

Africa's influence on European culture: conditions, impact and pathways of reception and Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*

A influência da África sobre a cultura europeia: condições, impacto e vias de recepção e *Filosofia Bantu* de Placide Tempels

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ABSTRACT

Placide Tempels was a pioneer in presenting Bantu philosophy in the mid-20th century as a serious ontological and metaphysical system. His book stands in the context of Europe's discovery of African art and of its aesthetics. In this article the conditions for this reception and the resonance of key motifs of Bantu philosophy with developments in European culture are discussed. Fields of cultural and epistemic difference which persist are identified for further consideration and suggestions for further reception are indicated.

Keywords: Bantu philosophy, African philosophy, inter-cultural dialogue, Vitalism, Modern art and African aesthetics, spiritual energy, holism, Spiritism, Spiritualism

RESUMO

Placide Tempels foi um pioneiro ao apresentar a filosofia Bantu em meados do século XX como um sistema ontológico e metafísico sério. Seu livro se situa no contexto da descoberta pela Europa da arte africana e de sua estética. Neste artigo, as condições para essa recepção e a ressonância dos temas centrais da filosofia Bantu com desenvolvimentos na Europa são discutidas. Áreas de diferença cultural e epistêmica que subsistem são identificadas para se fazer mais considerações e são indicadas sugestões para outras recepções.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia Bantu, Filosofia Africana, Diálogo intercultural, Vitalismo, Arte Moderna e Estética Africana, Energia Espiritual, Holismo, Espiritismo, Espiritualismo.

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INTRODUCTION

Africa's culture has exerted a formative influence on modern European culture for more than a century by now. For such influence to happen, certain conditions are necessary. Cultures, like all (living) systems are aware of their identities and systemic boundaries, and act reflexively to preserve them, reinforcing the sense of self. Reception from foreign cultures depends on factors within a culture, such as perceiving another culture as similar, so that fusions do not affect identity, with the "other" being perceived as "alter ego", or when a sense of deficit arises by which elements of another culture can fill gaps in the receiving system or provide new pathways of development. Usually the receiving system preserves its core features in the process of integration and transformation. Ulrich Berner, historian of religion, describes different forms of syncretism in a systemic perspective (BERNER, 1982)

For our topic of the reception of African culture in Europe this means, that we may assume that the reception of African culture is strongly determined by the perceived deficits in European cultures, themes, debates and hermeneutics. The background of such reception is thus interesting and necessary for understanding. Introduced elements may develop a life of their own in the receiving system, effecting changes within it and transforming it.

APPRECIATING THE "LANGUAGE" OF AFRICAN ART AS CONDITION OF INFLUENCE ON EUROPEAN CULTURE

Cultural exchange between Africa and Europe developed intensely though through colonialism. From the late 19th century on Europeans became exposed to African cultures beyond the coastal trade settlements. Works of art, obtained by whichever means, arrived in Europe and became accessible to the public through museums. The impact of this exposure on the development of modern art in Europe was immense. It is impossible to understand the art of Europe since the early 20th century without the formative impact of African aesthetics. By way of this – mostly uninvited – encounter African cultures began to assert themselves world-wide, in the spheres of European and Euro-descendent cultures. Africa exerts a formative influence in their core, in particular in the realms of symbolic expression and symbolic forms. This applies to music and the visual arts, in some parts also to religion. The significance of these as mediums of expression of inner and outer reality, and their influence on forming perceptions and sense of being has been assessed by philosophers and

theoreticians of art. Theoreticians of semiotics, especially Umberto Eco (ECO, 1976 [1968]) have deepened understanding for the cultural meaning and significance of symbolic forms, identifying them as distinct “languages”. African influence in these fields goes to the core of European cultures, however conditioned and limited by its motifs and convictions.

CULTURAL CONDITIONS FOR THE RECEPTION OF AFRICAN ART AND THOUGHT IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

At the turn of the 20th century Europe appeared to be at its peak in power, cultural and scientific development, yet barely two decades later it lay in ruins. The cultural crisis and transformations which prefigured and presaged the demise of the old political order, with its revolutions, had begun already in the late 19th century. Culturally it was an intensely fruitful and inspiring era which persisted beyond the collapse of World War I and the Russian Revolution. New views on what had hitherto been suppressed and excluded in the established symbolic order arose. In this situation a “philosophy of life” prevailed (EKSTEINS, 1989, p. 33f.) which was first proposed by F. Nietzsche and continued by W. Dilthey and H. Bergson. Nietzsche's ideas influenced both S. Freud and C. G. Jung. Both of them developed hermeneutics to interpret works of art as expressions of the soul – individually, but also universally, in cross-cultural perspective. The works of art of foreign cultures were now understood as expressions of alternative symbolic orders which possibly revealed aspects of the common soul which were repressed in the own. Hereby a critique of the own culture came to be connected to interest in foreign cultures as important expressions of complementary aspects of humankind. The critique of ruling culture – whose limitations had become so apparent in the crises of the First World War and the Russian Revolution – opened up interest in other cultures – in particular in those perceived as more “original” for the sake of cultural revision and new- self-perception.

Some focal points mark this revolution: In 1899 Sigmund Freud published his epochal book on the interpretation of dreams, the *Traumdeutung* (FREUD, 1900), where he raised the symbolic manifestations of the unconscious and repressed contents of the soul, to the dignity of revelations in dreams, whose decipherment would lead a person to wholeness, happiness and self-understanding. Freud significantly compared the language of dreams to the symbols of non-literate people.

Freud's view has been complemented by Ruth Benedict in her *Patterns of Culture* (BENEDICT, 1934) who emphasised the individual logic of any culture and thus cultural difference - it nevertheless presented a very important figure of thought.

The exploration of African art, the visual arts, music, ritual, and of religion thus became means of retrieving vital layers of the common collective self but also as manifestations of alternative cultures worth consideration. The "Other" of the colonized peoples came to be appreciated as representing either a lost element of the collective "Self", or as representing inspiring difference. This has methodological consequences. African art and other symbolic expressions of culture and religion are approached with the intent of "understanding" in the sense of W. Dilthey, that is to take them seriously as means which give access to their perceptions of outer and inner realities, of the natural and super-natural realms.

This transition in method and attitude can be well observed in the work of Victor and Edith Turner, who began the studies of ritual among the Ndembu people of northwest Zambia in the 1950's from a functionalistic approach of sociology (V. TURNER, 1967), up to the point of realizing its limitations and inherent "not taking for serious" the perceptions, actions and effects of the rites they studied. This brought them to a fundamental change of approach, which was worked out in their later work of ritual studies (V. TURNER & E. BRUNER, 1986; E. TURNER, 2008).

Of course a hermeneutic approach has its limitations, since any "understanding" is inevitably conditioned and limited by the culturally conditioned means of understanding of a researcher or (mere) observer, as of African art and ritual. The intended "fusion of horizons" (MALPAS, 2016) can only be attained, approximately, in a "dialogue" with the "Other" by which initial pre-conceptions are tested and revised. Such an approach is often derided as "going native". It is however not only ethically sound in terms of inter-cultural respect, but also less prone to the inherent self-deceit of reductionistic approaches of reducing the enigmatic expressions and performances of foreign cultures to the allegedly all explaining assumptions of reductionist perspectives.

Carl Gustav Jung idea of a "collective unconscious" in the soul of mankind and of any person, (JUNG, 1916), connected the awareness of cultural differences with the idea of common ground in the soul. This theory became hermeneutic tool for the interpretation of works of art, including myth, in the following years (JUNG, 1936). Jung also inspired S. Freud to look at the cultures of non-literature societies for symbolic expressions of common deep

levels of the human psyche (JUNG, 1912). It means that works of art and myths are interpreted as expressions of inner realities accessible across the boundaries of cultures. This approach coincided with the arts' movement of Symbolism (CASSOU & al., 1979). The movement engendered a respectful and dedicated study of the art of "primitive" cultures – with a growing sense that theirs were by no means simple, but rather sophisticated symbolic cultures.

BEYOND EXOTICISM: DISCOVERING THE "OTHER SELF" IN AFRICAN CULTURE

The preoccupation with African art was initially burdened with colonial power distance and contempt. However fascination took over with pioneers of European art, who understood the abstraction and sophistication of African art and the possibilities of her language and grammars of expression. Africa became adopted as expressive of the (undiscovered) possibilities of "Self". Constantin Brâncuși's gently ironic title of the sculpture *La Négrresse Blonde* [*The Blonde Negro Lady*] (1933) expresses this insight. It challenges the European "blond" spectator to see himself or herself as mirrored in the gilded bust of an African woman. This subtly subverts the power distance of colonial times by representing the prestigious "blond" of Europe with the "gold" of the negro statue, "gold" being associated with Africa from the Gold Coast of Ashanti to the gold mines of the Rand.



Constantin Brâncuși, *La Négresse Blonde II*, 1933. Exhibited in the *Mumok* [Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig], Vienna, Austria.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_N%C3%A9gresse_Blonde_II.JPG

This sculpture, inspired by African styles, expresses these hermeneutics:

Brâncuși depicted the hermeneutic situation of European encounter with Bantu African philosophy in his *La Négresse Blonde*. to discover oneself in the encounter with the “other”. The use of an African style for this statue conveys the message that the (European) spectator should try to see with the aesthetic and perceptual means of African culture. The “blonde negro woman” is thus not only depicted as “mirror image” – which it does, by its polished surface – but it creates an effect by which the spectator will inevitably find himself being looked at through the sculpture. The change of perspective in the attempt to see with African eyes – which Picasso understood and tried to adopt in his art – became programmatic.

AFRICA IN THE FORMATION OF MODERN ART OF EUROPE: DISCOVERING AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES AND MEANS OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN THE QUEST FOR A NEW AESTHETICS

The inspiration which Cubism drew as an artistic movement from the confrontation with the aesthetics of African art in the early 20th century, which became accessible in major collections in museums of Europe from the late 19th century onwards (JUNGE & IVANOV, 2005, pp. 56ff), is well known. Pablo Picasso is perhaps best known for his reception of African forms of artistic expression. His first encounter with African art took place in 1907 in a museum in Paris:

“When I began to take interest in African art, some forty years ago, inaugurating the ‘Negro Period’ of my art, I rejected what was then regarded as ‘beautiful’... I stayed and studied the objects. People had created these masks and other objects for a holy purpose, to a magical purpose, as a sort of medium between themselves and unknown alien forces, which surrounded them, in order to overcome their fears and terror, by giving them a form and image. In this moment I realised what painting essentially is. Painting is not an aesthetic endeavour. It is a form of magic ... a means to attain power, by giving form to our fears and to our desires. When I realised that, I knew that I had found my way. The people began to regard these objects from an aesthetic perspective.” (GATES, 1996, p. 27)

Picasso describes his first encounter with African art as an epochal event, revealing a new meaning of art to him, by which he discovered his own course as an artist. It was an initiatory experience, which became a seminal event. He understood the dimensions of the spiritual and the magic in these works of art and adopted them for his own work. His appreciation of African art was profound:

“I felt touched as an artist most strongly always then when I was confronted with the sublime beauty of the sculptures of the anonymous artists of Africa. These works of a religious, passionate, and rigorously logical art represent the most overwhelming and beautiful things which human imagination has ever brought forth. Although I have to add, that I abhor exoticism.” (GATES, 1996, p. 27)

Picasso was not the only artist to become fascinated by African art. André Derain had coaxed him to visit the exhibit of African art. Henri Matisse collected African art and introduced Picasso to its meaning. Eduard Manet, Paul Cezanne and Paul Gauguin were fascinated and adopted elements of African art (PABLO PICASSO, 2009). Alberto Giacometti or Henry Moore adopted African forms and styles, likewise Karl Schmitt-Rottluff, Henri Matisse and Paul Gauguin. They explored principles of African art and applied it in their own creations. The multiplicity of perspectives, the abstraction and reduction of colour, “geometrization” and flowing shapes were discovered. The visual art of European Modernity is essentially and indelibly influenced by African art. This also applies to its „theurgic”, divinatorial properties, which had been proclaimed as programme by the art movement of Symbolism, at the beginning of the 20th century and was adopted subsequently, especially in Expressionism, as in Germany (BILANG, 1989). African aesthetics disclosed aesthetic means of perception and of expression which came to be adopted here. This discovery has imprinted itself permanently in cultural memory, in spite of the cataclysms of the 20th century.

Interest in African art since the begin of the 20th century became a movement “ad fontes”, “to the sources” for the sake of liberation from an old Self, for re-identification and of renewal in a movement similar to that of the Renaissance – of “re-birth” by re-immersion in the collective “origins” (ELIADE, 1959, p. 15).

MOVING FROM ART AND SYMBOLISM TO PHILOSOPHY: PLACIDE TEMPELS' "BANTU PHILOSOPHY" - EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is in this cultural context that the seminal book by Fr. Placide Tempels, *La philosophie bantue* (TEMPELS, 1945), was written and received. P. Tempels worked in the Belgian Congo between the First and Second World Wars. Looking at central concepts of his "Bantu Philosophy" one can recognise the influence of the "Philosophy of Life" as a transcendent, metaphysical force, as proposed by Nietzsche, which inspired the cultural (and spiritual) revolution of the first two decades of the 20th century. Tempels finds parallels and correspondences between Bantu thought and this philosophy. It provided him hermeneutic tools of understanding key features of Bantu philosophy. His book has influenced other works on African religion and philosophy ever since (MALIBABO, 2006). Tempels and the editor of his book were well aware of the reception of African art in European culture at the time and have furnished it richly with illustrations of Congolese sculptures.

Tempels has succeeded in applying the figure of "inversion" of the merely "ethnographic", "objective" look at cultural elements of African culture into a view in which African (religious) philosophy "speaks" to European and Africans intellectuals. He inaugurated a "de-colonial perspective" in which a new appreciation of African religion became possible as well.

Tempels has been criticised for applying this contemporary philosophy as well as the religious philosophy of scholasticism as interpretative tools to the study of Bantu philosophy. However such critique does not take the fundamentals of any intercultural understanding into account. The "hermeneutic circle" cannot be escaped at whim and to deny it means to relegate the implicit (hermeneutic) pre-conceptions of any researcher (from outside) to the unconscious. Translation inevitably implies alienation – and thus the necessity of subsequent dialogue and reflection on conceptual differences becoming apparent in the process.

Placide Tempels' research and presentation of Bantu philosophy was the fruit of many years of work as a missionary and educator in the Belgian Congo. He knew the Ciluba language well. He was trained in philosophy and in neo-scholastic systematic theology. Thus he was able to understand Bantu philosophy as a system and to fathom its ramifications into diverse realms of culture, such as law or psychology.

It is to his honour that he did not merely study Bantu philosophy as an exotic (random) "belief system", "constructed" with more or less (mal-)adaptive "cognitive means" of

“attributing meaning” to the uncontrollable or enigmatic conditions of the environment. In this perspective Bantu philosophy would be seen as an unenlightened, superstitious system of coping with a difficult environment not yet connected to the cognitive means of rational science and utilitarianism - a condescending attitude, cloaked as “enlightened”, persisting to the present. Tempels distanced himself from such presumptions, exploring Bantu thought with a view to its relevance to issues of European thought. He presented Bantu philosophy a unique contribution to universal philosophy, to be taken for serious in the same way as the philosophy of Plato. He called it one of the major systems of philosophy, deeply convinced that it had something “to say” in its own right, opening up new perspectives of ontological understanding.

The quality of P. Tempels' work has been acknowledged by African scholars such as the Angolan philosopher P. Batsíkama, who however also deplores that Tempels' sound work has not received the reception in European philosophy which it deserves.:

“A ‘filosofia bantu’ de Padre Tempels é o resultado duma longa experiência de estudos e de publicações nos jornais de especialidade. No seu trabalho ‘L'étude des langues bantues à la lumière de la philosophie bantue’ é muito visível a maneira como o autor traçou o seu projeto sobre a ‘filosofia bantu’ a partir da língua. Como é de conhecimento de muito, essa publicação foi barbaramente refutada pelo classicismo eurocêntrico.” (BATSÍKAMA, 2008)

This recognition by a scholar who can assess the quality of Tempels' interpretations of words and sayings, due to his own fluency in languages closely related to the CiLuba which Tempels spoke, and with the culture that he studied, is important. Batsíkama also affirms the value of Tempels' method of starting his research of Bantu philosophy with the analysis of words and sayings – in the context of their culture – which came to be adopted by notable Africa authors on Bantu philosophy, such as Alexis Kagame of Ruanda, and John Mbiti of Uganda, who both followed this methodological approach, albeit with some modifications, confirming the essence of Tempels' book, but adding differentiations. Further linguistic research has added more nuances, such as by Eboussi-Boulaga and by Tshiamalenga. (MALIBABO, 2006, p. 30)

Although Tempels' pioneering work was not received into the mainstream of European philosophy it nevertheless became important in Europe for those who seek to understand African art and its influence in Europe, or African cultures and religion.

Tempels' Bantu Philosophy changed attitudes to African culture in the early 20th century. Philosophical and religious encounter followed. Father Placide Frans Tempels (1906 – 1977) was a pioneer of the study of Bantu African philosophy.



Father Placide Frans Tempels

<http://www.aequatoria.be/tempels/Gallery.htm>



The first edition of Bantu Philosophy

<http://www.aequatoria.be/tempels/Gallery.htm>

THE RECEPTION OF “BANTU PHILOSOPHY”

Tempels' book soon became widely read, when it was translated from Flemish to French in 1945. The English translation appeared in 1959. A Portuguese edition does not yet exist to my knowledge. Tempels contributed much to change perceptions on Bantu thought in Europe. This is reflected in statements of the time. Thus A.D. Ritchie, professor of philosophy in the University of Edinburgh, wrote in the "It is quite clear, if Father P. Tempels is right, that the Bantu system of thought [...] ought to be taken seriously." (RITCHIE, 1947)

Tempels' book has influenced other works on African religion and philosophy ever since. The significance of this book is consists not only in its reception as a key work on African philosophy. It also conveys elements of African traditional religion. It laid a foundation for authors such as Axel Ivar Berglund (BERGLUND, 1976), Alexis Kagame (KAGAME, 1956), John Mbiti (MBITI, 1969), Gabriel Setiloane (SETILOANE, 1976), Mubabinge Bilolo (MALIBABO, 2006), Alan Anderson (ANDERSON, 1991) or Mogobe Ramose (RAMOSE, 2003). Tempels' book has become a classical work which is referred to in almost any work on African philosophy, as recently affirmed in a conference on him, by H. Lodewyckx:

“Il est indéniable que la Philosophie Bantue de Tempels a changé la vision sur l'homme africain. On ne lira à peine une article ou un livre concernant

la philosophie africaine sans qu'on ne fasse mention de cet petit livre.”(LODEWYCKX, 2014)

Of course Tempels has also found critics, both in Europe and in Africa. His reception by the most notable scholars on African philosophy and religion however indicates the degree of his work.

Tempels regarded the spiritual elements of Bantu philosophy in a remarkable attitude of inter-religious respect. Here he pre-empted positions adopted by his Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council. One of Tempels' supporters, Cardinal Achille Lienhart became a leading figure at this council which redefined the relations of the Roman Catholic Church to non-Christian religions. Tempels' book contributed to this re-evaluation (MAGESA, 2015, p. 10f.). However, as L. Magesa, a leading African scholar of religion, critically observes, Tempels' recognition and appreciation of the spiritual world view of Africa, with its integration of the super-natural in cultural perception and religious and therapeutic practice has not been received, but is suppressed in much of the practice of the Roman Catholic Church in Africa at the time of writing:

“... it is the theology so far in force in the African seminaries, a result of European rationalism, enforced rigorously in diocesan policies, that considers the intrusion of spiritual forces into human life as “irrational” and “superstition.” (MAGESA, 2015, p. 12f)

This verdict unfortunately still holds. While the dynamic aspect of Bantu world view was found compatible with European perceptions, the integration of the para-normal or “super-natural” has remained a contentious issue.

TEMPELS' DELINEATION OF COMMON GROUND OF PAGAN BANTU THOUGHT WITH CATHOLICISM

Tempels reflected on the spiritual aspects of the dynamic ontology. Emphasising the theme of spiritual growth in an inter-religious perspective, delineating common ground between African Paganism expressed in Bantu philosophy and Roman Catholic theology. He wrote:

“Catholic spirituality still teaches that God created humanity by reason of the living richness of His own Nature, by His Goodness, and in order to allow His creatures to have a part in His Beatitude, in His Love. This participation, we are taught, can occur in various degrees and in ever-increasing degree. That is to say, there exists on earth the possibility of

vital, intrinsic and supernatural internal growth. This intense spiritual doctrine, which animates and feeds the souls who are in the bosom of the Catholic Church, finds an arresting parallel in the ontological thought of the Bantu. We arrive, therefore, at the unheard of conclusion that Bantu paganism, the ancient wisdom of the Bantu, reaches out from the depths of its Bantu soul towards the very soul of Christian spirituality." (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 121)

This integrative attitude was intended to pave the way for respectful understanding on the basis of his Christian convictions.

TEMPELS' APPEAL FOR UNDERSTANDING BANTU PHILOSOPHY "FROM WITHIN":

In a rather rare move, Tempels explicitly asks his readers to attempt to think on the lines of the Bantu world view:

"I therefore invite the reader of this study to put out of his mind while reading it both his western philosophical thought and any judgments which he may have already made concerning Bantu and primitive peoples I ask him to abandon received ideas and to apply his mind to getting hold of the significance of what is here said, trying to grasp Bantu thought from within and not allowing himself to be diverted into criticism of my way of setting it out or of my choice of terms. I ask him even to reserve judgment concerning the evaluation to be put upon the theory and, before he pronounces judgment upon it, to have patience to consider the proofs and applications of it which will ultimately be given." (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 30)

In this passage it appears that Tempels had learnt to apply Bantu philosophy's perceptual and analytical concepts - and begun to see the world in this way. In a way reminiscent of initiatory processes he asks the reader to embark on a voyage of transformation by setting aside the accustomed European modes of perception and ideas of reality and to deliberately become strange to himself by engaging with African thought from within. The effects of such existential change of environment are documented (KLEINHEMPEL, 2018). Anticipating resistance, he asks for suspension of judgement.

Change of perspective – the application of the "inverted perspective"

"Let us try above all to understand Bantu philosophy, to know what their beliefs are, and what their rational interpretation of the nature of visible and invisible things is. These views may be held to be sound or erroneous: in either case we should admit that their ideas on the nature of the

universe are essentially metaphysical knowledge, which constitutes them an ontology.

Before we set about teaching these Africans our system of philosophical thought, let us try to master theirs." (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 25f.)

The contentious issue of a non-materialistic world view is touched with circumspection. Tempels was clearly aware of European reservations in this regard.

A DYNAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AS BASIS FOR THE RECEPTION OF BANTU ONTOLOGY

Tempels presented Bantu philosophy on the background of the dynamic understanding of the human person which had developed by the late 19th century, especially in the "philosophies of Life" which came to be expressed and unfolded in the dynamic anthropology of Psychoanalysis (ELLENBERGER 1994). However in distinction from the vitalistic monism, such as of F. Nietzsche, Tempels emphasised the spiritual element of Bantu anthropology.

"If the Bantu ideal were concerned with the temporal only, it would be difficult to see how it could serve as a basis for a higher civilization. [...] There are abundant examples, some few of which have been cited in the course of this book, to prove that ... there is to be found in the depths of the Bantu soul an aspiration, an irresistible allurements towards an infinite strengthening of life." (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 121)

In this passage the appeal of Bantu thought to Tempels emerges, based in issues of discourse in contemporary European philosophy and theology: While Roman Catholicism upheld the ideal of a transcendent ontology, Vitalism was based on a monistic concept of "Nature". Tempels understood the scope and power of this dynamic ontology. In Bantu thought he found a philosophy which reconciled these perspectives. The dynamic spiritual world view, linking the vital powers of nature and man with the transcendent only came to be received in European culture in the late 20th century, by the more established pathways of reception of Yoga and Tantra.

The significance of Tempels' understanding of the dynamic element of Bantu philosophy was recognized by specialists familiar with its implications. Thus the renowned Belgian jurist and anthropologist Emile Possoz wrote:

"A true estimate of indigenous peoples can now take the place of the misunderstanding and fanaticism of the ethnology of the past and of the former attitude of aversion entertained with regard to them. That is why this present work by the Revd. Fr. Tempels is destined to achieve so much good. [...] Since the Greeks, all classical European philosophy has revealed

a static outlook. But older peoples, tribal peoples as I call them ... have preserved a mental outlook not purely static. We have behind us two thousand years of too static thought. Prof. Maréchal, some years ago, ended his study of Kant as follows: 'The future metaphysics will be either dynamic or it will not be at all.' (POSSOZ, 1945)

In this review themes of critique of European thought are formulated which came to be powerful only decades later in the "counter-cultural" movement: the revision of an ontology of static order and of isolated "being"— an idea reflected in Mogobe Ramose's exegesis of the concept of "Ubuntu" (RAMOSE, 2003) - as well as the retrieval of a unified world view integrating the spiritual, as Tempels confirmed himself (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 39).

THE KEY TO BANTU ONTOLOGY: A DYNAMIC CONCEPT OF BEING:

Tempels identified the following ideas as central to Bantu philosophy and culture:

"This supreme value is life, force, to live strongly, or vital force. The Bantu say, in respect of a number of strange practices in which we see neither rime nor reason that their purpose is to acquire life, strength or vital force, to live strongly, that they are to make life stronger, or to assure that force shall remain perpetually in one's posterity. [...] In every Bantu language it is easy to recognize the words or phrases denoting a force, which is not used in an exclusively bodily sense, but in the sense of the integrity of our whole being." (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 30)

This idea has become a mainstay of Western culture since the late 20th century by mediation of Afro-American pop culture: "power", "energy", or "presence" have become household words, to denote the force of a person in the public sphere and a state of well-being. This motif is not derived from European tradition of thought.

Bantu African scholars of philosophy, such as A. Kagame have however pointed out that Tempels has gone somewhat too far in identifying the ideas of "being" and of "force vitale". Thus the Congolese scholar B. Malibabo refers to the argument of Tshiamalenga, who pointed out that the root word "-ntu" does not only designate force (of life) but also weakness. (TSHIAMALENGA, 1973, p. 80). John Mbiti has been quite critical of Tempels in this regard, stating about Tempels' central assertion: "... the theory of 'vital force' cannot be applied to other African peoples with whose life and ideas I am familiar." (MBITI, 1990 [2nd rev. ed.], p. 10). However he continues – with critical distance - by referring the work of J. Jahn (JAHN, 1958) with his analysis of the root word „ntu“ and its philosophical connotations:

"Muntu is the philosophical category which includes God, spirits, the departed, human beings and certain trees. These constitute a 'force' endowed with intelligence.

Kintu includes all the 'forces' which do not act on their own but only under the command of *Muntu*, such as plants, animals, minerals and the like.

Hantu is the category of time and space

Kuntu is what he calls 'modality' and covers items like beauty, laughter etc." (MBITI, 1990, p. 11)

While Mbiti is strongly critical of Tempels' dynamic interpretation, other Bantu African scholars of religion and philosophy confirm it. Thus the South African Gabriel Setiloane explains in his analysis of the Sotho-Tswana anthropological concept of "seriti" ("personality"), which is closely connected to the element of blood:

"At the annual 'renewal of the marks' medicines for the strengthening of 'seriti' are mixed with the blood flowing from newly made incisions. 'O seriti se setle' (he has a good personality), is identical in meaning with 'O madi a matle' (he has good blood). [...] Life does not end with biological death. [...] In Sotho-Tswana terms 'seriti' may be 'light' (weak) or 'heavy' (strong). It may be heavy with good or bad. A child is born with a light 'seriti' and this has to be strengthened ... by the influence of the 'diriti' [= plural of seriti] of others which are strong for good. [...] So in contrast, the evil 'seriti' of a sorcerer attacks and weakens the 'diriti' of his victims, making them subject to all kinds of misfortunes. 'Seriti' is dynamic concept, as Tempels has written – 'Bantu speak act and live as if for them beings are forces. Force is for them not an adventitious accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings. Force is the nature of being; force is being; being is force.' (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 35)." (SETILOANE, 1976, p. 41f.).

In this passage Setiloane emphatically affirms the concept of "force" identified by Tempels and applies it as analytic category to his analysis of Sotho-Tswana anthropology. In distinction from a European tendency to view this "force of life" somewhat in isolation and as limited to the individual human life in this world, Setiloane explains that it is closely connected to interpersonal relations, and thus to the concept of "humanity", as sketched above too:

"Basically this is Tempels' 'force vitale'. But it has to be insisted with Mulago [MULAGO, 1973] ... that it exists only through participation with the vital forces of other people and things. In contrast to Janheinz Jahn [JAHN, 1961] it is essential to speak not of 'Muntu' [i. e. 'Man' in the singular] but of 'uluntu' (the community of man)..." (SETILOANE, 1976, p. 261f., fn. 33)

Interestingly Setiloane also affirms Tempels' view that the 'force vitale' is not limited to animated beings, nor even less, to human beings, but is even contained in inanimate things and conveyed by them.

A DYNAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIVINE AND THEOLOGY:

The reflection of Tempels' key concept can be recognized in G. Setiloane's description of the Sotho-Tswana concept of God:

"Modimo [God] is one. [...] Modimo has no plural without a radical change of meaning. [...] If Modimo is to be designated as Creator, it must be as one who eternally generates both himself and his manifestations. [...] Modimo is 'motlhodi', the source, in unrecorded time, of the stream of life which flows into the indeterminate future and is ever returning to its source." (SETILOANE, 1976, pp. 79ff).

Mbiti illustrates the same ontological figure of life emanating from God – and with it, the souls - to return likewise to God, and to act as mediators between men on earth and God. (MBITI, 1990, pp. 24ff.).

BANTU PHILOSOPHY ON HEALING

A holistic view of "energy" related to happiness and exchange with the environment has become a central motif of health and wellness in Western countries. Tempels' declaration: "In the minds of Bantu, all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate." (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 30) resonates perfectly with views current in the early 21st century. The holistic nature of this "force vitale", including its spiritual aspect in Bantu thought appeal to this view. This has implications for the diagnosis of illness and for healing:

"Every illness, wound or disappointment, all suffering, depression, or fatigue, every injustice and every failure: all these are held to be, and are spoken of by the Bantu as, a diminution of vital force" (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 30f.).

The implicit relation between well-being and susceptibility to disease and illness of body and psyche, have received heightened attention in European cultures in recent years.

THE CONCEPT OF "POWER" AND THE REALMS OF SPIRITS

The concept of "power" has a religious quality since God the Creator is understood as the supreme source of all vital power in the world. It also defines the status and role of otherworldly and spiritual beings:

"The spirits of the first ancestors, highly exalted in the superhuman world, possess extraordinary force inasmuch as they are the founders of the human race and propagators of the divine inheritance of vital human strength. The other dead are esteemed only to the extent to which they increase and perpetuate their vital force in their progeny." (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 32)

Thus a continuum is assumed between this world and otherworldly realms of the spirits and ancestors. Tempels' wording is reminiscent of Spiritism, which was still culturally established in Europe. However he avoids any comparisons. The exchange with the spirits is governed by their role of mediating divine energy, as is expected from them. This influences religious life:

"Force, the potent life, vital energy are the object of prayers and invocations to God, to the spirits and to the dead, as well as of all that is usually called magic, sorcery or magical remedies. The Bantu will tell you that they go to a diviner to learn the words of life, so that he can teach them the way of making life stronger." (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 30)

The concept of such "force vitale" is not limited to the natural world, but comprises the "otherworld" and the realm of the spiritual as well, existing as unified and as diversified "forces":

"It is because all being is force and exists only in that it is force, that the category "force" includes of necessity all "beings": God, men living and departed, animals, plants, minerals. Since being is force, all these beings appear to the Bantu as forces. This universal concept is hardly used by the Bantu, but they are susceptible to philosophical abstractions though they express them in concrete terms only. They give a name to each thing, but the inner life of these things presents itself to their minds as such specific forces and not at all as static reality" (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 36)

It is a view that coincides with the rise of "energetic" perceptions of reality in the sub-atomic realm and with its philosophical implications which are gradually taking hold of the general mind in Western societies, in which the concept of "energy" is increasingly used for a wide range of phenomena and states. The aspect of "vital energy" nourished both in the physiological and psychological sphere are recognised as a prime factor of health and resilience, and are receiving holistic attention.

PRACTICES AND HERMENEUTICS CONCERNING THE SUPERNATURAL REALMS AND DIMENSION OF REALITY

Tempels pointed out that the influence of the supernatural is considered to be pervasive and not limited to specific agents, as by magic. The cosmological conception of a force, ultimately considered to emanate from God has been affirmed by subsequent Bantu researchers. This power is considered to manifest itself in specific phenomena of unusual character, but is generally held to be ubiquitous in the natural realm (SETILOANE, 1976, p. 77f.). Apart from this sustaining force, specific agents from beyond the visible realm are also assumed. These are the spirits of the departed, the “Badimo”, who may be of a very personal nature, when close to their descendants, and in a relation with them of providing guidance and sustenance, also acting as mediators to God, or moving on in time to become impersonal when no longer remembered (MBITI, 1990, pp. 24ff.). They may be invoked for providing rainfall or healing or for protection and fertility in the appropriate rites. This is connected to complex rites of (priestly) invocation, performed individually, at the level of the (extended) family or in the wider community. (SETILOANE, 1976, pp. 64ff.). The spirits are also believed to reincarnate themselves in subsequent generations. Tempels has described the outlines of this belief; its details have been described by following authors. Apart from these religious rites, involving the spirits and the supernatural in the communication with God, the handling of specific forces – of a good or evil nature – is a matter for the specialists, the diviners. In some Bantu societies, they also handle the field of herbal cures, in others they are distinct. In cases of illness or misfortune, it is their task to discern the supernatural factor in an affliction, apart from the medical, psychological or other natural causes involved (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 22f.). Admittance to training for this profession requires clear signs of mediumistic endowment. The candidates' natural faculties in this regard are developed in the course of structured, arduous training and are subjected to repeated examinations, as described by N. Mlisa (MLISA, 2009). Tempels has merely outlined this realm and its influence. He made it clear that it is a central aspect of Bantu cosmology, influencing many fields of life (the secular and the religious), not confined to healing alone (TEMPELS, 1959, p. 33). He did not treat this realm as a matter of unenlightened superstition, but integrated it in a comprehensive philosophical understanding, defending its dignity and seriousness to the European reader.

CONCLUSION

The impact of Tempels' book in the cultural transformation in European art, and the resonance of his depiction of the dynamism and holism of Bantu world view have been well understood and appreciated. What remains is the integration of the super-natural realm, sometimes conceptualised as "extended naturalism" to distinguish it categorically from the spiritual aspects which pervade both the natural and the super-natural, according to Bantu thought. Contemporary "cognitivist" approaches in Western culture and academia ride roughshod over the rich phenomenology and tested diagnostic means of identifying phenomena in this realm, accepting only that as "real" which can be subsumed under a materialistic view of the "brain", regardless of the knowledge and acumen as of African culture. Fascination by these well-documented phenomena (MLISA, 2009) in some parts of academia (ESSWE 7) is neutralized by a paradigm which is based on the cultural repression of the uncontrollable and denial of the enigmatic regardless of revisions in the field. The prevailing disregard of this aspect of Bantu ontology, which Tempels described and acknowledged conscientiously, requires revision. A readiness to become a stranger unto one's own culture and to enter the epistemological realms of another culture may be required – an attitude which Father Placide Tempels has convincingly and fruitfully lived up to. Chapters of his book still remain to be studied. It is reassuring to see that this is going on.

DISCUSSIONS:

Dr. Lily Rose Nomfundo MLISA (University of Ft. Hare, South Africa) was able to alleviate the somewhat pessimistic assessment that the ontology described by P. Tempels would continue to be rejected by European academic circles and relegated to the margins of the "ethnographic". She reported on her extensive connections to the Jungian Societies of South Africa and of Switzerland. Her own doctoral work is based on concepts described by Tempels. Hereby she stands in a tradition of engagement with Bantu philosophy by this influential society of psychoanalysts in clinical practice and academia.

Dr. Reto MELCHIOR (São Paulo) pointed out at the reception of some notions presented by Tempels by artists and theoreticians of French and Spanish Surrealism, the pathways of which remain to be explored.

Dr. Katerina KERESTETZI (CNRS, Paris/Toulouse) stated that while the ontological models presented by P. Tempels for Bantu philosophy are receiving some credit, recently, authors venturing in this realm like Dr. Diana Espírito Santo (Santiago de Chile, Pontifical University) have remained deliberately vague about cosmological models to support the corresponding phenomena of “ontological plasticity” and “recursivity”, preferring to limit themselves cautiously to such general formulae and to detailed documentations.

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