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MUNTU RECONSIDERED:  
FROM TEMPELS AND KAGAME TO JANHEINZ JAHN\*

By

Aliko Songolo

The late Janheinz Jahn was one of the most prolific and most encyclopedic critics of Black cultures. This brief study will not attempt to assess his overall impact on criticism of Black arts and civilizations; its purpose is, rather, a more modest one: to examine the cornerstone of Jahn's critical system, namely the concept of *Muntu*; to trace its origin and its transformations, and to reflect on its literary and socio-political implications.

Janheinz Jahn entered the field of African Studies in 1952, not as a trained literary critic, historian, philosopher, or anthropologist. At best, he could be described as a free-lance writer. What is remarkable is that only six years later, he had constructed a system which claimed to explain Black cultures everywhere, from the African continent to the New World, from the standpoint of religion and philosophy, plastic arts and communication arts. He elaborated this system in a book entitled *Muntu*,<sup>1</sup> which brought him rapid worldwide acclaim. The immediate question is, of course, how could a man who obviously knew little about as vast and heterogeneous a continent as Africa build such a complete system in such a short time? And how valid could this system be?

*Muntu* was not a new concept in 1958, and it was certainly not a new word. In many African languages the word means a person, a human being; but it was first introduced as a linguistic concept by nineteenth century European grammarians in an attempt to categorize a large number of Sub-Saharan languages which displayed common characteristics. One of these characteristics is the absence of genders as they are known in Western languages; instead of genders, all nouns are divided into at least seven classes, determined by a "classifier" which precedes the root of the noun. In 1852, a certain Sir G. Grey coined the term *Bantu Languages* upon observing that first-class nouns changed their classifiers from the singular MU- to the plural BA- and that the root -NTU was common to most if not all the languages of this group he had studied.<sup>2</sup>

The subsequent expansion of the use of the concept *Muntu* and its plural beyond its original linguistic meaning was proba-

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bly due to a confusion of fields of study. In the decade between 1945 and 1956 there appeared two books which attest to this confusion: Placide Tempels' La Philosophie Bantoue<sup>3</sup> and Alexis Kagame's La Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l'Etre.<sup>4</sup> The first, employing ethnological data and methods, formulated a dubious philosophical theory, while the latter, combining linguistics, ethnology and philosophy, set out to determine whether Tempels' assertions and conclusions had any basis in fact. As a result, *Bantu* soon became an anthropological term designating a large number of Sub-Saharan ethnic groups. It is now common to hear many an African say: "I am Bantu." This tautological (and, incidentally, ungrammatical) phrase is somewhat reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's now famous remark about a tiger not needing to proclaim its "tigritude."

Although it is not my intention to analyze either Tempels<sup>5</sup> or Kagame's books in detail, I believe a brief review of their salient conclusions will be helpful, for they occupy a prominent place in Janheinz Jahn's much expanded application of the concept *Muntu*.

According to Placide Tempels, *Bantu* ontology is governed by the interaction of *forces*. The notion of *force* corresponds to the notion of *being* in Western philosophy. Force is not merely an attribute of being: "Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force" (p. 35). Moreover, unlike Western understanding of the notion of being, the *Bantu* notion of force is a dynamic one: the vital force can increase or diminish. A person beset by misfortunes, for instance, would experience a diminution of his vital force, and thus the curtailment of his *essence*; conversely, an increase in his socio-political power corresponds to an increase in his nature as a human being.

Hence it follows that social order is based on a hierarchy of forces which interact according to the respective position of each being. The higher being can confer a quantity of force on a lower being, or it can take it away, thereby increasing or diminishing the latter's essence. At the top of this hierarchy is the "Creator," followed by "the first fathers..., founders of the different clans" (p. 41), who provide an important link between the creator and humans and are therefore ranked higher than the ordinary dead. The living are likewise ranked according to their primogeniture and station in life--according to their vital force. Finally, at the bottom of the ladder are found lesser forces such as animals, plants and minerals, which are also ranked following the same principle. Like the higher forces, "the inanimate beings and minerals are forces which by reason of their nature have been put at the disposal of men, of living human forces" (p. 44). The living human being is therefore at the center of all creation, receiving reinforcement from the dead on the one hand, and on the other using the lower forces to

increase his own force, his own essence.

At first glance, Bantu Philosophy appears to be a liberal undertaking designed to either refine or contradict the theories of previous ethnologists, especially Lévy-Bruhl<sup>6</sup> and his school, who contended, one will recall, that there were in the world two types of minds: a logical mind and a "pre-logical" mind, the former ascribed to Western societies and the latter to "primitive" societies, that is to say non-Western societies. By studying "the languages, modes of behavior, institutions and customs" (p. 28) of the Baluba of southern Zaire, Tempels intended to prove that among "primitives" the Bantu at least were "not completely primitive" (p. 23); he wanted to show that they at least had a coherent and logical system of thought which, although inferior to the Europeans', was--albeit embryonically--*philosophical*. It is no wonder, then, that Bantu Philosophy was hailed by a number of European liberals, some of them serious philosophers, and it became the background textbook of many subsequent African thinkers.

Yet, the book was not intended for Africans, but for European "missionaries, magistrates, administrators" (p. 20) and other supporters of the colonial enterprise. The title and content of the last chapter--"Bantu Philosophy and *Our Mission to Civilize*" (my emphasis)--clearly exposes the ethnocentric attitude (to say the least) which underlies Tempels' analysis throughout the book. In the explanation of his theory of forces, he finds that the Bantu had a special place for the White man in their ontology:

*The technological skill of the White man impressed the Bantu. The White man seemed to be the master of great natural forces. It had, therefore, to be admitted that the White man was an elder, a superior human force, surpassing the vital force of all Africans (p. 44, my emphasis).*

In other words, the White man was somewhere between the Creator and all other forces. Indeed, one wonders if, according to Tempels' theory, the White man was not the Creator himself. There is therefore no possibility of dialogue between Blacks and Whites because, in Tempels' view, the Africans have no words with which to express their thought:

*Certainly, we cannot pretend that the Bantu are capable of presenting us with a philosophical treatise with an adequate vocabulary. It is we who must develop it systematically. It is we who can tell them in a precise manner, what their innermost conception of being is (p. 25).*

Thus, while the Africans may have a philosophy, they are

not aware of it. It is an unconscious philosophy; it has no language with which to express itself and must therefore be articulated by European philosophers and then explained to the Africans themselves. They are that which is spoken about: faces without voices, which must be deciphered and explained by others; objects to be defined. This then, is the real purpose and thrust of Tempels' Bantu Philosophy: to arouse a debate among Europeans aimed at instituting a new brand of colonialism in the interest of better results for the colonizing powers; in short, a neo-colonialism before the word was invented. The centerpiece of this new colonialism would be the elevation of the African from the status of beast to that of inferior human being--with a philosophy to boot! In more conservative European quarters, the book was received with much suspicion as too liberal, and the local Belgian authorities in Zaire initially banned its distribution<sup>7</sup>:

This, then, is the book which provided Janheinz Jahn with his ready-made system. He adopted Tempels' theory of forces almost unchanged, except for some adjustments which he borrowed from Kagame's thesis, as we shall see. In addition, Jahn shares Tempels' seemingly liberal intentions. If Tempels intended to counter Lévy-Bruhl's theory of the "primitive mentality," Jahn seems to counter Jaspers' theory of human history which maintains that the so-called primitive peoples will eventually be faced with extinction as technological civilization advances. Lévy-Bruhl's and Jaspers' theory of social change corresponds to what Lévi-Strauss has called *false evolutionism*. False evolutionism attempts to suppress cultural diversity while, at the same time, pretending to recognize its right to exist. Instead of simply and openly denying the validity of other cultures, the false evolutionist considers them as being in the *process* of development, an evolution which will inevitably make them converge toward one global goal, namely the attainment of the level of Western culture. Thus, all cultures will eventually become one; the differences which might have been acknowledged in theory are obliterated in practice. Lévy-Bruhl considers these differences temporary: that is why he calls non-Western societies "pre-logical." The implication is that they are going to evolve towards a "logical" stage, where they will catch up, as it were, with Western cultures. Jaspers apparently goes one logical step further to imply that these non-Western cultures will simply physically disappear.

For his part, Jahn argues that if this theory is valid for the Australian aborigines, the American Indians of the South Sea Islanders, it does not hold true for the Africans (Muntu, p. 13). And he sets out to prove his contention by pointing to the survival of what he calls "neo-African cultures" not only on the continent, but also in the New World, where they seemingly had the poorest chance of survival.

Like Tempels, then, Jahn is motivated by generous intentions. However, he fails to see, or pretends not to see, the real purpose of his predecessor's book.

The difference between Tempels, Lévy-Bruhl and Jaspers, in my opinion, is one of a tenuous nuance. Before adopting Tempels theory, Jahn would have done well to establish a clear distance between himself and the Belgian priest. His criticism is only implicit and does not go far enough. Furthermore, he follows Tempels into a pitfall. Tempels maintained that African intellectuals (or at least those who were called "évolués" in Belgian colonialism) were misguided and had lost their culture, and that the only Africans worth studying were the old people living in the villages. For his part, Jahn seems to find his material almost exclusively among the Western-educated Africans,<sup>8</sup> and he justifies himself by stating that since his "book deals with culture, it is above all people of a certain intellectual level who are quoted" (p. 12). He does not say, however, how he determines the intellectual level in a society he hardly knows. In his effort to counter Tempels, then, Jahn seems to have made the same error of excluding an important section of the social group. This exclusion casts doubts on one of the main purposes of his study, namely to find a basic unity within vastly divergent Black cultures of African origin. Is it possible to reach valid conclusions about this unity if some of the elements (in this case, the common denominator, in my opinion) on which it depends are excluded from the start? Is it possible, given these conditions, to propound a viable theory of social change? And how valid are Jahn's criteria about who is a "Neo-African" artist and who is not? It is not entirely clear how he comes to the conclusion, for instance, that among Black Americans, Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson are Neo-Africans, while Richard Wright is not, and Langston Hughes only partly so.

If the general framework of Jahn's book is indebted to Tempels' work, some of its parts are borrowed from the work of an African priest-philosopher from Rwanda who is also indebted to Tempels to a large extent. Alexis Kagame set out to determine whether Placide Tempels' theories could be substantiated in other areas of the so-called Bantu culture. From the outset, he established a more modest goal: if the theories could be verified in the Rwandese culture, the conclusions would still not be applied wholesale to all other cultures of central and southern Africa unless the experience could be repeated with the same results over and over again.

The main difference between Kagame and Tempels resides in their respective methods. While Tempels had reached his conclusions without an explicit analysis of his ethnological data, Kagame takes one aspect of the culture--the language--

and analyzes it in detail, giving center stage to grammatical structure and etymological derivation, discarding those aspects which can be defined as strictly ethnological, and emphasizing those elements which have to do with "philosophical principles." Thus he takes the concept of *Bantu* back to its linguistics origin before attempting to draw any philosophical conclusions. He also demonstrates, by the same token, that where there is a system of thought, there is also an adequate language to express it.

At the same time, however, Kagame seems enclosed within the confines of the term *Bantu* as elaborated by his predecessor. He concludes that for the area in and immediately around Rwanda, the system of thought can be divided into four categories: *MUNTU*, *KINTU*, *HANTU* and *KUNTU*. Nothing can be thought outside of these four categories, which have a common stem, *NTU*. According to Kagame, this stem is the equivalent of *Being* or *Essence* in European philosophy. Each classifier preceding the stem determines the difference between the various manifestations of being. In practical terms, what distinguishes the human being, *Muntu*, from the others is his/her intelligence.

The second category, *Kintu*, comprises all things which have substance but have no intelligence. This category includes animals and plants as well as nonliving objects. *Hantu*, the third category, has to do with localization, both in terms of space and time; and finally, the fourth category, *Kuntu*, refers to "modality," commonly called style in plastic and communication arts. It includes a variety of concrete and abstract concepts such as quality, quantity, action, relative position.

These categories can be recognized in Jahn's system; indeed they provide--in addition to the title of the book--subject-headings for three important chapters of his study ("*Ntu*," "*Kuntu*," "*Hantu*"). There is not space enough here to examine each of these chapters in detail, but a brief consideration of the last one seems indispensable, in view of its subject-matter and its underlying assumptions. The chapter is entitled "*Hantu*: History of Literature." If "*Hantu* is the category of space and time" (p. 190) within the African world-view, then the reader is justified to expect a different conception of history than the European. Instead, Jahn divides the epochs of African history into "Antiquity," "Middle Ages" and "Modern Times," going from the founding of Egyptian culture by Nubian penetration into the Nile Valley to the "discovery" of Africa by Europe. One wonders what a term like "Middle Ages" really means in African history. Jahn compares what was happening in Europe in that period with what was happening in Africa:

*As in Europe, the rest of the continent had failed to keep up with the people on the shore.*

*As in Europe also, Medieval culture had to be constructed anew out of the heritage of antiquity (p. 192).*

Even a cursory reading of African history reveals, however, that the period which is called Middle Ages in Europe was in fact for Africa the time of the greatest social and political organization and cohesion, to wit the empires and kingdoms of Mali, Sohghai, Ghana, Kongo and others, some of which extended deep into the interior of the continent. In his monumental *Histoire de l'Afrique noire*, Joseph Ki-Zerbo describes with ample justification the period between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries as "the great epochs of Black Africa."<sup>9</sup> The period immediately following (which Jahn calls modern times and which is usually associated with "progress" in European history) represents a time of destruction and regression, highlighted by the establishment of alien political institutions which seem to have short-circuited African initiative beyond recall. Perhaps African history will come to regard this period as its equivalent of the Middle Ages.

Jahn's history of African literature is necessarily a result of his view of history through European eyes. "In Africa as in America," he writes, "modern African literature begins with the acquisition of the Latin script" (p. 196). This proposition clearly minimizes the importance of literatures written in other scripts (Arabic, Vai, Amharic, Bamoum) which preceded the Latin script on the continent. Jahn's statement also dismisses oral literature even though it is still the preponderant literature today. Oral literature is no less "modern" than any other; rather it is the one which continues an indigenous tradition, while the Latin script introduces a largely alien tradition. What is important to determine is the meeting place of the two traditions.

This meeting place, I believe, is what Jahn attempts to discover, but his search often ends up sounding like an apology or a paternalistic discourse: apology for the absence of written historical documents before the Europeans came; apology for the neglect of African languages by contemporary writers in favor of European languages:

*In European culture the language, the mother tongue, is the epitome of the national heritage... In African culture, language does not have this weight...It is not the vocabulary, but the way of using speech that is (the) real language (p. 194).*

The present debate on national languages in Africa reveals the fallacy of this argument, as does the continued existence of Creoles, and other New World "hybrid languages." If the

problem of language were not important, the search for more culturally acceptable alternatives to French and English would have ended long ago. The continuing search makes one wonder if the African writer would still choose a European language if his mother tongue enjoyed the same political and economic power as the European languages. This power is obviously the aftermath of Europe's adventures in Africa in "modern times."

Few European scholars have written about Africa with more passion and sympathy than Janheinz Jahn did in Muntu. However, by the time he arrived on the scene, a tacit and insidious alliance already linked the so-called progressive Western scholar and the African scholar who was perforce a student of the former. Kagame and other African thinkers<sup>10</sup> were locked into a system of analysis which deluded them by the mere use of the word "philosophy" in connection with African cultures, a word which was denied by earlier European philosophers. To them, Tempels was an advocate of African philosophy, and they could not think outside of his Muntu/Bantu concept even when they set out to disprove his theory. As a result, few realized that this theory advocated, not the overthrow of colonialism, but the institution of a *neo-colonialism* to better entrench European domination. Whatever corrections Kagame and others brought to Tempels' work could not change this basic fact.

Janheinz Jahn, following in Kagame's footsteps, furthered this neocolonialist alliance. Perhaps he could not help it; after all, Kagame, an African, seemed to have accepted Tempels' theory, if not its assumptions. Deriving its strength from this fact, Muntu propounded a new set of theories and generalizations about Black literature and other arts, and it has served as a textbook of literary theory and criticism in conjunction with Jahn's second book, Neo-African Literature.<sup>11</sup>

My aim in this brief study has not necessarily been to reprove any individual work, but rather to point out a situation which exists in many areas of African studies, as well as in the political arena. Africans still define themselves in the words and concepts of Europe (and I am not even speaking of the larger problem of language *per se*). They still look at themselves through the mirror handed to them by others, unable to denounce the distortions which are inherent within that mirror. The reversal of this situation is imperative if African political and scholarly thought is to regain the initiative and the independence it lost since its earliest contact with Europe.

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#### Notes

1. Muntu: Umrissa der neoafrikanischen Kultur, Dusseldorf: Eugen Diederichs, 1958. At last count, the book has been

translated into eight languages. My references are to the English translation by Marjorie Grene, Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture, New York: Grove Press, 1961.

2. Cf. Alexis Kagame's comprehensive study La Philosophie Bantu Comparée, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976, pp. 52-55.
3. R.P. Placide Tempels, La Philosophie bantoue, Elisabethville: Lovanie, 1945. Although this French edition is the best known, the book was originally written in Flemish. For my purposes here I use the English translation by Colin King, Bantu Philosophy, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959.
4. Alexis Kagame, La Philosophie bantou-rwandaise de l'être, Bruxelles, 1956.
5. Thorough analyses can be found in F. Eboussi Boulaga, La Crise du Muntu, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1977, and Paulin J. Hountondji, Sur la "philosophie africaine", Paris: Maspéro, 1976.
6. Lévy-Bruhl's tardy "corrections" in Les Carnets neither alter the inherent ethnocentrism of ethnology nor therefore explain the real reasons of his past errors.
7. Cf. F. Eboussi Boulaga, "Le Bantou problématique", Présence Africaine, No. 66 (2<sup>e</sup> trimestre 1968), 39, note 1.
8. Except for Ogotemmel, the old Dogon wise man, but this is a secondary source which Jahn borrowed from Marcel Griaule's Dieu d'eau.
9. Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Histoire de l'Afrique noire, Paris: Hatier, 1972, p. 129.
10. To name only a few who seem to have followed in Kagame's wake: F.-M. Lufuluabo, La notion luba-bantoue de l'être, Tournay: Castermann, 1964; Vincent Mulago, Un visage africain du christianisme, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1965.
11. Janheinz Jahn, Neo-African Literature, translated by O. Coburn and U. Lehrburger, New York: Grove Press, 1968.