived there before. It is the same with things because if the force of the people who have gone can continue to exist in the stones that are left there, then the force can generate a force in other things that are supposed to be non-existent. Put in other words - a European way - there is in everything a constant power, atoms moving and so on, which keeps things in a state of generative force. Plants, things, objects, the ocean itself has great power. This description demonstrates the supra-material dimension of our reality. We are not real only because we have this physical form but also because we shall be here in future. The forest

is a place where many other beings have lived. You know from many other African stories animals have their own societies. They discuss their own point of view about people just as we have ours about them. So these are different worlds and in the definition of life we do not focus only on ourselves. We are not the only creatures that have life nor are we the strongest. I think we must be a bit careful not to take the experimental views of people as gospel truth, because the same people will one day come back to learn from us. There are a lot of thought systems in the African continent which are years in advance of the European system, but the later has been able to impose temporarily, the importance and significance of their thought to the extent that they make people believe that their ideas are always ahead of ours. This is of course not so. You see now, I keep trying to say to you that Africa has been colonized for a very short period--four or five hundred years--sometimes less. We are in the period in which we think there is a crisis, that our ideas are all gone and we can not think anymore. Actually we are only describing the crisis of the colonial pseudo-intellectual. He is pseudo because he has not produced anything creative. He has only imitated the second-rate output of the colonial regime. There are a lot of great achievements from the African continent which are still unfolding.

U. You said something about the crisis, the materialistic crisis?

K. Yes, this crisis produced a great deal of desperation. The people who came to the African continent were not only eager to seize the land, families and people, they were also eager to remove ideas so they could sell them. Ideas are themselves for sale, for example in medicine. They get these ideas from the Africans and sell them. And you know yourself in Africa the emphasis is not on selling, but on curing the person.

U. Yet the foreigner brings the ideas of healing back to us...

K. Yes. By that time you are conditioned into thinking that your own cures which are actually better than the ones he brings, are no good. And in spite of the fact that you have an African continent that is full of people and has been there for centuries, you believe that without this foreigner's medicine you would not be here. In America for instance, it's amazing to me how many people get ill. I said to a fellow "you are young. Why do you allow this thing?" The fellow says: "I suffer from mononucleosis. I never heard of this thing. There are many diseases, because the population itself has been conditioned to illnesses. A little cough, he goes for an injection. He's got 101 pills in his pocket. It's amazing! But this is the condition. I said to one fellow "don't take all these pills. What's wrong with you?" And he tells me "I have depression. I suffer from terrible illnesses." I say: "You are too young to have all those diseases.

This is for old ladies. Why don't you take a break? Go home." "How can I go home" he says. "It's so far." I say, "take a bus." Then comes the great discovery. The guy came to me the other day and said: "Gosh I feel better. I went to the same doctor and told him what you had said about his medicine. He laughed at the time. When I came back he took my blood pressure and found it normal." The fellow is alright. To get home he traveled by bus all day. It cost him only a hundred dollars. But that's conditioning. He was lost. He could not take his own initiative. He was ill. He was really helpless because the whole strategy of this society is to make you helpless and then see what they can sell you to get you up. So people take pills they do not need to get well.

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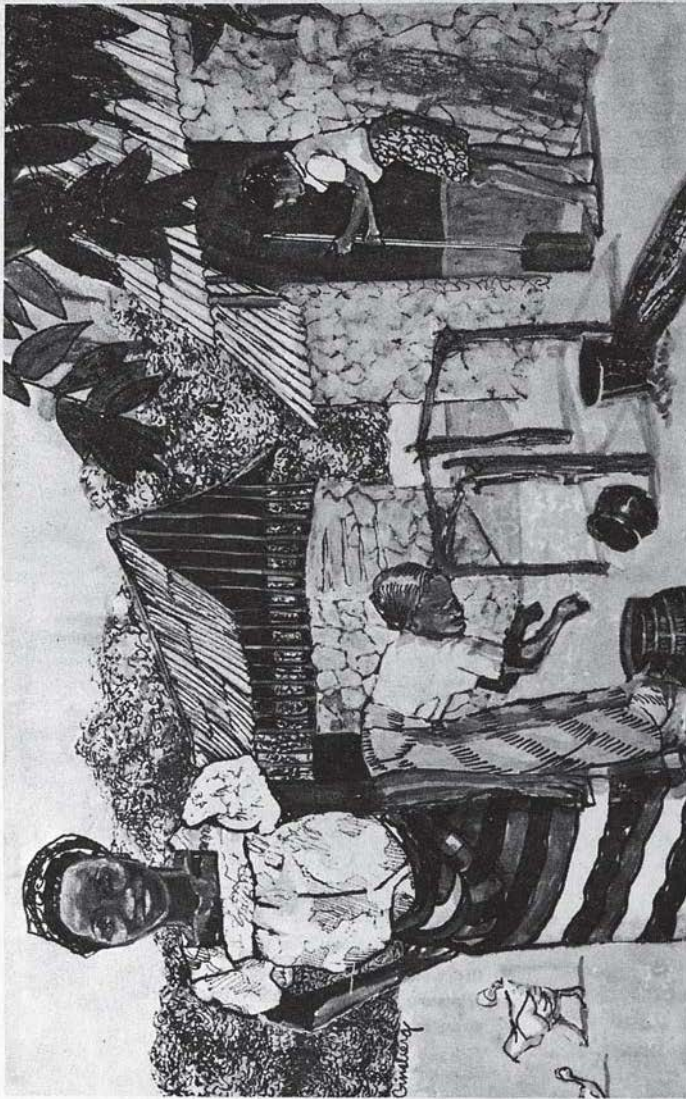


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