

# BANTU PHILOSOPHY

by

The Revd. Father PLACIDE TEMPELS

(Translated into English from « La Philosophie Bantoue »,  
the French Version by Dr A. Rubbens of Fr. Tempels' original  
work. The Revd. Colin King, M.A. Translator.)

With a Foreword to the English Edition by Dr Margaret  
Read, C.B.E., Ph. D., M.A., formerly Professor of Education  
and Head of the Department of Education in Tropical Areas  
The University of London, Institute of Education.

IMPRIMATUR

† VICTOR PETRUS KEUPPENS

Vic. Ap. de Lulua

Luauo-Kamina, 30-5-1952

used to denote the Bantu basic concept of the ultimate nature of being, as we should call it. The Dutch version uses two words, "kracht" and "sterkte", both alone and in combination with "levens", but both are rendered by the French "force".

Another relates to many references to Africans in the book. My general rule has been to speak of "Africans" whenever I could not with assured accuracy speak of "Bantu". On p. 146, where I had no option but to use "Black Race", I italicised it. I dislike the terms "native(s)", "primitive..."; and, still more, "savages". The last is employed (in italics) only in a context which shows that Fr. Tempels' dislike of the term is as great as my own. For the rest, I hardly imagine that any reader of this translation will think that either Fr. Tempels or I entertain the least derogatory thought in respect of people (or peoples) not of the "White race". It is my hope that this translation will assist many to find, in the stimulating thought of Fr. Tempels' work, a key to a fuller understanding of African peoples and a deeper grasp of the truth that the true philosophy is that which both accepts and rejects all philosophies; but, in regard to peoples, rejects none: accepting all as they are and as they will become.

## PREFACE

My excellent friend, the Revd. Father Placide Tempels, has asked me for a short preface. I cannot do better than to reproduce the following passage from a letter which I received from him when I had just ended my short colonial career.

"It is a curious fact that it was many challenging statements and casts of thought in your "Elements of Negro Customary Law" that obliged me to *concretize* and *synthetize* my own thought.

"I felt baffled, not because the Elements which you treat are false, but because, raising so profoundly the real question at issue and examining it, they wander round the point a little until the last moment and do not drive the nail right home.

"When you wrote to me "What then do you regard as the African way of synthesizing ideas?" you were feeling the lacuna or imperfection in your own conceptions, your own discoveries. Without this lacu-

na I should certainly never have sought to develop this synthesis as I have."

"Tribal law, primitive philosophy and an applied catechism will become, I believe, a trio of inseparables."

Already, he wrote to me, certain Missionaries were using with the greatest success principles of life drawn from Bantu ways of thinking.

It would be false modesty on our part not to see that ethnology, ethnological principles, ethnological jurisprudence and the religious instruction of patriarchal peoples will derive a new and a fresh orientation by reason of the Revd. Fr. Tempels' work.

Up to the present, ethnographers have denied all abstract thought to tribal peoples. The civilized Christian European was exalted, the savage and pagan primitive man was denigrated. Out of this concept a theory of colonisation was born which now threatens to fail everywhere.

A true estimate of indigenous peoples can now take the place of the misunderstanding and fanaticism of the ethnology of the past and of the former attitude of aversion entertained with regard to them.

That is why this present work by the Revd. Fr. Tempels is destined to achieve so much good. It will mark a new epoch in the history of colonisation. Europe will only enhance its prestige by admitting, in the light of Fr. Tempels' thought, its former ethnological mistakes.

Since the Greeks, all classical European philosophy

has revealed a static outlook. But older peoples, tribal peoples as I call them — since, whether they are patrilineal or matrilineal, they are all patriarchal — have preserved a mental outlook not purely static. We have behind us two thousand years of too static thought. Prof. Maréchal, some years ago, ended his study of Kant as follows: "The future metaphysics will be either dynamic or it will not be at all."

We await a neo-Thomism, with Mercier, Maritain and many others who are seeking a modern Thomism. Without a system of thought, philosophical and personal, attaining that exactly, no objectivity in ethnography is possible.

It is precisely from this standpoint that the Rev. Fr. Tempels' work throws such remarkable light on ethnography today and will so remarkably illumine colonial practice and missionary evangelization tomorrow.

We are in with him on the ground floor of modern thought.

Brussels, 20th July, 1945.

E. Possoz.

## CHAPTER I

# IN SEARCH OF A BANTU PHILOSOPHY

### 1. *Life and death determine human behaviour.*

It has been often remarked that an European who has given up, during his life, all practice of the Christian religion, quickly returns to a Christian viewpoint when suffering or pain raise the problem of the preservation and survival or the loss and destruction of his being. Many sceptics turn, in their last moments, to seek in the ancient Christian teaching of the West, the *practical answer* to the problem of redemption or destruction. Suffering and death are ever the two great apostles who lead many wanderers in Europe at their last moments to our traditional Christian wisdom.

In the same way among our Bantu we see the *évolués*<sup>1</sup>, the "civilized", even the Christians, return to their former ways of behaviour whenever they

---

1. *Évolués* : I preserve this term untranslated for lack of a suitable English equivalent. It signifies those who have passed out of the traditional ways of life and thought of their own ethnic group and have taken over those of the West. (C.K.)

are overtaken by moral lassitude, danger or suffering. They do so because their ancestors left them *their practical solution* of the great problem of humanity, the problem of life and death, of salvation or destruction. The Bantu, only converted or civilized superficially, return at the instance of a determining force to the behaviour atavistically dictated to them.

Among the Bantu and, indeed, among all primitive peoples, life and death are the great apostles of fidelity to a magical view of life and of recourse to traditional magical practices.

2. *All human behaviour depends upon a system of principles.*

If the modern over-civilized European is unable to be entirely emancipated from the attitudes of his ancestors, it is because his reactions are founded upon a complete philosophical system, influenced by Christianity; upon a clear, complete, positive intellectual conception of the universe, of man, of life and death, and of the survival of a spiritual principle called the soul. This view of the visible and invisible world is too deeply ingrained in the spirit of Western culture not to rise up again irresistibly when the great crises of life occur.

It is very possible, both with the individual and with the tribal or culture group, that the mysteries of life and death, survival and destruction, together with fear arising from all these mysteries, became the

psychological agent that gave birth to certain behaviour patterns and to certain redemptive practices. It would, however, scarcely be scientific to retain, as the sole ground of human behaviour, the influence of environment and of psychological factors (emotion, fantasy, or childish imagination). We do not study the attitudes of a few individuals. We compare two conceptions of life—the Christian on the one hand and the magical on the other—which have perpetuated themselves through time and in space: two conceptions which, in the course of centuries, whole peoples and entire cultures have embraced.

The persistence of these attitudes through centuries of simultaneous evolution can only be satisfactorily explained by the presence of a corpus of logically co-ordinated intellectual concepts, a "Lore". Behaviour can be neither universal nor permanent unless it is based upon a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man and of the things which surround him, of existence, life, death and of the life beyond.

Without excluding other factors (divine and human) we must postulate, seek and discover a logical system of human thought as the ultimate foundation of any logical and universal system of human behaviour.

No live code of behaviour is possible unless the meaning of life is sensed. There can be no will to determine life unless the ends of life are conceived.

No one can pursue the way to redemption who has no philosophy of salvation.

In the matter of the religion of primitive peoples, modern science seems to have concluded quite definitely, by the light of the methods of historical criticism, that present beliefs of primitive and semi-primitive peoples had their origin in simple notions which have degenerated today into complex conceptions; and in precise, exact principles that have evolved towards imprecision and inexactness. It is today generally admitted that, among primitive peoples, it is the most primitive of all who have maintained the most pure form of the concept of the Supreme Being, Creator and Disposer of the Universe.

The faith of really primitive peoples in the Supreme Being lies at the root of all the religious conceptions current among semi-primitives: animism, dynamism, fetichism and magic.

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 logically coherent ontology?

Many roads seem to lead to the discovery of such an ontological system. A profound knowledge of the language, a penetrating study of their ethnology, a critical investigation of their laws, or again, the adaptation of religious teaching to primitive thinking: all these can reveal it to us.

It is also possible—and this is obviously the shortest way—to trace directly the thought of the Bantu on the deepest matters, to penetrate it and to analyse it. Has Bantu philosophy been studied and developed as such? If not, it is high time that each scholar should start to seek out and define the fundamental thought underlying Bantu ontology, the one and only key that allows native thought to be penetrated.

We need not expect the first African who comes along, especially the young ones, to be able to give us a systematic exposition of his ontological system. None the less, this ontology exists; and it penetrates and informs all the thought of these primitives; it dominates and orientates all their behaviour.

It is our task to trace out the elements of this thought, to classify them and to systematise them according to the ordered systems and intellectual disciplines of the Western world.

Anyone who claims that primitive peoples possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men. Those who do so, contradict themselves fatally elsewhere. To give one example only, we find it in R. Allier, who, in his "Psychology of Conversion" writes, (p. 138) "If you ask the Ba-Souto, says Mr. Dieterlen, the why and the wherefore of these customs, they cannot tell you. They do not indulge in reflective thought. They have no theories and no doctrines. The only thing that matters, they think, is the carrying out of certain traditional acts, preserving contact with the past and with the dead." But two pages further on we read, "What is it which

causes this opposition of the chiefs to be irresistible? It is the fear of breaking the mystic bond which, through the chiefs, is established with the ancestors and the fear of the disasters which that may entail." What is this "mystic bond" or what is this "ancestral influence" if not the elements of a system of thought? Is it a simple instinct or an irrational fear and no more? Would it not be more reasonable and more scientific to look for whatever *ideas* sustain this reaction to the "mystic bond"? Perhaps, after that, we may be able to do without the omnibus word "mystic".

3. *The reasons for seeking the intellectual instrument, the fundamental philosophical concepts and principles of the Bantu*<sup>1</sup>.

Any one who wishes to study primitive people or *évolués* must give up all idea of attaining valid scientific conclusions so long as he has not been able to understand their metaphysic. To declare on *a priori* grounds that primitive peoples 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. Every day we are able to note

1. See my Translator's Foreword on the use of the names "African" and "Bantu" *passim*. (C.K.)

that primitive peoples are by no means just children afflicted with a bizarre imagination. It is as Men that we have learned to know them in their homes. Folklore alone and superficial descriptions of strange customs cannot enable us to discover and understand primitive man. Ethnology, linguistics, psycho-analysis, jurisprudence, sociology and the study of religions are able to yield definitive results only after the philosophy and the ontology of a primitive people have been thoroughly studied and written up. If, in fact, primitive peoples have a concrete conception of being and of the universe, this "ontology" of theirs will give a special character, a local colour, to their beliefs and religious practices, to their mores, to their language, to their institutions and customs, to their psychological reactions and, more generally, to their whole behaviour. It is even more true, I venture to think, that the Bantu, like primitive people in general, live more than we do by Ideas and by following their own ideas.

So much must be said for the benefit of those who wish to "study" the Bantu and primitive peoples generally.

Nevertheless, a better understanding of the realm of Bantu thought is just as indispensable for all who are called upon to live among native people. It therefore concerns all colonials, especially those whose duty is to hold administrative or judicial office among African people; all those who are concerning themselves with a felicitous development of tribal law; in short, it concerns all who wish to civilize,

educate and raise the Bantu. But, if it concerns all colonizers with good will, it concerns most particularly missionaries.

If one has not penetrated into the depths of the personality as such, if one does not know on what basis their acts come about, it is not possible to understand the Bantu. One is entering into no spiritual contact with them. One cannot make oneself intelligible to them, especially in dealing with the great spiritual realities. On the contrary, one runs the risk, while believing that one is "civilizing" the individual, of in fact corrupting him, working to increase the numbers of the deracinated<sup>1</sup> and to become the architect of revolts.

We find ourselves at a loss when confronted by native law and customs. It is impossible to distinguish what is commendable from what is pernicious for lack of any criterion to enable us to keep not only some good things in native custom, but all that is good therein, cutting out all that is evil. Indeed, there is a reason for safeguarding, for protecting with every care, for purifying and refining everything that is worthy of respect in native custom, in order to make a link, or, if the metaphor be preferred, a bridgehead, by means of which natives can attain without hin-

1. *Deracinated* : Fr. *déracinés*, those who have been torn away from their ethnic roots ; and who, belonging nowhere, are very liable as a result of their insecurity to all kinds of unstable behaviour. (C.K.)

drance all that we have to offer them in respect of stable, deep, true civilization. Only if we set out from the true, the good and the stable in native custom shall we be able to lead our Africans in the direction of a true Bantu civilization.

The fact is that those in high positions do not know to which patron saint to turn for guidance in directing the Bantu, who are growing ever more and more unstable politically. They realize their own impotence to give sound directions worthy of acceptance to ensure the evolution and civilization of the Bantu. All this seems to me to be due to the fact that we have taken no account of Bantu ontology ; that we have not as yet succeeded in reproducing syntheses of their thought ; and that in consequence we are not fit to judge them upon their ideas.

It has repeatedly been said that evangelization and catechetical work should be adapted... Adapted to what ? We can build churches in native architecture, introduce African melodies into the liturgy, use styles of vestments borrowed from Mandarins or Bedouins, but real adaptation consists in the adaptation of our spirit to the spirit of these people. I shall have occasion to recur to this point. I hope in due course to submit for consideration a catechism adapted to primitive mentality<sup>1</sup>.

1. "Catechèse Bantoue" : Les Questions Missionnaires : Abbaye de St. André, Bruges, Belgium.