

BOOK REVIEW**A REVIEW OF 'LA PHILOSOPHIE BANTOU' BY PLACIDE TEMPELS**

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Tempels is widely acknowledged as the father of ethno-philosophy as a result of his analysis of the Bantu thought system in which the notion of Being or 'Vital force' is easily noticed. In his work, *La Philosophie Bantou*, published in 1945, and the English version of 1959, Placide Tempels sets out to assert that primitive people have a concrete concept of being and the universe, and also to help European missionaries understand the thought pattern or worldview of the Bantu people. This he thought would make the work of evangelization easier for the European missionaries, and also help them to avoid misunderstanding the people and their culture. His work marked a new epoch in the history of colonization, as it helped Europe, no matter how little, to admit her ethnological mistakes. It illumined colonial practice and evangelization.

Tempels began by arguing that the principles of life and death, survival and destruction and the fear of the unknown give birth to certain behavioural patterns and religious practices. This is true of the European and also of the primitive Bantu person to whom the principles of life and death have made an apostle of fidelity to a magical way of life; a magical way of life that is founded on a logical system of human thought, although simple and relatively primitive. Thus, he avers:

Need we, then, be astonished that we find among the Bantu, and more generally among all primitive peoples, as the foundation upon which their intellectual conception of the universe rests, certain basic principles and even a system of philosophy – though it is relatively simple and primitive – derived from a logical coherent ontology (p. 10).

He thus argues that even in the primitivity of primitive people's thought, philosophy is not absent. In this argument, he was responding to his contemporaries who thought that Africans do not indulge in reflective thinking, except in traditional acts. Speaking of his contemporaries, he wrote, "It has been claimed that the African reasons half as we do... and that he then abandons all reasoning and gives himself up to magic" (p. 42). He further argues that anyone who does so excludes primitive people from the category of human beings; for to

abandon his native philosophy, which is the characteristic feature of his being, amounts to an intellectual suicide. In fact, while referring to fellow missionaries and colonial authorities, he said, "... we have taken our share of the responsibility for having killed 'the man' in the Bantu" (p. 13). He wrote further, indicating the effect bearing on not just the primitive people but also on the thinker: "To declare on a priori grounds that primitive people have no ideas on the nature of beings, that they have no ontology and that they are completely lacking in logic, is simply to turn one's back on reality" (p. 11). Picking from the reasonable engagements of the African, he wrote:

Thus it is indicated, for example, that Africans show themselves to be intelligent and reasonable in the weaving of their nets, the making of their traps and, more generally, in all their hunting crafts... they employ an infallible logic to contrive their ambushes (p. 42).

The misconceptions of missionaries and colonial powers of the Bantu people, he believes, is based on the fact that none of them has tried to meet the Bantu people in the wholesome aspirations of their own ontology. It is in this regard that he says, "All of us, missionaries, magistrates, administrators, all in directive posts or posts which ought to be directive, have failed to reach their 'souls', or at any rate to reach them to the profound degree that should have been attained" (p. 13). He, therefore, calls for a new pattern of investigation of primitive thought in such a way that it is exposed to the roots and from the point of view of the primitive people; there is found real philosophy.

Tempels had argued that the principles of life and death give birth to certain behavioural patterns and religious practices. He now goes further to posit that Bantu behaviour is centered on a single value: vital force. He wrote that "...the philosophy of forces strictly governs in fact the whole of Bantu life" (p. 35). The vital force he calls variously, as life, as force and as to live strongly. All their practices (Bantu), both religious and otherwise, are geared towards making life stronger and assuring that vital force remains perpetually in one's posterity. Thus, it is not surprising that supreme happiness is found in the possession of vital force: "Supreme happiness, the only kind of blessing, is, to the Bantu, to possess the greatest vital force: the worst misfortune and, in very truth, the only misfortune, is, he thinks, the diminution of this power" (p. 22). The vital force is not just a value, and not just an inseparable element of being, but being itself. He wrote: "Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force" (p. 24). Tempels further distinguished between the external appearance of a being and the inner nature of the being itself; while the external appearance is visible, the inner nature is invisible. This inner nature he calls the Vital centre or nodal point of the force or being. To explain further, he wrote "A wild beats may be pierced by ten arrows without dying, while another beats succumbs to the first shot. This is because the one arrow has touched the vital centre, or one of its vital centers" (p. 39). He further spoke of a hierarchy of forces starting with God.

God (Divine force): God is the source of vital force, “Above all force is God... It is he who has force, power, in himself. He gives existence, power of survival and of increase, to other forces. In relation to other forces, he is he who increases force” (p. 29), and also “He knows all forces, their orderings, their dependence, their potential and their mutual interactions” (p. 34). He is the great Muntu (the great person or the great powerful and reasonable living force). He possesses the supreme and complete force. His existential cause is within himself and sustains resultant forces. Tempels avers that “The origin, the subsistence or annihilation of beings or of forces, is expressly and exclusively attributed to God” (p. 28). While other creatures can paralyse, diminish or stop the operation of another being's vital force, they cannot stop it to exist entirely, only God can.

Man (Human forces): The human person (Muntu) is a vital force endowed with intelligence and will. Although God is the source of vital force, man is the sovereign vital force in the world, ruling the land and all that abides in it, however, “his fullness of being consist in his participation to a greater or less extent in the force of God” (p. 47) who possesses the supreme force. He also shares an ontological relationship with his patrimony, relations and land. He has a will to choose between good and evil, which might be life giving or life destroying. Man is the centre of the universe, including the world of the dead. Tempels wrote that “man is the supreme force, the most powerful among created beings” (p. 46). He can renew his vital force by tapping the strength of other creatures. He wrote, “Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man” (p. 22).

Among men, which include the living and dead, the ancestors have a greater force. They bind men to God and exercise influence on the living, “The strengthening of life, the preservation and respect for life, are by the very nature of creation the business of the ancestors and elders, living and dead” (p. 57). While speaking of the ancestors, Tempels avers:

They must not be injured or scorned, nor must they be threatened with a breaking off of relationships, for this would mean simply death for the living. When a disaster falls upon the clan, there must be no question of reproaching the ancestors, but simply of testifying from out of mourning to be re-established filial attachment to secure a new alignment with the vital influence of the forebears (p. 69).

After the ancestors are the elders, who bind the ancestors with their descendants. He avers that “Ontologically and juridically, the elders who hold the ascendancy are the only ones to know fully, in the last resort. Their wisdom exceeds that of other men” (p. 35). To sin against them is making an attempt against the vital rank. However, such a fault committed against them (including God and the ancestors) is not considered as affecting their vital force, in terms of diminution. He wrote, “According to Bantu ideas, diminution of a superior force subordinate to it is a

metaphysical impossibility” (p. 66). As such when an attempt is made against the hierarchical order, there is no case of restitution, in the sense of the repair of a damage caused, since no damage can be done to superior forces. All that is required is the acknowledgment of the hierarchical order through a proprietary sacrifice.

Very significant in the relationship between man and superior forces, like God, elders and ancestors, is that man has no rights, for there are no contractual pacts. This is contrary to what we have in Judaism, the covenant between God and Israel and in Christianity as regards the new covenant. According to Tempels, “God is the giver of life. Life is a free gift. The giver can be under no obligation to the recipient” (p. 67). On the other hand, if an elder engages in an activity that diminishes the vital force of inferior forces, he is not bound to any act of reparation to the younger even though “... such an abandonment may bear the character of dereliction of duty towards inferiors” (p. 68).

Animal, Vegetable, Inanimate (forces): These belong to the category called Bintu. They are forces not endowed with reason, not living. They are all under the force of man and exist for man. He wrote, “In fact even inferior beings, such as inanimate beings and minerals, are forces which by reason of their nature have been put at the disposal of men, of living human forces, or of men's vital forces” (p. 31). In another text, he wrote, “These lower beings exist, by Divine decree, only for the assistance of the higher created being” (p. 46). The hierarchy of being reveals the hierarchy of forces. God is the source of force; the ancestors who bind men with God, have a greater force than men, followed by the elders who bind men with the ancestors, then other men, who have a greater force than animals, plants and minerals. The greater a force, the greater its causal power in relation to other forces. Thus, the hierarchy of forces determine the laws of vital causality.

Contrary to the opinion of his time among Europeans that Africans have no morality, Tempels moves on to prove that Africans have morality. “We often hear it said that Africans do not distinguish between good and evil, or at least that on these questions their ideas are those of savages, cutting morality as we understand it to ribbons” (p. 54). In another text he observed that:

On the subject of theft, it is generally said that the African does not see the least wrong in it, that the only thing that matters is not to get caught. Lies and deceit, it is said, are, in African eyes indications of subtlety of mind, countenanced by all moral assessment. They would not regard adultery as any infraction of morality and it would suffice if anyone caught in the act should agree to pay an indemnity (p. 54).

Contrary to these opinions, he argued that the Bantu have morality, with ethical principles based on the ontological order: “The Bantu likewise reject lies, deceit,

theft and adultery... In fact they know and accept the natural law as it is formulated in the Ten Commandments” (p. 56). He described Bantu morality as ontological, immanent and intrinsic morality. Ontological in terms of its relationship with the order of forces. He writes:

Bantu moral standards depend essentially on things ontologically understood. Knowledge of a necessary natural order of forces forms part of the wisdom of primitive peoples. From that we may conclude that an act or usage will be characterized as ontologically good by Bantu and that it will therefore be accounted ethically good; and at length, by deduction, be assessed as juridically just. The Bantu have not yet in fact, yielded to the subtlety which permits our jurists to devise a statute law divorced from philosophy, or from the nature of beings (p. 57).

The relationship in the ontological order affects morals, as it makes human actions contagious:

Besides, if all forces find themselves in a relationship of influence according to their vital rank, it is but a step to the conclusion that a force, abnormal in itself, will usually if not necessarily have a disordering influence upon the forces upon which it exercises its action. A monstrosity does not constitute, any more than any other being, at autonomous force; but, like every other force, it will have a vital influence and this influence will be logically monstrous (p. 61).

What then is bad or good? That which is bad is that which militates against the vital force. He wrote, “Every act, every detail of behaviour, every attitude and every human custom which militates against vital force or against increase of the hierarchy of muntu is bad” (p. 57). It is not just bad, it is a fight against God who gives life, “The destruction of life is a conspiracy against the Divine Plan; and the muntu knows that such destruction is, above all else, ontological sacrilege: that is for the reason immoral and therefore unjust” (p. 57). The unalterable principles of his philosophy, his concept of humanity and life, conditions his notion of rights.

Like every other person, the African also has a conscience, and his conscience is formed by his awareness that “...by divine decree, this order of forces, this mechanism of interaction among beings, out to be respected. They know that the action of forces follows immanent laws, that these rules are not to be played with, that the influences of forces cannot be employed arbitrarily” (p. 62). He has a duty that is anchored on the vital force and its preservation, “The individual knows what his legal and moral obligations are and that they are to be honoured on pain of losing his vital force. He knows that to carry out his duty will enhance the quality of his being... He knows his clan duties. He knows, too, his duties towards other clans” (p. 62). He also has obligations which are proportionate to his vital rank. Thus he wrote, “The elder, the chief, the king know very well that their doings do not involve their own personal vital force only. They and their subjects fully realize that their deeds will have repercussions upon the

whole community subject to them” (p. 62). His faults and responsibilities relate integrally to the vital force philosophy, “Fault or responsibility will, then, be proportional to the degree of evil will by which harm is done to vital force” (p. 63).

Evaluation

Contrary to what was obtainable in the pre-colonial and colonial periods, scholars like Placid Tempels, among others, lived among African people and understood them and thus began to ignite a sympathetic approach to the study of African Traditional Religion and philosophy. This method of enquiry finally led to the discovery that Africans originally had faith in the worship of the Supreme Being, and could as well reason. Hountondji praised Tempels for his contribution towards the emergence of the recognition of African thought as thought:

However, from the point of view of its ideological impact and of its immediate relevance to the present debate on African philosophy, the most important work to emerge from the new orientation in anthropology was produced by a Belgian missionary, Placide Tempels, whose work, *Bantu Philosophy...* was the first to attribute a developed philosophical system to an African people. its demonstration of the new spirit of accommodation for other cultures went so far to represent a total retreat from the positions of classical anthropology. In particular his insistence on the need for a recognition of the rationality of the so-called primitive man carried a pointed refutation of the theories of Levy-Bruhl on primitive mentality. (p. 15).

Although Tempels vigorously promoted the Philosophy of the Bantu and their culture, the use of words like 'primitive' and 'savage' to describe the Bantu culture has been described as questionable by philosophers, such as Hountondji. The concept “primitive” means crude, backward, uncouth, ancient, old-fashioned, outdated, etc. The use of the concept in relation to Africa by anthropologists and sociologists has its roots in racial pride and cultural arrogance. It was used by Europeans to describe any culture that does not measure up to their own cultural pattern. The second word 'savage' means pertaining to the forest or wilderness, wild, uncultured, untamed, violent, brutal, uncivilized, untaught, rude, barbarous, inhuman etc. It is the opposite of civilized, which accounts for his use of a third word 'non-civilized'. According to Quarcoopome (1987), in every culture, religion or people, there is an element of savagery. Thus, this should not be made exclusive to Africans. This, notwithstanding, it would be unfair to judge Tempels today on how he used the concepts 'primitive' and 'savage' decades ago.

Hountondji (1976) further criticized the Bantu Philosophy of Tempels on the ground that it was an eloquent example of a process of exclusion, where white scholars discussed on the basis of the black man's silence. Regarding Tempels as an ethno-philosopher, he argued that as a result of the black man's silence, Tempels did not meet any resistance and as such subjected the Bantu people to all

kinds of conceptual manipulation. In the silence of the black man, the discourse was between two classes of Europeans: the colonial masters and missionaries. He wrote, "The black man continues to be the very opposite of an interlocutor; he remains a topic, a voiceless face under private investigation, an object to be defined and not a subject of a possible discourse" (p. 34).

Hounntondji (1976) had moved further to argue that ethno-philosophy is no philosophy on the grounds of orature and the absence of dialectics. He reasons that philosophy is a theoretical and systematic discipline motivated by a consciously dialectical discourse among individuals. He argues:

... philosophy never stops; its very existence lies in the to and fro of free discussion, without which there is no philosophy. It is not a closed system but a closed history, a debate that goes from generation to generation, in which every thinker, every author, engages in total responsibility: I know I am responsible for what I say, for the theories I put forward....A philosophical... work is intelligible only as a moment in a debate that sustains and transcends it. It always refers to antecedent positions, either to refute them or to confirm and enrich them. It takes on meaning only in relation to that history, in relation to the term of an ever changing debate in which the sole stable element is the constant reference to the one self-same object, to one sphere of experience, the characterization of which, incidentally, is itself part of the evolution (pp. 72, 83).

Hounntondji (1976) had insisted that ethno-philosophy is no philosophy on the grounds that it is not written down. He further reasons that philosophy is a theoretical and systematic discipline motivated by a consciously dialectical discourse among individuals. The criticism of Hounntondji of ethno-philosophy on the basis of oral tradition cannot be sustained. Philosophy is not philosophy because it has been written down; it is philosophy because it is first an idea. This would question the philosophiness of the ideas of Socrates who never wrote down his thought, but they were later put down by his disciple, Plato. Writing is not the only way of transmitting information; oral tradition is one.

When all has been said about Tempels, two things cannot be taken away from him. His philosophy is at the base of modern discourse on African philosophy, and in him we see a fundamental effort towards appreciating the thought of the black man.

References

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