

THE INVENTION OF AFRICA

Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge¹

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Note from the Website Coordination

The publication of these parts of a fundamental book on representations of Africa, drawing on the analyses of a set of knowledges and discourses - from travel narratives or missionary works to anthropological studies and theories on 'primitive' art -, was thought in articulation with the virtual exhibit "African Art Photography: San Payo and Mário Novais". The latter can be also understood as pointing to the ways in which a set of epistemologies made possible the discourses that would offer the conditions of possibility for the exhibition and classification practices that would come to play a decisive role in the invention of 'African art'. It is this organization of knowledges that contemporary artistic and curatorial practices evoke, displace or contest, and that an analysis that associates historical depth with the questioning of epistemological presuppositions allows to critically recognize.

INTRODUCTION

This book evolved accidentally, as a result of an invitation to prepare a survey of African philosophy. Strictly speaking, the notion of African philosophy refers to contributions of Africans practicing philosophy within the defined framework of the discipline and its historical tradition (Horton, 1976; Hountondji, 1977). It is only metaphorically, or, at best, from a historicist perspective, that one would extend the notion of philosophy to African traditional systems of thought, considering them as dynamic processes in which concrete experiences are integrated into an order of concepts and discourses (Ladrière, 1979:14-15). I have thus preferred to speak of African *gnosis*. J. Fabian used the notion of *gnosis* in his analysis of a charismatic movement (1969). In this book, the wider frame seems better suited to the range of problems addressed, all of which are based on a preliminary question: to what extent can one speak of an African knowledge, and in what sense? Etymologically, *gnosis* is related to *gnosko*, which in the ancient Greek means "to know".

Specifically, *gnosis* means seeking to know, inquiry, methods of knowing, investigation, and even acquaintance with someone. Often the word is used in a more specialized sense, that of higher and esoteric knowledge, and thus it refers to a structured, common, and conventional knowledge, but one strictly under the control of specific procedures for its use as well as Transmission. *Gnosis* is, consequently,

¹ The administration of the website ArtAfrica is grateful to V. Y Mudimbe for the readiness with which he authorised the Portuguese translation of parts of the book *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). The added bibliography, only includes the authors who are mentioned or referred to.

different from *doxa* or opinion, and, on the other hand, cannot be confused with *episteme*, understood as both science and general intellectual configuration.

The title is thus a methodological tool: it embraces the question of what is and what is not African philosophy and also orients the debate in another direction by focusing on conditions of possibility of philosophy as part of the larger body of knowledge on Africa called "Africanism". I use this central notion of conditions of possibility in accordance with a recent tradition in which Michel Foucault could, for example, define his own intellectual ambition in terms of its dependence on alterations that Jean Hyppolite introduced into Hegelian philosophy (Foucault, 1982: 235-37). What the notion of conditions of possibility indicates is that discourses have not only sociohistorical origins but also epistemological contexts. It is the latter which make them possible and which can also account for them in an essential way.

I shall be dealing with discourses on African societies, cultures, and peoples as signs of something else. I would like to interrogate their modalities, significance, or strategies as a means of understanding the type of knowledge which is being proposed. In fact, I do not address the classical issues of African anthropology or history, the results of which might or might not mirror an objective African reality. Rather I am looking upstream of the results, precisely at what makes them possible, before accepting them as commentary on revelation, or restitution, of an African experience.

The book attempts, therefore, a sort of archaeology of African *gnosis* as a system of knowledge in which major philosophical questions recently have arisen: first, concerning the form, the content, and the style of "Africanizing" knowledge; second, concerning the status of traditional systems of thought and their possible relation to the normative genre of knowledge. From the first chapters, which interrogate Western images of Africa, through the chapters analyzing the power of anthropologists, missionaries, and ideologists, to the last, on philosophy, I am directly concerned with the processes of transformation of types of knowledge.

This orientation has two consequences: on the one hand, an apparent attenuation of the originality of African contributions and, on the other, an overemphasis upon external procedures, such as anthropological or religious influences. The fact of the matter is that, until now, Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order. Even in the most explicitly "Afrocentric" descriptions, models of analysis explicitly or implicitly, knowingly or unknowingly, refer to the same order. Does this mean that African *Weltanschauungen* and African traditional systems of thought are unthinkable and cannot be made explicit within the framework of their own rationality? My own claim is that thus far the ways in which they have been evaluated and the means used to explain them relate to theories and methods whose constraints, rules, and systems of operation suppose a non-African epistemological *locus*. From this viewpoint the claim of some African philosophers such as O. Bimwenyi (1981) and E. Eboussi-Boulaga (1981) that they represent an epistemological hiatus should be taken seriously. What does this mean for the field of African studies? To what extent can their perspectives modify the fact of a silent

dependence on a Western *episteme*? Would it then be possible to renew the notion of tradition from, let us say, a radical dispersion of African cultures?

These are the most important issues in the debate on African philosophy. They oblige me to clarify immediately my position about representatives of African gnosis. Who is speaking about it? Who has the right and the credentials to produce it, describe it, comment upon it, or at least present opinions about it? No one takes offense if an anthropologist is questioned. But strangely enough, Africanists - and among them anthropologists - have decided to separate the "real" African from the westernized African and to rely strictly upon the first. Rejecting this myth of the "man in the bush", J. Jahn chose to "turn to those Africans who have their own opinion and who will determine the future of Africa: those, in other words, of whom it is said that they are trying to revive the African tradition" (Jahn, 1961: 16). Yet, Jahn's decision seems exaggerated. I would prefer a wider authority: intellectuals' discourses as a critical library and, if I could, the experience of rejected forms of wisdom which are not part of the structures of political power and scientific knowledge.

In sum, rather than simply accept the authority of qualified representatives of African cultures, I would like to study the theme of the foundations of discourse about Africa. It is obvious that in such a subjective work I cannot claim to offer an exhaustive report analyzing all present tendencies or encompassing all within its frame. This book is only a critical synthesis of the complex questions about knowledge and power in and on Africa.

The presuppositions and hypotheses outlined above indicate a range of theoretical alternatives that I have been working on for the last fifteen years. If, from *L' Autre face du royaume* (1973) to *L' Odeur du père* (1982) and this contribution, my general view has somewhat changed, I believe that my major thesis has remained the same with respect to the analogical form of the social sciences and the history of Africanist discourse. These disciplines do not provide a real comprehension of the *Weltanschauungen* studied. Yet one can also say that it is in these very discourses that African worlds have been established as realities for knowledge. And today Africans themselves read, challenge, rewrite these discourses as a way of explicating and defining their culture, history, and being. It is obvious that since its inception Africanism has been producing its own motives as well as its objects, and fundamentally commenting upon its own being, while systematically promoting a *gnosis*. From this *gnosis* ultimately arose both African discourses on otherness and ideologies of alterity of which *négritude*, black personality, and African philosophy might be considered to be the best established in the present-day intellectual history of Africa.

Some of my critics (e.g., Mpoyi-Bwatu, 1983; N'Zembele, 1983; Willame, 1976) have aggressively urged me to draw political implications from my conclusions. Others, such as Mouralis (1981, 1984), have instead thought my project, that of dealing with taboo themes, overly ambitious. I only hope that some people would agree that the task of bringing philosophy to some of its own limits and metaphors in social science, and that of questioning philosophy's ambiguous contacts with unphilosophical discourses, justify my commitment not to philosophy, nor to an

invented Africa, but to what it essentially means to be an African and a philosopher today. I am grateful to L. Kaumba whose phenomenological study of the significance of identity in my literary work (Kaumba, 1986) forced me to reevaluate the implications of my theses about the Same and the Other in philosophical anthropology. Yet his critique meets my fundamental beliefs: identity and alterity are always given to others, assumed by an I or a We-subject, structured in multiple individual histories, and, at any rate, expressed or silenced according to personal desires vis-à-vis an *episteme*.

This also implies that from a methodological viewpoint I think, as Foucault put it, that "discourse in general and scientific discourse in particular, is so complex a reality that we not only can but should approach it at different levels and with different methods" (1973: xiv). For this essay I have chosen an archaeological perspective that allows me to address the issue of the progressive constitution of an African order of knowledge. However, for reasons having to do with the bizarre nature of some of the sources used - mainly the anthropological ones - I have preferred not to distinguish the epistemological level of knowledge from the archaeological level of knowledge.

I am deeply indebted to the joint Committee on African Studies of the Social Science Research Council in conjunction with the American Council of Learned Societies. They invited me to write this study and gave me the necessary facilities. A briefer and slightly different form of chapters three and five was published by the *African Studies Review* in 1985.

The bibliography at the end reveals my intellectual debt to many works and scholars. In this bibliography I present books I have indeed used. I did not think it important to include such authors as Aristotle, Descartes, Diderot, Rousseau, or Voltaire to whom I sometimes refer. In the same manner, it did not seem useful to include a number of narratives and texts by explorers, colonial theorists, and popes. They generally express a normative *doxa* and its submission to an *episteme*. As such, they reveal the development of anthropological and philosophical theories. As to non-English books I quote, I have often-but not always-consulted the originals, even when the existing translations were excellent. Yet apart from stated exceptions, I generally make reference to English versions when available. If an English edition is not mentioned in the bibliography, the translation is my own.

I must express explicitly my gratitude to some friends and colleagues without whom this book would, perhaps, not have been written, or certainly not yet finished: Elizabeth Boyi for her encouragement; Christie Agawu for her editorial assistance; Kofi Agawu, Paul Riesman, and Ivan Karp for their critical evaluations. I am particularly grateful to Arnd Bohm, Walter Michener, David Newbury, and Mildred Mortimer, whose patient reading of the entire manuscript and critical comments helped me clarify many points and translate my Gallic style into the English language. I extend my gratitude to Haverford College and in particular to Robert Stevens, Robert Gavin, Jr., Wyatt MacGaffey, and Judy Young for their support and generosity. Finally I have to express my special thanks to Shirley Averill for her useful suggestions, the typing of many drafts of the manuscript, and her unfailing patience. Roberta L. Diehl and Janet Rabinowitch, my editors, deserve grateful

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I

DISCOURSE OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE OF OTHERNESS

Colonizing Structure and Marginality

Lord have pity on us!... "*The human race?*" Phyllis exclaimed, stressing the second word in her astonishment. "That's what it says here," Jinn assured her. "Don't start off by interrupting me."

P. BOULLE, *Planet of the Apes*.

The scramble for Africa, and the most active period of colonization, lasted less than a century. These events, which involved the greater part of the African continent, occurred between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries. Although in African history the colonial experience represents but a brief moment from the perspective of today, this moment is still charged and controversial, since, to say the least, it signified a new historical form and the possibility of radically new types of discourses on African traditions and cultures. One might think that this new historical form has meant, from its origins, the negation of two contradictory myths; namely, the "Hobbesian picture of a pre-European Africa, in which there was no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continued fear, and danger of violent death"; and "the Rousseauian picture of an African golden age of perfect liberty, equality and fraternity" (Hodgkin, 1957:174-75).

Although generalizations are of course dangerous, colonialism and colonization basically mean organization, arrangement. The two words derive from the latin word *colère*, meaning to cultivate or to design. Indeed the historical colonial experience does not and obviously cannot reflect the peaceful connotations of these words. But it can be admitted that the colonists (those settling a region), as well as the colonialists (those exploiting a territory by dominating a local majority) have all tended to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs.

I would suggest that in looking at this process, it is possible to use three main keys to account for the modulations and methods representative of colonial organization: the procedures of acquiring, distributing, and exploiting lands in colonies; the policies of domesticating natives; and the manner of managing ancient organizations and implementing new modes of production. Thus, three complementary hypotheses and actions emerge: the domination of physical space, the reformation of natives' minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective. These complementary projects constitute what might be called the colonizing structure, which completely embraces the physical, human, and spiritual aspects of the colonizing experience (see, e.g., Christopher, 1984: 27-87). This structure clearly also indicates the projected metamorphosis envisioned, at great intellectual cost, by ideological and theoretical texts, which from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the 1950s have proposed programs for “regenerating” the African space and its inhabitants.

A. Césaire thinks that “the great historical tragedy of Africa has been not so much that it was too late in making contact with the rest of the world, as the manner in which that contact was brought about; that Europe began to propagate at a time when it had fallen into the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industry.” (Césaire, 1972:23)

He refers to the second part of the nineteenth century, emphasizing the coexistence of “imperialist” ideology, economic and political processes for extending control over African space, and capitalist institutions which ultimately led to dependence and underdevelopment (see also Mazrui, 1974). In a recent book, D. K. Fieldhouse writes that “only a dogmatist would attempt to state categorically that colonialism was either totally inconsistent with economic development in the dependencies or, alternatively, that it was the best possible medium for stimulating their growth. Colonialism was not sufficiently consistent over time to justify any such sweeping assertions, nor were its objectives sufficiently coherent to achieve any particular result” (1981:103). Thus colonialism has been some kind of historical accident, a “largely unplanned and, as it turned out, transient phase in the evolving relationship between more and less developed parts of the world” (1981: 49). This accident, on the whole, according to this view, was not the worst thing that could have happened to the black continent.

Essentially, the argument is not new. It has a history that goes back' to the debate of the early decades of this century. In his book, *Imperialism: A Study*, J. A. Hobson linked the scramble for Africa to capitalism and capitalist search for higher profits from colonial conquests. For J. A. Schumpeter, in 1919, colonialism as well as its

cause, imperialism, did not obey logic. It was “non-rational and irrational purely instinctual inclinations toward war and conquest” that guided “objectless tendencies toward forcible expansion, without definite, utilitarian limits” (Schumpeter, 1951: 83). Against the Leninist theme of *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), he stated that “a purely capitalist world offers no fertile soil to imperialist impulses . . . capitalism is by nature anti-imperialist” (1951: 96). And in a voluminous document full of statistics, *The Balance Sheets of Imperialism* (1936), Grover Clark demonstrated that colonialism was not only economically irrational but also ruinous for the colonial powers.

On the opposite side, at the risk of being labeled dogmatists, Marxist interpreters accept the essentials of Lenin's thesis. The contention of neo-Marxists such as Samir Amin, Paul Baran, André Gunder-Frank, and Immanuel Wallerstein is that if colonialism was inconsistent with economic development, it was at least, since its inception, quite consistent with its own economic interests and objectives.

Accordingly, colonialism should have produced a body of knowledge on the means of exploiting dependencies (Rodney, 1981). It should also have produced a kind of empirical technique for implementing structural distortions by positing four main political propositions: first, priority given to the industrial revolution over the agricultural revolution; second, the simultaneous promotion of all branches of industry with a preferential approach to heavy industry; third, emphasis on tertiary and service activities; fourth, preference for exports to the detriment of the total economic system (Amin, 1973). The outcome of these policies was the process of underdevelopment initiated everywhere colonialism occurred. This process can be summed up in three points: First, the capitalist world system is such that parts of the system always develop at the expense of other parts, either by trade or by the transfer of surpluses. Second, the underdevelopment of dependencies is not only an absence of development, but also an organizational structure created under colonialism by bringing non-Western territory into the capitalist world. Third, despite their economic potential, dependencies lack the structural capacity for autonomy and sustained growth, since their economic fate is largely determined by the developed countries (Amin, 1974; Gunder-Frank, 1969; Wallerstein, 1979). From this last contention, some theorists have quickly hypothesized that if Japan has escaped the predicament of underdevelopment, it is because it is the only non-Western country to have escaped colonialism (Bigo, 1974: 32, 60).

It seems impossible to make any statement about colonialism without being a dogmatist, particularly where economic organization and growth are concerned. Different as they are in form and intention, the Marxist and peripheral theories have nevertheless the same focus: overseas territory, totally reorganized and submitted to a Western model (Mommsen, 1983). The first theory considers colonial imperialism as a calculated and inevitable culmination of capitalism. If the latter discounts the planned aspect of colonialism, it still assumes the phenomenon to be a consequence of European industrialization and development, somehow bound to expand overseas. Whatever theory one accepts, the application remains the same, leading inevitably to what I have called the colonizing structure responsible for producing marginal

societies, cultures, and human beings (Emmanuel, 1969; Bairoch, 1971). Therefore, for the purpose of clarity further on, let me make clear the dichotomy that this structure creates and which is a sign of what I. Sachs calls “eurocentrism.” It is a model which “dominates our thought and given its projection on the world scale by the expansion of capitalism and the colonial phenomenon, it marks contemporary culture imposing itself as a strongly conditioning model for some and forced deculturation for others.” (Sachs, 1971: 22; quoted by Bigo, 1974: 23, n.3)

Because of the colonializing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional *versus* modern; oral *versus* written and printed; agrarian and customary communities *versus* urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies *versus* highly productive economies. In Africa a great deal of attention is generally given to the evolution implied and promised by the passage from the former paradigms to the latter (Mudimbe, 1980). This presupposed jump from one extremity (underdevelopment) to the other (development) is in fact misleading. By emphasizing the formulation of techniques of economic change, the model tends to neglect a structural mode inherited from colonialism. Between the two extremes there is an intermediate, a diffused space in which social and economic events define the extent of marginality (Bigo, 1974: 20; Shaw, 1985: 33-36). At the economic level, for example, if the relatively low productivity of traditional processes of production (formerly adapted to the then-existing markets and range of trade and exchanges) has been disrupted by a new division of labor which depends upon international markets, then transformation has meant a progressive destruction of traditional realms of agriculture and crafts (Meillassoux, 1975: 115). As a second example, one could regard the social disintegration of African societies and the growing urban proletariat as results of a destabilization of customary organizations by an incoherent establishment of new social arrangements and institutions (Turnbull, 1962; Memmi, 1966; Mair, 1975). Finally, if at the cultural and religious levels, through schools, churches, press, and audio-visual media the colonializing enterprise diffused new attitudes which were contradictory and richly complex models in terms of culture, spiritual values, and their transmission, it also broke the culturally unified and religiously integrated schema of most African traditions (Bimwenyi, 1981). From that moment on the forms and formulations of the colonial culture and its aims were somehow the means of trivializing the whole traditional mode of life and its spiritual framework. The potential and necessary transformations meant that the mere presence of this new culture was a reason for the rejection of unadapted persons and confused minds.

Marginality designates the intermediate space between the so-called African tradition and the projected modernity of colonialism. It is apparently an urbanized space in which, as S. Amin noted, “vestiges of the past, especially the survival of structures that are still living realities (tribal ties, for example), often continue to hide the new structures (ties based on class, or on groups defined by their position in the capitalist system)” (1974: 377). This space reveals not so much that new imperatives could achieve a jump into modernity, as the fact that despair gives this intermediate space

its precarious pertinence and, simultaneously, its dangerous importance. As P. Bigo put it recently:

The young nations rightly fear seeing their original world swallowed up in the whirlpools of industrial society and disappear forever, somewhat like animal species we try with difficulty and often in vain to protect against the invasion of technical man. (Bigo, 1974: 23)

There is no doubt that direct or indirect colonialism always provokes in the countries that experience it cultural constraint, a contamination the more profound as it is hidden. Lifestyles and modes of thinking of the dominant nations tend to impose themselves on the dominated nations. Moreover, they are accepted, even sought after. Models spring up, alienating factors for the people who adopt them. (Bigo, 1974: 24)

At any rate, this intermediary space could be viewed as the major signifier of underdevelopment. It reveals the strong tension between a modernity that often is an illusion of development, and a tradition that sometimes reflects a poor image of a mythical past. It also unveils the empirical evidence of this tension by showing concrete examples of developmental failures such as demographic imbalance, extraordinarily high birth rates, progressive disintegration of the classic family structure, illiteracy, severe social and economic disparities, dictatorial regimes functioning under the cathartic name of democracy, the breakdown of religious traditions, the constitution of syncretic churches, etc. (Bairoch, 1971; Bigo, 1974).

In general, troubled by such confusion, social scientists prefer to plead for a reassessment of programs of modernization. No doubt many theories are still to be proposed and plans to be made. Yet one may already understand that this marginal space has been a great problem since the beginning of the colonializing experience; rather than being a step in the imagined “evolutionary process,” it has been the locus of paradoxes that called into question the modalities and implications of modernization in Africa.

Discursive Formations and Otherness

It is certain that the learned Antelle, without being a misanthrope, was not interested at all in human beings. He would often declare that he did not expect much from them anymore....

P. BOUILLE, *Planet of the Apes*

The colonializing structure, even in its most extreme manifestations - such as the crisis of South Africa (see, e.g., Seidman, 1985) - might not be the only explanation

for Africa's present-day marginality. Perhaps this marginality could, more essentially, be understood from the perspective of wider hypotheses about the classification of beings and societies. It would be too easy to state that this condition, at least theoretically, has been a consequence of anthropological discourses. Since Turgot (who in the 1750s first classified languages and cultures according to “whether the peoples [are] hunters, shepherds, or husbandmen” [1913-1923, 1, 172] and ultimately defined an ascending path from savagery to commercial societies), non-Western marginality has been a sign both of a possible absolute beginning and of a primitive foundation of conventional history. Rather than retracing an already too well-known evolutionary hallucination (Duchet, 1971; Hodgen, 1971), let us take a different angle by examining both the issues derived from a fifteenth-century painting and the allocation of an “African object” to nineteenth-century anthropology.



Velázquez, Diego Rodríguez de Silva y, *Las Meninas*. approx. 1656. Oil on canvas (318 cm x 276 cm). Museo del Prado.

Commenting upon *Las Meninas* of Velázquez, M. Foucault writes: “the painter is standing a little back from his canvas. He is glancing at his model; perhaps he is considering whether to add some finishing touch, though it is also possible that the first stroke has not yet been made...” (1973: 3). The painter is at one side of the canvas working or meditating on how to depict his models. Once the painting is finished, it becomes both a given and a reflection of what made it possible. And

Foucault thinks that the order of *Las Meninas* seems to be an example of “a representation [which] undertakes to represent itself... in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being”. Yet in the amazing complexity of this painting there is remarkable absence: “the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance” (Foucault, 1973:16).



"Gennea". Engraving according to Hans Burgkmair's painting, *Exotic tribes*. Two sheets of a printed ribbon from eight states blocks. Woodcut and letterpress. 1511. British Museum.

Now let us consider Hans Burgkmair's painting *Exotic Tribe*. Is the painter sitting back contemplating his exotic models? How many? It is not even certain that a model is present in the room where Burgkmair is thinking about ways of subsuming particular versions of human beings. The year is 1508. Dürer is still alive. Burgkmair is by then a respected master of the new school of Augsburg he has founded. He would like to please the Fuggers and Welsers and has agreed to illustrate Springer's book on his travels overseas (Kunst, 1967). He has carefully read Springer's diary, has probably studied some clumsy pencil or pen-and-ink sketches, and has decided to draw six pictures of “primitives”.

The first picture of the series seems to represent a family. Let us imagine the painter at work. He has just read Springer's description of his voyage, and, possibly on the basis of some sketches, he is trying to create an image of blacks in “Gennea”. Perhaps he has decided to use a model, presumably white but strongly built. The painter is staring at the pale body, imagining schemes to transform it into a black entity. The model has become a mirror through which the painter evaluates how the norms of similitude and his own creativity would impart both a human identity and a

racial difference to his canvas. Perhaps the artist is already at work. Yet he has to stop regularly, walk around the model, leave the luminous space before the window, and retire into a discreet corner. His gaze addresses a point which is a question: how to superimpose the African characteristics described in Springer's narrative onto the norms of the Italian *contrapposto*? If he succeeds, the painting should be, in its originality, a celebration and a reminder of the natural link connecting human beings and, at the same time, an indication of racial or cultural differences. It should bear witness to the truth of similitudes, analogies, and possibly even the violence of antipathy. At any rate, Kunst notes that

The nude African depicted from behind conforms to the classical rule of *contrapposto* expressed in the compensatory balance of symmetrical parts of the body in movement: one shoulder leaning on one leg and the other, raised above the free leg. One guesses that this nude man was copied from a classic model to which the artist gave characteristics, jewelry and swords, of an exotic people still strongly attached to nature. (Kunst, 1967:19-20)

It is easy to dismiss my concern about similitude in this particular creative process. Am I not projecting a twentieth-century perspective onto the pictorial techniques of the early sixteenth century? The structure of figures is there in the first small painting, treated in a typical way. The fuss about similitude might just be, after all, only a contemporary hypothesis about the process of establishing links between beings and things from our present viewpoint.

Yet it is possible to look for issues stemming from Burgkmair's representation. In effect, we can describe his artistic filiation and his dependence upon the classic ideals of the Renaissance (Kunst, 1967: 20). We can also compare the principles of his technique with those apparent in some contemporary works directly or indirectly dealing with black figures, such as Erasmus Grasser's *Moor Dancers* (1480), Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Delights* (1500), *Katleen the Moor Woman* (1521) by Albrecht Dürer, and at the very end of the century, Cornelisz van Haarlem's *Batseba*.



Erasmus Grasser. *Moor Dancers* (1480) [Münchner Stadtmuseum](#).



Hieronimus Bosch, *The Garden of Delights*. 1500-1515. Oil-on-wood panels (220 x 389 cm). Museo del Prado.



Albrecht Dürer. *Katleen the Moor Woman*, 1521. Drawing. 20x14,1 cm. Istituti museali della Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Fiorentino, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence. See the the [catalog](#) of the exhibition “Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe” // Cornelisz van Haarlem. *Batseba*. 1594. 77,5 x 64 cm. Rijksmuseum



In Gennea, engraving according to Hans Burgkmaier, the Elder. (1,75x2,64 cm). British Museum.

Speculating about or analyzing the contrasts between white and black figures in these paintings, one could certainly search for a vision which refers to historically conventional explanations—for example, the sense of the characteristics and “the idea of design, that is to say, of expression by means of the pure disposition of contours and masses, and by the perfection and ordering of linear rhythm” (Fry, 1940: 165). The complex play of colors in harmony and opposition, the order of shades between the white and the black, are obviously based on such intellectual and conscious references. But does not our understanding of the colorful economies of canvases refer, in a very insistent manner, to invisible traces?

The contrasts between black and white tell a story which probably duplicates a silent but powerful epistemological configuration. *Ex hypothesi* it might simply be a similitude interplay: “*Convenientia, aemulatio*, analogy, and sympathy tell us how the world must fold upon itself, duplicate itself, reflect itself, or form a chain with itself so that things can resemble one another. They tell us what the paths of similitude are and the directions they take; but not where it is, how one sees it, or by what mark it may be recognized” (Foucault, 1973: 23-24).

Let us return to Burgkmair's finished painting. The three black figures - a boy, a man, a seated woman with a baby pressed to her breast - have the right proportions to one another and to the wider context. All are naked and have either bracelets around their arms or strings around their necks, clear signs that they belong to a “savage” universe

(Kunst, 1967:20). The little boy is dancing, his oversized head turned toward the sky. At the center of the canvas, the man, presented in clear, strong lines, is staring at a faraway horizon, brandishing an arrow with his left hand and holding two other



Frontispiece of John Ogilby's *Africa being an accurate description of the regions of Ægypt, Barbary, Lybia, and Billedulgerid, the land of Negroes, Guinee, Æthiopia and the Abyssines*, London. Printed by Tho. Johnson for the author. 1670.

arrows in his right hand. He incarnates power, not only because he occupies the central place in the painting, but also because he is the most well-defined signifier in this scene. He is the *locus* defining the relationship between the boy at his left and the woman at his right, depicted with both a touch of hieratic sense and a slightly instinctual force. At the right, the woman with the baby is seated on a trunk. She seems to be staring pensively at the pelvic area of the man. The curves of her body are canonically executed.

The whole picture, in its simplicity and in the balanced rhythms of its lines, seems a truly charming and decorative painting. Yet what it really expresses is a discursive order. The structure of the figures, as well as the meaning of the nude bodies, proclaim the virtues of resemblances: in order to designate Springer's blacks, the painter has represented blackened whites. This was not rare during the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, as a great number of the drawings of the period reveal. That is the case for example, of the fifth picture in Filippo Pigafetta's 1591 edition of his *Relatione del Reame di Congo*, representing three Italianized African women, and that of the African king in the frontispiece of J. Ogilby's 1670 book on Africa. What is important in Burgkmair's painting, as well as in similar drawings, is their double representation.

The first, whose objective is to assimilate exotic bodies into sixteenth-century Italian painting methodology, reduces and neutralizes all differences into the sameness signified by the white norm, which, let us keep in mind, is more religious history than a simple cultural tradition. In concrete language this reference meant a “biblical solution to the problem of cultural differences [which] was regarded by most men as the best that reason and faith could propose” (Hodgen, 1971: 254); that is, the same origin for all human beings, followed by geographical diffusion and racial and



Velázquez (Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez), *Juan de Pareja*. 1650. Oil on canvas (81.3 x 69.9 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

cultural diversification. And it was believed that the Bible stipulated that the African could only be the slave of his brethren.

There is another level, a more discreet one. It establishes a second representation that unites through similitude and eventually articulates distinctions and separations, thus classifying types of identities. Briefly, I can say that in Burgkmair's painting there are two representational activities: on the one hand, signs of an epistemological order which, silently but imperatively, indicate the processes of integrating and differentiating figures within the normative sameness; on the other hand, the excellence of an exotic picture that creates a cultural distance, thanks to an accumulation of accidental differences, namely, nakedness, blackness, curly hair, bracelets, and strings of pearls.

In their arrangements, these differences are pertinent signs. Because of the fundamental order which they reveal, and to which they bear witness, the virtues of resemblance erase physical and cultural variations, while maintaining and positing surface differences as meaningful of human complexity. Diego Velázquez's *Juan de Pareja* (1648) still actualizes this integrating reference, whereas major paintings such as Peter Paul Rubens's *Study of Four Blacks' Heads* (1620), Rembrandt's *Two Negroes* (1697), and Hyacinthe Rigaud's *Young Black* (1697) explicitly express and relate to another order. A new epistemological foundation was then functioning in the West. Theories of diversification of beings, as well as classificatory tables, explain the origins of constructing taxonomies and their objectives (Foucault, 1973: 125-65). The framework of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* (1735) is just one of the paradigmatic classifications of species and varieties of Homo Sapiens (europaeus, asiaticus, americanus, afer) distinguished according to physical and temperamental characteristics (Count, 1950: 355). It would be too easy to link it, upstream, to discursive formations about the great chain of beings and its hierarchy, and, downstream, first to Blumenbach's craniology and, second, to the general anti-African bias of the philosophical and scientific literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Lyons, 1975:24-85).



Rembrandt. *Two Negroes*. 1661. Oil on canvas. 77,8 x 64,4 cm. Haia, [Mauritshuis](#)



Hyacinthe Rigaud. *Young Negro with a Bow*, c. 1700. **Oil on canvas** (44,5 x 57cm). [Dunkerque, Musée des Beaux-Arts](#)



Peter Paul Rubens. *Study of Four Blacks' Heads* (1620). Oil on canvas. 51 x 66 cm. [Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium](#)

Two very different discursive formations - the discovery of African art and the constitution of the object of African Studies, that is, the “invention” of Africanism as a scientific discipline - can illustrate the differentiating efficiency of such general classifying devices as pattern of reality, designation, arrangement, structure, and character. I have already suggested that resemblance has been pushed out of Rubens's, Rembrandt's, and Rigaud's perceptions of blacks. What is there, given in detailed description, might be considered as a naming and an analysis of an alterity and refers to a new epistemological ordering: a theory of understanding and looking at signs in terms of “the arrangement of identities and differences into ordered tables” (Foucault, 1973: 72).

Portuguese sailors brought to Europe the first *feitiços*, African objects supposedly having mysterious powers, in the late fifteenth-century. One finds them mostly in well-organized curio cabinets, along with Indian tomahawks or arrows, Egyptian artifacts, and Siamese drums. Some interpreters do consider them to be signs of a state of barbarism (Hodgen, 1971: 162-203). Yet one can firmly state that more frequently they are seen as simple curiosities brought back in accordance with the tenth task of the traveler observer in the table of Varenus's *Geographia generalis* (1650): to consider “famous Men, Artificers, and Inventions of the Natives of all countries” (Hodgen, 1971: 167-68). On the whole, these objects are culturally neutral. Because of their shapes and styles, sometimes a bit terrifying, they account for the mysterious diversity of the Same (Bal, 1963: 67). It is not until the eighteenth century that, as strange and “ugly” artifacts, they really enter into the frame of African art.

The black continent was still on the maps a *terra incognita*, but its peoples and their material productions were more familiar to travelers, students of the human species, merchants, and European states. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, there had been a tremendous increase in the slave trade and a profitable trans-Atlantic

economy which involved most of the Western countries. In West Africa, Dahomey was a powerful commercial partner of European traders. The Ashanti empire expanded, dominating the Akans and the Oyo kingdom further to the east and increasing its power as it grew. Freed slaves and impoverished Africans were settled by European sponsored organizations in present-day Sierra Leone. On the east coast, in 1729, Africans expelled the Portuguese from their fortresses in the northern region of Mozambique; and down south, in 1770, there was the first war between Dutch immigrants and Bantus. Two years later, James Bruce, traveling from North to Central Africa, reached the source of the White Nile in the very year that Chief Justice Mansfield declared in England that slavery was against the law (Verger, 1968).

In this atmosphere of intense and violent exchanges, *feitiços* became symbols of African art. They were viewed as primitive, simple, childish, and nonsensical. Mary H. Kingsley, at the beginning of this century, summed it up with an axiomatic evaluation: "The African has never made an even fourteenth-rate piece of cloth or pottery" (Kingsley, 1965: 669). It seems to me that "a process of aesthetization" (Baudrillard, 1972) took place from the eighteenth century onward. What is called savage or primitive art covers a wide range of objects introduced by the contact between African and European during the intensified slave trade into the classifying frame of the eighteenth century. These objects, which perhaps are not art at all in their "native context," become art by being given simultaneously an aesthetic character and a potentiality for producing and reproducing other artistic forms. Taken in their initial function and significance, might they have created a radical *mise en perspective* of the Western culture wedded to classifications (Baudrillard, 1972)? That is precisely an impossibility. Arts are based on criteria, and it is difficult to imagine that these standards can emerge from outside the "power-knowledge" field of a given culture, a field which, at a historical period, establishes its artistic bible. Therefore it is obvious that fetishes and other "primitive" pieces of art are wonderful because their structure, character, and arrangement demand a designation (Laude, 1979; Wassing, 1969). They are "savage" in terms of the evolutionary chain of being and culture, which establishes a correspondence between advancement in the civilizing process and artistic creativity, as well as intellectual achievements.

At this point, paradoxically, it is a celebration of the African craftsmanship which confirms my analysis. Admiring the beauty of a "Negro sculpture," the late R. Fry was puzzled:

It is curious that a people who produced such great artists did not produce also a culture in our sense of the word. This shows that two factors are necessary to produce the cultures which distinguish civilized peoples. There must be, of course, the creative artist, but there must also be the power of conscious critical appreciation and comparison. (Fry, 1940: 90-91)

Fry is, I am afraid, utterly wrong. The two factors do not and cannot explicate types of cultures. They only constitute a basis for the production of art and its possible

modifications over time (see Laude, 1979; Delange, 1967). They cannot completely account for the internal patterns of cultures. At any rate, it is the “power-knowledge” of an epistemological field which makes possible a domineering or humbled culture. From this perspective, the point that Fry makes immediately after has great sense: “It is likely enough that the Negro artist, although capable of... profound imaginative understanding of form, would accept our cheapest illusionist art with humble enthusiasm” (1940: 91).

My thesis is confirmed, almost *ad absurdum*, by B. Jules-Rosette's study of contemporary African tourist art. She defines this art as an “art produced locally for consumption by outsiders” (1984:9) and strongly insists on the paradoxical interaction between its origin and its destination, that is, its production and its consumption:

Although the concept of the tourist art system emphasizes how artists and their audiences perceive images and convert them into economic commodities, it does not neglect the expressive components of the interaction. Within the system, both images and actual objects constitute sources of exchange between producers and consumers. Although artists have a definite impression of the tourist audience, consumers often have little direct contact with the artists. (Jules-Rosette, 1984:10)

This concept of tourist art implies, in principle, a critique of the classical understanding of art. It also explicitly means a relativization of what the author calls “assumptions about the manner and quality of tourist art productions”; namely, its mass production character, the relative inexperience of present-day craftspeople, the collectivization in the artistic production, and the dominance of consumer demand over artistic creativity.

A limpid argument upholds the thesis of the study. Tourist art is both a symbolic and an economic exchange. This can be understood, according to Jules-Rosette, by reference to three models: First, the traditional African arts that have ceremonial and social significance may and do become objects produced primarily for external trade. Second, there are, in the very being of tourist art, signs of a major tension existing between “folk culture” and “haute culture”. Or, as Jules-Rosette puts it: “Folk culture is implicitly contrasted with something else-haute culture... There is an inherent tension and asymmetry between the ideals of high culture and the profit motives and new reproductive technologies that sustain the growth of the market of popular cultures” (1984: 23). As to the horizons of this artistic production, Jules-Rosette insists on the fact of Western reading of African creativity and its propositions for innovations in African workshops.

The international tourist art market depends upon the Western demand for “exotic” souvenir and gift items and the assumption that they should be

procured abroad. The artists and craftspeople utilize this demand as a stimulus for creating new ideas and technologies to meet the needs of the expanding market. (Jules-Rosette, 1984:1192)

African tourist art and its contradictions (is it an art? in which sense and according to what kind of aesthetic grid?) are just an *ad vallem* consequence of the process which, during the slave trade period, classified African artifacts according to the grid of Western thought and imagination, in which alterity is a negative category of the Same. It is significant that a great number of European representations of Africans, or more generally of the continent, demonstrated this ordering of otherness. For example, Andreas Schlüter's painting, *Africa* (1700), is structured upon a complex relation between a nude black woman and a frightening lion standing protectively behind her voluptuous body.



Andreas Schlüter. *Africa*. C. 1700. Knights Room, Royal Palace. Berlin (destroyed in 1945).

The *African Allegory* (1765) of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (t. IV, fol. 164) is a biblical and scientific text. The continent's name is linked etymologically to Afer, Abraham's son, yet in contrast the continent's peculiarity is presented with powerful symbols: the black color of a horned woman, a monstrous animal with a human face surrounded by serpents and bizarre birds. The African has become not only the Other who is everyone else except me, but rather the key which, in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same. G. B. Tiepolo's *Africa* (1750-1753), Delacroix's *Algerian Women* (1834), and a multitude of other paintings can be read for their implications: traces of something else whisper, slips of color reveal the meanings, and treads of a secret stair indicate the magnitude of a new order.



Ripa, Cesare. *Iconologia ovvero Descrizione d'Imagini delle Virtù, Viti, Affetti, Passioni humane, Corpi celesti, Mondo e sue parti* [1611]

These representations are contemporary with the Enlightenment discussions on such axiomatic propositions as “men are born unequal” and such questions as “the place of the savage in the chain of being” (Duchet, 1971; Hodgen, 1971). In the following years, the sagas of exploration begin with J. Bruce's expedition into Ethiopia in 1770 and Mungo Park's journey to the river Niger in 1795. The novel text which emerges from these expeditions is not fundamentally original (see, e.g., Hammond and Jablow, 1977). It reveals characteristics already well circumscribed and established. The distinction between “savage Negro” and “civil Mohometan”, and the commentaries on the Africans' indolence, their unbridled passions, and their cruelty or mental retardation were already there. They formed part of the series of oppositions and of the levels of classification of humans demanded by the logic of the chain of being and the stages of progress and social development. Explorers just brought new proofs which could explicate “African inferiority”. Since Africans could produce nothing of value; the technique of Yoruba statuary must have come from Egyptians; Benin art must be a Portuguese creation; the architectural achievement of Zimbabwe was due to Arab technicians; and Hausa and Buganda statecraft were inventions of white invaders (Davidson, 1959; Lugard, 1905; Randall-MacIver, 1906; Sanders, 1969; Mallows, 1984).



Gian Battista Tiepolo. *Africa* (detail). 1752/53. Fresco in the Staircase of the Würzburg Residence



Eugène Delacroix. *Algerian Women*. 1834 (180 cm × 229 cm). Musée du Louvre.

This tendency appears in other fields as well. Two French botanists, A. Chevalier in 1938 and R. Portères in the 1950s, suggested that the African continent could have been a very early locus of plant domestication (see e.g., Portères, 1950 and 1962). On the basis of linguistic data, the anthropologist G. P. Murdock expounded a similar proposition and postulated a “Sudanic complex of crops” (Murdock, 1959). These hypotheses were dismissed, and today “by far the most popular view of the origins of cereal-crop agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa is that it was the product of human

migration or some form of culture diffusion or stimulus deriving from south-west Asia” (Desmond Clark and Brandt, 1984: 111; see also Reed, 1977).

Here is a last illustration. The work of M. Griaule and his disciples in Dogon country has demonstrated the complexity of Dogon astronomical knowledge and its symbolism (e.g., Griaule, 1948, 1952; Griaule and Dieterlen, 1965, 1976; Dieterlen, 1941; Heusch, 1985). Carl Sagan, professor of astronomy at Cornell University, assumed the task of checking the validity of Dogon cosmology. Sagan begins by noting his surprise: “In contrast to almost all prescientific societies, the Dogon hold that the planets as well as the Earth rotate about their axes and revolve about the Sun...” (Sagan, 1983: 81). Strangely enough, rather than using Griaule and his disciples' documentation, Sagan exploits a certain Temple, who summarized Griaule's discoveries: “The Dogon go further. They hold that Jupiter has four satellites and that Saturn is encircled by a ring ... Unlike every astronomer before Kepler, the Dogon are said to depict the planets moving correctly in elliptical, not circular orbits” (1983: 81). Most amazing for Sagan seems to be the following:

[The Dogons] contend that [Sirius] has a dark and invisible companion star which orbits Sirius . . . once every fifty years. They state that the companion star is very small and very heavy, made of a special metal called “Sagala” which is not found on Earth. The remarkable fact is that the visible star does have an extraordinary dark companion, Sirius B which orbits it in an elliptical orbit once each 50.04 ± 0.09 years. Sirius B is the first example of a white dwarf star discovered by modern astrophysics. Its matter is in a state called “relativistically degenerate”, which does not exist on Earth, and since the electrons are not bound to the nuclei in such degenerate matter, it can properly be described as metallic. (Sagan, 1983: 83)

How can we explain the Dogons' astronomical knowledge? Sagan has a hypothesis: “I picture a Gallic visitor to the Dogon people... He may have been a diplomat, an explorer, an adventurer or an early anthropologist...” (1983: 87). This man has read, or perhaps still has, a copy of Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington's book, *The Nature of the Physical World*, published in 1928, in which the density of white dwarf stars is discussed.

The conversation turns to astronomical lore. Sirius is the brightest star in the sky. The Dogon regale the visitor with their Sirius mythology. Then, smiling politely, expectantly, they inquire of their visitor what his Sirius myth might be . . . The white dwarf companion of Sirius being a current astronomical sensation, the traveler exchanges a spectacular myth for a routine one. After he leaves, his account is remembered, retold and eventually incorporated into the corpus of Dogon mythology... When Marcel Griaule makes mythological inquiries in the 1930s and 1940s, he has his own European Sirius myth played back to him. (Sagan, 1983: 88)

All this is sheer speculation. Had Sagan carefully consulted knowledgeable sources (e.g., Griaule, 1948; Dieterlen, 1971; Griaule and Dieterlen, 1965) he would not have confused facts and symbolic levels in order to make his point about a beautiful “full-cycle return of a myth.” Let us note three facts. First, the orbiting cycle of Sirius B is analogized and reflected in the celebration of the *sigui*, a ritual introduced by a mythical ancestor of the Dogons, Dyongu Seru. It is celebrated every sixty years; a symbolic period that integrates the fifty years of the revolution of Sirius B (for Dogons, the “star of the *fonio*”) plus ten years which makes the ritual agree with the old Mande system of numeration by sixty and with its esoteric symbols (Dieterlen, 1971: 2-3). The last *sigui* ritual took place in 1967 and was filmed by J. Rouch and G. Dieterlen and released under the title *La Caverne de Bongo* (1969, 35mm. in color). The preceding *sigui* performance was in 1907, and before that in 1847. “The rite is celebrated under the ‘sign’ of the ‘star of the fonio.’ Indeed, this ‘companion’ of Sirius is the representation in the sky of the little fonio seed...” (Heusch, 1985: 147). Second, if one wants to validate Sagan's hypothesis, one should, in fact, demonstrate that a European traveler hurried to the Dogon region just after the 1844 discovery by F. W. Bessel of the sinusoidal motion of Sirius. He must have taught it well for the Dogons promptly to integrate it in their myths to the point that it could perfectly function in a set of major founding symbols in time for the 1847 ritual of *sigui*. Third, the preceding supposition seems difficult since the existence of Sirius B was, in Western science, really discovered in 1862 by A. G. Clark. Dogons had already used the symbolism of the *fonio* in their 1847 and 1787 rituals of *sigui*. Specialists in “oral civilizations” can easily check this. At the same time, they should evaluate the historical credibility and context of Dyongu Seru, who according to Dogon tradition is both the one “responsible for the loss of immortality” and the inventor of the *sigui* cycle (Heusch, 1985; Griaule and Dieterlen, 1965). On the other hand, I see another problem: the Dogons' concept of *sagala*, a metal which does not exist on earth and which constitutes the nature of Sirius's companion, is strongly linked to the *sigui* mythical cycle. It thus seems to go relatively far back in the history of the ritual, whereas in Western science the hypothesis of the “relativistically degenerate nature” of Sirius B was made for the first time in the 1930s. Most scientists did not then accept the concept, which, by the way, was proposed by an Indian scholar, S. Chandrasekhar.

To conclude this long illustration of an epistemological ethnocentrism, I suppose by now it has become clear how controversial Carl Sagan's hypothesis is. Let us sum up. First, I do not believe that the Dogons got their astronomical knowledge from extraterrestrials. The “bad faith” (in the Sartrean sense) with which Sagan destroys the theses and fantasies of E. von Däniken who claims this in *Chariots of the Gods* (1970, New York) and *Gods from Outer Space* (1978, New York) makes me suspect that Sagan and von Däniken are probably closer than they suspect. Second, Sagan's way of treating the Dogons well illustrates the power of a will to truth. A metaphor might generalize this case. Let us imagine a theorist who is enclosed in Euclidean geometry. He thinks about, believes in, and writes on the impossibility of non-Euclidean systems. These, in effect, would incarnate the possibility of incredible

contradictions such as the intellectual reality of an intrinsic truth (e.g., a validly demonstrated theorem in Euclidean geometry), which would be simultaneously an extrinsic error, that is, a validly negated proposition in the logic of a non-Euclidean geometry. As we know, there are such things as non-Euclidean geometries. Thus my metaphor could at least become a symbol: it might not make sense at all to reduce non-Euclidean systems to Euclid's, since the systems spring from radically different postulates and sets of axioms.

In brief, although presented in the second part of the twentieth century, Carl Sagan's hypothesis belongs to nineteenth-century reasoning about “primitives”. In the name of both scientific power and knowledge, it reveals in a marvelous way what I shall define in the following chapter as an epistemological ethnocentrism; namely, the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from “them” unless it is already “ours” or comes from us.

Explorers do not reveal otherness. They comment upon “anthropology”, that is, the distance separating savagery from civilization on the diachronic line of progress (see Rotberg, 1970). R. Thornton claims that “the discovery of Africa was also a discovery for paper. Had the great Victorian travellers not written anything it would not be said today that they had ‘discovered’ anything”. Strictly speaking, however, it seems difficult to prove in a convincing way that “Livingstone, Stanley, Burton, Grant, Speke and others entered into the enterprise for the sake of the text” (Thornton, 1983: 509). Other students can invoke other motives such as the classical ones of curiosity, courage, generosity, contempt (Killingray, 1973: 48).

At any rate, the explorer's text is not epistemologically inventive. It follows a path prescribed by a tradition. Expedition reports only establish a very concrete, vivid representation of what paintings and theories of social progress had been postulating since the Baroque period. In what the explorer's text does reveal, it brings nothing new besides visible and recent reasons to validate a discipline already remarkably defined by the Enlightenment (Lévi-Strauss, 1973: 45-56). The novelty resides in the fact that the discourse on “savages” is, for the first time, a discourse in which an explicit political power presumes the authority of a scientific knowledge and vice-versa. Colonialism becomes its project and can be thought of as a duplication and a fulfillment of the power of Western discourses on human varieties.

The development of anthropology, which up to the very end of the eighteenth century was sought within travelers' narratives, now takes a radical turn. From now on it will develop into a clearly visible power-knowledge political system. As Foucault put it:

Ethnology has its roots, in fact, in a possibility that properly belongs to the history of the European culture, even more to its fundamental relation with the whole of history... There is a certain position of the Western *ratio* that was constituted in its history and provides a foundation for the relation it can have with all other societies... Obviously, this does not mean that the colonizing

situation is indispensable to ethnology: neither hypnosis, nor the patient's alienation within the fantasmatic character of the doctor, is constitutive of psychoanalysis; but just as the latter can be deployed only in the calm violence of a particular relationship and the transference it produces, so ethnology can assume its proper dimensions only within the historical sovereignty-always restrained, but always present-of European thought and the relation that can bring it face to face with all other cultures as well as with itself. (Foucault, 1973: 377, *emphasis mine*)

“African Genesis”

I would like to use Frobenius's expression “African genesis” (1937) to formulate hypotheses about the epistemological locus of Africa's invention and its meaning for discourses on Africa.

The genesis of anthropological science took place within the frame of mercantilist ideology. We know that during the eighteenth century, as G. Williams puts it, “colonies were... of value only insofar as they brought material benefits to the mother country” (1967: 17-30). On the other hand, it is during this same century that, paradoxically, original interpretations of “savages” were proposed by Enlightenment social scientists (Duchet, 1971). And I quite agree with R. L. Meek that if we look at their work, “what shine out are its virtues rather than its vices, its brilliant intuitions rather than its occasional logical lapses, its adventurousness and novelty rather than its dogmatism” (1976: 242). To defend this point, Meek quotes Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968), Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (1971), and Sidney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress* (1958). I may add Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale II* (1973) and M. Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières* (1977).

The problem is that during this period both imperialism and anthropology took shape, allowing the reification of the “primitive”. The key is the idea of History with a capital H, which first incorporates St. Augustine's notion of *providentia* and later on expresses itself in the evidence of Social Darwinism. Evolution, conquest, and difference become signs of a theological, biological, and anthropological destiny, and assign to things and beings both their natural slots and social mission. Theorists of capitalism, such as Benjamin Kidd and Karl Pearson in England, Paul Leroy-Beaulieu in France, Friedrich Naumann and Friedrich von Bernhard in Germany, as well as philosophers, comment upon two main and complementary paradigms. These are the inherent superiority of the white race, and, as already made explicit in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, the necessity for European economies and structures to expand to “virgin areas” of the world (Mommsen, 1983).

From this point, various schools of anthropology developed models and techniques to describe the “primitive” in accordance with changing trends within the framework of Western experience. These different trends can easily be explained from two angles. The first is an ideological one and concerns the relationship between an individual's projection of consciousness, the norms exemplified by one's society, and the social or

the scientific dominant group (see, e.g., Baudrillard, 1972: 174). On the other hand, mainly since the end of the eighteenth century, natural sciences have served as models for the progressive and wavering implementation of social sciences (Duchet, 1971: 229-473). *In concreto*, one thinks of those “ideological interests of strata that are in various ways privileged within a polity and, indeed, privileged by its very existence” (Weber, 1978: 920). On the other hand, Aristotle's invitation to study in beings the “plane of Nature” (Animal, I, 5) is mathematized (Veyne, 1984: 63). New methodological grids link social facts to physical phenomena. Laws of structural organization and distribution, patterns in individual or collective development, account for historical transformations. The social scientist tends to imitate the naturalist and compresses social behaviors and human cultures into “scientific paradigms”. These actually remain subsumed by what is defined as the goal of knowledge. Paul Veyne recently made some strong statements about the confusion which comes out of this legacy:

Buffon thought that the fly should not hold a greater place in the concerns of the naturalist than it occupies in nature; on the other hand, he maintained a value relationship with the horse and the swan... But zoology has changed a great deal since then and, after Lamarck had pleaded the cause of the lower animals, every organism became of interest in the science.

Weber was indignant that the history of the Bantus could be studied as much as that of the Greeks. Let us not retort that times have changed, that the Third World and its nascent patriotism... that the awakening of the African people who are taking an interest in their past... it would be a fine time to see that patriotic consideration should be the criterion of intellectual interest and that Africans have more reasons to despise Greek antiquity than Europeans had to despise Bantu antiquity. (Veyne, 1984: 62)

At the level of organization of discourses these two factors - the impact of ideology and the model of natural sciences - can serve as guides to the relative epistemological unity of social sciences since the nineteenth century. For instance, it would be easy to draw a parallel between philology and anthropology. We wrongly tend today to consider the former, and particularly its offshoot, linguistics, as more scientific than the latter. Morgan's historicism in *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871) matches the positivism of Max Muller's *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1861 and 1864), in which fidelity to August Schleicher's *Stammbaumtheorie* is integrated with Darwin's general postulations. In the same way, the *Wellentheorie* which is central in J. Schmidt's work (e.g., *Die Verwandtschaftsverhältnisse der Indo-Germanischen Sprachen*, 1872) is similar to the diffusionist perspective of Ankermann, Frobenius, and Graebner in anthropology. The principles of association and difference invoked by Boas and Lowie resemble many hypotheses in the philological field. Examples are the “Junggrammatiker” interpretations of analogy in the evolution of language exemplified by Meyer-Lübke work, or the perspectives opened by H. Schuchardt's *Über die Lautgesetze*, in which

the major concept - the *Sprachmischung* -implies the necessity of subordinating general laws, such as those promoted by Darwin's disciples, to the complexity and alterity of the objects described and studied.

I do not mean that there is an unquestionable genealogical dependence or obvious synchronic connection between these theories. It is clear, for example, that Schuchardt deals extensively with multidimensional comparison, while Boas avoids it. In simpler words, I mean that anthropology and philology and all social sciences can be really understood only in the context of their epistemological region of possibility. The histories of these sciences as well as their trends, their truths as well as their experiences, being derived from a given space, speak from it and, primarily, about it. Given that, one also might agree that from the anthropology of Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot to the most modern studies, such as J. Favret-Saada's study of witchcraft in France (1977), the basic concern of anthropology is not so much the description of "primitive" achievements and societies, as the question of its own motives, and the history of the epistemological field that makes it possible, and in which it has flourished as retrospectivist or perspectivist philosophical discourse (see Sebag, 1964; Diamond, 1974). Thus ethnocentrism is both its virtue and its weakness. It is not, as some scholars thought, an unfortunate mishap, nor a stupid accident, but one of the major signs of the possibility of anthropology.

Some thinkers, such as Lévi-Strauss, thought that studying a diversity of cultures reduced the weight of ideology and allowed anthropologists to fight such falsehoods as those about the natural superiority of some races and traditions over others. From this ethical point of view, some scholars have wondered whether it was possible to think of an anthropological science without ethnocentrism (e.g., Leclerc, 1972). It is surely possible, as functionalism and structuralism proved, to have works that seem to respect indigenous traditions. And one could hope for even more profound changes in anthropology, as R. Wagner proposes (1982). But so far it seems impossible to imagine any anthropology without a Western epistemological link. For on the one hand, it cannot be completely cut off from the field of its epistemological genesis and from its roots; and, on the other hand, as a science, it depends upon a precise frame without which there is no science at all, nor any anthropology.

I distinguish two kinds of "ethnocentrism": an epistemological filiation and an ideological connection. In fact they are often complementary and inseparable. The first is a link to an *episteme*, that is, an intellectual atmosphere which gives to anthropology its status as discourse, its significance as a discipline, and its credibility as a science in the field of human experience. The second is an intellectual and behavioral attitude which varies among individuals. Basically this attitude is both a consequence and an expression of a complex connection between the scholar's projection of consciousness, the scientific models of his time, and the cultural and social norms of his society. Thus, for example, for the eighteenth century one might think of the differences existing between Goguet, Quesnay, and Helvétius, independently of the content of their interpretations of the stages of evolution (see

Duchet, 1971; Meek, 1976). Frobenius and Lévy-Bruhl differ in the same manner, and their ethnocentrism is quite different from that of, say, Michel Leiris, Margaret Mead, or Carl Sagan. I could say that the epistemological filiation maintains and sustains anthropology as a system of knowledge and as a developing science; cultural ethnocentrism explains ideological changes and struggles in the history and practice of the social science discipline.

The fact that universal civilization has for a long time originated from the European center has maintained the illusion that European culture was, in fact and by right, a universal culture. Its superiority over other civilizations seemed to provide the experimental verification of this postulate. Moreover, the encounter with other cultural traditions was itself the fruit of that advance and more generally the fruit of Occidental science itself. Did not Europe invent history, geography, ethnography, and sociology in their explicit scientific forms? (Ricoeur, 1965: 277)

In the colonizing experience, the mingling of these two aspects of ethnocentrism tended, almost naturally, to be complete in both the discourse of power and that of knowledge, to the point of transforming the mission of the discipline into an enterprise of acculturation. And the anthropologist decided to take charge of controlling evolutionary processes: “Anthropology, which used to be the study of beings and things retarded, gradual, and backward, is now faced with the difficult task of recording how the ‘savage’ becomes an active participant in modern civilization” (Malinowski, 1938: vii).

Still, it is clear that since the beginning of the nineteenth century, explorers’ reports had been useful for opening the African continent to European interests. Myths about “bestly savages”, “barbaric splendours”, or the “white man's grave” go along quite well with the “tropical treasure house theory,” the promises of the Golden Land or New Orphir, and with the humanitarian principles for suppressing the slave trade, and for Christianizing and civilizing the Africans (Hammond and Jablow, 1977; Leclerc, 1972).

Theories of colonial expansion and discourses on African primitiveness emphasize a historicity and the promotion of a particular model of history. In other words, Mungo Park's *Journal of a Mission* (1815) or Richard and John Lander's report (1838) essentially address the same issues that R. E. Burton, V. L. Cameron, H. M. Stanley, and E. D. Lugard spelled out in different words, and on which twentieth-century anthropology focuses. This is the discrepancy between “civilization” and “Christianity” on the one hand, “primitiveness” and “paganism” on the other, and the means of “evolution” or “conversion” from the first stage to the second. From this point of view, it can be said that, for instance, J. Chaillet-Bert's programmatic theory of the steps of colonization (agriculture, commerce, industry) has the same significance as Lugard's views on the European mandate in Africa. What they propose is an ideological explanation for forcing Africans into a new historical

dimension. Finally, both types of discourses are fundamentally reductionist. They speak about neither Africa nor Africans, but rather justify the process of inventing and conquering a continent and naming its “primitiveness” or “disorder”, as well as the subsequent means of its exploitation and methods for its “regeneration”.

In fact, the question might be a bit more complicated, and also dramatic, for the imperial power of Same, if we take into account, for example, Ricoeur's meditation on the irruption of the Other in the European consciousness:

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an “other” among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilizations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes a kind of imaginary museum: where shall we go this week-end-visit the Angkor ruins or take a stroll in the Tivoli of Copenhagen? (Ricoeur, 1965: 278)

In addition to Paul Ricoeur's anguished propositions, one should note the still strong anthropological spirit exemplified by N. Barley's small book, *Adventures in a Mud Hut* (1984). In 1978, Barley decided to turn his attention to the Dowayos, “a strangely neglected group of mountain pagans in North Cameroon... They were interesting [for him]: they had, for example, skull cults, circumcision, a whistle language, mummies and a reputation for being recalcitrant and savage” (1984: 13). The result is a brief memoir which ten years ago would have qualified as arrogant or, at best, disrespectful of both fieldwork and the peoples described. Between commentaries on “their heavily Africanized version of Marianne, the French revolutionary heroine” (1984: 17) and the fact that it is “ridiculous that it should be in Africa that people of different races should be able to meet on easy, uncomplicated terms” (1984:21), one gets intrusive lessons. Among them, the following two sum up the project's scientific interest. About the “whole business” of anthropology, the author states:

Frankly, it seemed then, and seems now, that the justification for fieldwork, as for all academic endeavour, lies not in one's contribution to the collectivity but rather in some selfish development. Like monastic life, academic research is really all about the perfection of one's own soul. This may well serve some wider purpose but is not to be judged on those grounds alone. (Barley, 1984: 10)

As to the Dowayos, his adventures in a mud hut gave Barley reasons for believing that “in attempting to understand the Dowayo view of the world I had tested the relevance of certain very general models of interpretation and cultural symbolism. On the whole they had stood up pretty well and I felt much happier about their place in the scheme of things” (1984:188).

This, wrote a reviewer in *The Daily Telegraph*, is “probably the funniest book that has been produced this year.” The evaluation has since served for publicizing the essay. In a more neutral manner, I would say that this book is epistemologically significant. It convincingly illustrates my two previously described dimensions of ethnocentrism in the social sciences: the pertinence of an individual's projection of consciousness and the perception of a discipline from the normative perspective of its practice and history; it comments upon itself from within a paradigmatic cultural model. Barley assumes a magnificent position which allegorically indicates the space of his introspectiveness and his African anthropology: “Face-to-face with Africa, the differences between a French botanist and an English anthropologist seem minimal and we talked far into the night” (1984: 106).

Thus, we are not only dealing with a potential imaginary museum but with concrete constraints produced by two major orders: a topographical dimension which explains how and why discourses on the Same and the Other are expounded, and a cultural order which, in the disorder of what today seems to be a common humanity, indicates clear divisions, subtle frontiers, and sometimes the so-called openings to oneness.

I suppose that it is now clear that the trouble with Barley's text is not its ideological orientation. In fact there seems to be none, at least no explicit one, apart from its superb interrogation of anthropology as a business of “old stories”. What it reveals, at the end, is an absolute and almost amoral hypercriticism and a metaphorization of cultural reading. So, for instance, this “English alien”, back in Europe, rediscovers *la ville éternelle* and notes: “I paced the streets of Rome like a Dowayo sorcerer whose unearthly slowness sets off his ritual role from everyday activities” (1984:183). Saved from Italian robbers and sent to England by the British Embassy in Rome, one of the most important things he remembers is being alien: “an hour after my arrival, I was phoned by one friend who merely remarked tersely: ‘Look, I don't know where you've been but you left a pullover at my place nearly two years ago. When are you coming to collect it?’ In vain one feels that such questions are beneath the concern of a returning prophet” (1984:186). In effect, a topographical configuration accounts for Barley's discourse and a cultural atmosphere might explain his addiction to cream cakes and to anthropology. As to his impressionist message, it is a strikingly modernized lesson on Conrad's questions in *Heart of Darkness*: Why is African culture a “barbarous” experience? What is European civilization and in which sense is it different?

For a history of African studies and discourses it is therefore important to notice that apparent changes within the dominant symbols have never fundamentally modified the meaning of African conversion, but only the policies for its ideological and ethnocentric expression and practice. Present-day intellectual categories can allow, as demonstrated by Copans in his periodization, a distinction between travel literature, ethnology, and applied anthropology (Copans, 1971). Yet it is erroneous to depend on this type of theoretical distinction, which is concerned with differences of ideological

policies, in order to distinguish genres of “African knowledge.” Travelers in the eighteenth century, as well as those of the nineteenth and their successors in the twentieth (colonial proconsuls, anthropologists, and colonizers), spoke using the same type of signs and symbols and acted upon them. During the colonial era, these consistently involved reduction of differences into a Western historicity. This does not imply that Western inventors of an “African genesis” did not distinguish levels and types of interpretations of Africa. The author of *Ursprung der Afrikanischen Kulturen*, for example, could, in an article on the origin of African civilizations, perceive that the demands of his discipline were not met by travelers' information. “Far from bringing us answers to our questions, the travelers have increased our enigmas by many an addition” (Frobenius, 1899: 637). Today, the best students, faced with contradictory reports, will ask pertinent questions: What are these reports witnessing to? Do they contribute to a better knowledge of the African past? Are they scientifically credible and acceptable? (see Vansina, 1962). If correctly answered, these propositions lead, in principle, to a new understanding of human history. As Veyne put it, “if the Bantu *Homo historicus* proved to be a more primitive organism than the Athenian, it would only add to the interest, for it would thus reveal a less known part of the plan of Nature. As for knowing-Weber... asks the question-how many pages are to be devoted to Bantu history and how many to Greek, the answer is simple... It all depends on the volume of documentation” (1984: 62).

The question I am dealing with is one which would account for the possibility of anthropological knowledge, and its meaning for the foundation of both Africanist discourses and African gnosis. I am proposing to formulate it through a critical synthesis of Foucault's thesis on the last archaeological rupture in Western epistemology, a brief interpretation of Levi-Strauss's notion of savage mind, and finally a plea for the importance of the subject in social sciences; a subject that structuralism too easily pretends to have killed. These philosophical questions of method should, I hope, affirm the usefulness of both an epistemological analysis and a critical understanding of Africanism.

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