INTRODUCTION

No account of any movement is complete that does not take account of the ideas, emotions, and even fantasies of its leaders...in short, [of] the idées forces

J. Ayo Langley

This is a book of interpretation, not of fact. It studies the major discourses in African political thought throughout the last one and a half centuries, rendering new interpretations of a number of important theorists. Subsequently, this book analyzes paradigmatic models of thought that recur in pre-colonial, colonial, as well as post-colonial political discourses. This in depth analysis allows for a critical inventory of African political thought at the close of the twentieth century.

The history of African political ideas is a neglected field of study. Investigations in African history, anthropology and politics flourish, doing much in the last decades to eradicate a colonial, unhistorical and stereotypical notion of Africa. The study of African intellectual creation, in particular of political thought, however, remains quite marginal. No comprehensive history of Europe or the USA, for instance, would fail to discuss the ideas of Locke, Montesquieu, Jefferson, Dewey or Marx, but when it comes to Africa apparently one can do almost without African intellectuals. In those instances where African thought has been studied, expositions of metaphysical systems abound, whereas discussions of critical or theoretical thought belonging to individual Africans are quite rare. Within Africanist scholarship the African intellectual remains an anomaly.

The present project requires a further 'normalization' of the academic treatment of Africa. When it concerns any other part of the world, political philosophies are studied as distinct from proclaimed state ideologies. Then why should African political philosophy typically be equated with the statements of presidents or with the 'traditional' African political system? Everywhere in the world collective world-views are studied as distinct from the philosophical reflections of individual thinkers (often going against the established world-view). Why then, in the case of Africa, should world-views be the prime source for the study of ideas, and should anthropologists act as amateur philosophers and philosophers act as amateur anthropologists?

1Langley 1973, p.13
4Anthropological research on African Systems of Thought is highly interesting but, even in the
One of the results of this curious distribution of academic tasks, which seems to be uniquely reserved for Africa, is that interpretative histories with a title such as "Twentieth-Century African Political Thought" or "History of African Political Thought" cannot be found. A number of excellent studies on specific authors or movements appeared in the 1960s and the early 1970s, such as those by Ayo Langley and Imanuel Geiss on Pan-Africanism. There are also a few good collections of classical texts, and classical works by African intellectuals were reprinted in that same period. In the ensuing decades, however, there was practically no follow-up. Deficient intellectual historiography may also explain why one finds relatively little critical discussion of predecessors within African political discourses, resulting, not infrequently, in the re-invention of positions that were already excellently formulated by African precursors.

There is much need, therefore, for 'normal' studies in African intellectual history, in order to strengthen a tradition for the interpretation of African classics and a tradition of scholarly debate which forces theorists to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors. The systematic research into African intellectual history of Ayo Langley should be continued.

**Fathoming contemporary African political thought: hermeneutical, analytical, and critical tasks**

The central concerns for intellectuals in Africa have been socialism and development, for at least three decades. Today, new crucial issues take precedence on the agenda, such as democracy, civil society, a reorientation

---

5July 1968, a purely historical book, is the only exception to my knowledge.
7The criticism of the idea of the single-party system in the early 1990s practically never referred to the criticism of that system formulated in the 1960s, when these systems were introduced. With hindsight, the critiques of the 1960s were far richer than those in the 1990s!
8Historically informed studies are more common in discussions on specific African authors such as Fanon or Cabral. A tradition of interpretation, however, is hardly present. The sources for such work, in terms of classical texts, readers and journals, mostly have to be researched outside Africa itself, in European and American libraries!
towards indigenous political forms, and the question of the nation-state. The present intellectual situation is not clear, however. On the one hand, there seems to be a remarkable consensus about political ideals; practically everybody values democracy, for instance. On the other hand, the way of shaping these ideals in the form of political conceptions is not always new. In many cases the new wine is poured into old paradigmatic sacks, creating an indistinct mixture of tastes. In order to gain a clear view of the present intellectual situation, therefore, an analysis of the various ways of framing conceptions, that is of the paradigmatic models of African political thought, is needed. This book attempts to provide such an analysis. It aims, in short, to exhibit the intellectual armoury which African political thought provides for attacking urgent present-day issues.

In order to achieve its aim, this study engages in three major exercises. The study begins with a thorough historical review of discourses in African political thought, followed by a philosophical dissection of the key models of thought operative in these discourses, which finally results in a critical inventory of contemporary African political thought. The study, thus, involves three tasks: hermeneutical, analytical and critical. Let me characterize each of these tasks in more detail.

In the first place, the inventory requires a thorough interpretation of the history of ideas, in order to reclaim and chart the almost forgotten provinces of African political thought. And there is much to be reclaimed. Even if, as in the present study, the attention is limited to the direct ancestors of the present-day political discourses of the French or English writing intelligentsia, a fascinating history presents itself. West Africa, in particular Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Nigeria, has been the hotbed for the development of ‘modern’ political thought in Africa south of the Sahara, like France and Britain in Europe. Not, as I will argue, because West African countries were the first to import European ideas, as is often said, but the first to face the European confrontation and to produce a public space in which this encounter could be discussed.

Christopher Clapham (1970) rightly criticized the tendency to piece together disparate statements by African politicians and activists into ‘ideologies’ or ‘philosophies’. It would be a mistake, however, to deny that elaborate expressions of a political discourse can be analyzed philosophically. The dominant tendency to study political ‘facts’ and interests at the expense of political discourse is even less correct: the political scientist cannot even start to grasp the perceived interests of political actors without entering into their universe of discourse.

Just like one can discuss Kant or Rousseau as contributors to a philosophical tradition without being accused of limiting the discussion to just Germany and France, the prominence of West African thinkers in this study can be legitimate. Philosophy concerns intellectual, not geographical spaces, and can freely focus on thinkers who are relevant for the topic and ignore those who are not. South Africa, for instance, produced a very rich political history, however, besides Sol Plaatje and the Freedom Charter it does not seem to have left much sediment in the history of political thought up to now.

Initially, until the first years of this century, the colonial intrusion could be perceived as a temporary affair, soon to be overcome by a revitalized Africa. To highlight some conspicuous intellectual events, there were the optimistic state-building blueprints of Africanus Horton around 1870, the wide-ranging contributions to a philosophy of African regeneration by Edward Wilmot Blyden, and the sophisticated reconstructions of indigenous political and legal frameworks by John Mensah Sarbah and Joseph Casely Hayford around the turn of the century (see chapter III in this book).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, however, the colonial system appeared invincible and its discourse was hegemonic. There were only few intellectuals who did not get entangled in this discourse. While the statement that Africans have the capacity for self-government was not exceptional around the turn of the century, it was considered to be a bold conjecture in the following decades. Colonialism determined that African politics had to take the form of an opposition movement operating within the colonial system. Opposition politics led to a restatement of African ambitions, such as in the case of important intellectuals like Kobina Sekyi, J.B. Danquah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Obafemi Awolowo (see chapter IV in this book). Emigré communities in London and Paris produced more radical anti-colonial voices (e.g. Lamine Senghor, Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah), and African-American intellectuals infused the specific influences of Pan-African and black identity thought (e.g. Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke).

The best known forms of African political thought, Négritude, African Socialism and revolutionary theory, were the philosophies of the famous 'founding fathers' of the new nations, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Sékou Touré, Julius Nyerere, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Kenneth Kaunda. Political thought after the second world war was much richer, however, than these obligatory examples. It included a liberal discourse on modernization and the forceful revolutionary thought of, for instance, Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral. Marxist inspired discourses dominated political thought in the 1970s and 1980s, before the movements for democratization during the 1990s directed political discourses to the issue of shaping an open political order and the rule of law in African countries.

A history of ideas, as sketched above, can map discourses in African political thought, but it cannot uncover their architecture. For this purpose, we need a second type of exercise, an analytical exercise, that reveals the paradigmatic models of reasoning which structure discourses.

The need for analysis is demonstrated by the simple observation that political conceptions, despite an appearance of consistency, are usually 'patched together' from different discursive sources and adjusted to suit the problem-agenda of the day. One cannot construct an intellectual building from nothing since the only building material available is the wreckage of previous
discourses. Each discourse embodies a stock of concepts, dichotomies, metaphors, assumptions, and hopes about history and humanity. When new issues arise, we carry with us this inherited stock and adjust, rearrange, or convert it, while much retains its original form.

In this intellectual situation, gaining understanding of a historical discourse involves a kind of *archaeological* analysis that identifies the discursive bits and pieces, the debris, from which the particular intellectual building is constructed. The archaeology also involves laying bare the (possibly ancient) ground-plan and the foundation-stones, tracing the practical functions for which the building was designed as well as those functions for which it is inappropriate.

A glimpse at contemporary discussions about democracy in Africa illustrates the conditioning of a discourse by its intellectual ground-plan. Chapter VII explores these contemporary discussions in more detail, but at this point I can highlight the fact that the turn towards democracy involved discourses that were tailored to deal with issues such as socialism or development planning. The discourses were reoriented towards the issue of democracy without changing their ground-plan. In the case of Marxist discourse on democracy, foundational historicist assumptions had a high level of impact so that the issue of democracy became automatically conceived of as a struggle between major social actors (masses, classes, elites) within a historical process. In the case of those liberals, who perceive a fundamental separation between the private and the public while placing the seat of liberty on the side of the private, a similar conditioning of the view of democracy by the intellectual ground-plan is evident. Democracy, in this view, primarily consists of defending the private from the public, for instance by underlining individual rights and parliament as the primary institution of controlling the government. Democracy tends to be conceived here in terms of a multi-party representation in parliament, not of the democratization of society within the private sphere (economy, culture, family, gender).

The previous section argued that a descriptive *history of ideas* needs to be complemented by an *archaeological analysis* in the form of uncovering paradigmatic models of reasoning. If my inventory of contemporary African political thought is to be complete, however, even archaeological *analysis* fails to suffice. I still need to *assess* the abilities and disabilities of the intellectual armoury at hand when dealing with the urgent questions of today. To complete the study of political ideas, therefore, a third type of exercise, a 'critique of arms', is needed. The roles of the *hermeneutic* and the *analyst* have to give

---

12I borrow the expression of "critique of arms" from the title of Régis Debray's famous text *La Critique des Armes* (Paris, Edition du Seuil, 1974) which critically examined revolutionary ideology and struggles in the 1960s. Originally, the expression comes from Marx.
way, finally, to that of the critic, thereby covering the full range of what philosophical study can contribute to the study of political ideas.

While moving from the role of the hermeneutic to that of the analyst and the critic, however, the philosopher becomes gradually more implicated in the results of the study. *Hermeneutics*, although unavoidably involving a "Vorverständnis" (pre-understanding) of the interpreter, implies a role that is largely invisible. As an analyst, one already becomes more exposed: the uncovering of the basic aspects of an author's intellectual edifice, which archaeological deconstruction and reconstruction aim to achieve, is very much the analyst's 'editing' of the available material. In the role of the critic, finally, the philosopher is fully involved; the critic becomes part of the debate and has to justify the criteria employed.

The present book, written by a non-African, is limited in its critical pretensions. The outsider has to strike a delicate balance between uncommitted and overcommitted attitudes. Those culturalist Westerners who fail to go beyond repeating the ideas of African philosophers out of sheer 'respect' for the cultural 'other' can be rightly accused of discrimination because they do not take their colleagues seriously as philosophers. Showing respect among philosophers is, after all, the act of giving critical attention. On the other hand, one has to avoid contributing to another long-standing European tradition, namely of providing well intended, but unsolicited, advise to an African public.

Only the last chapters involve critical discussions. I employ the hermeneutical understanding and critical insights gathered in the previous chapters as a tool for an interrogation of contemporary political discourses. My role can be compared to that of a parliamentary journalist: well-informed and incisive while interviewing, but not attempting to take the seat of the parliamentarian.

*The era of the confrontation*

The scope of the present study is limited. The main body of the book consists of historical and archaeological reconstruction. Its aim, however, as I explained above, is not to add to historical knowledge but to contribute to the interpretation of the contemporary African intellectual situation. This contemporary aim conditions the chronological limitations of this book. The demarcation of historical periods may often be somewhat arbitrary, but in this case it is not. Tracing the direct predecessors of present-day political discourses leads to a definite location, namely the "West African settlements", mainly Liberia and Sierra Leone, in the 1850s and 1860s.

The choice of this starting point does not derive from a preoccupation with the westernized elite in Africa, nor with a preconceived notion that only a

---

13H-G. Gadamer. See e.g. the discussion on pp. 51-65 in Giddens 1976.
'Western' type of thought can qualify as serious political reflection. In the first place, the choice is determined by historical evidence. The types of discourse and vocabularies used in contemporary political thought in Africa actually trace back to that point. The origin in the West African Settlements can, in the second place, be convincingly explained. The principal issue in African political thought throughout this era, namely the confrontation with the powers and ideas coming from overseas, first arose in this location. It was on the West African Coast, in a few small settlements, that actual colonial relations were first established, and so the problem of confronting the European challenge was originally experienced. As the front line of confrontation moved inland, it affected practically all African communities already before the turn of the century.

African political thought has never been the same since this confrontation. Whether conceptualized as a confrontation with modernity, as in some discourses, or with Western culture, as in others, or with imperialist capitalism, it is always judged as a fundamental break. Even the situation before the break is hard to recapture in retrospect. The drama of the confrontation and hegemonic power of the Europeans meant that the sophisticated indigenous traditions of politics became represented in a new way. They gradually became perceived, not in their own terms, but in the newly dominant ones, and not in their own right, but as different from European forms. In the new situation only, they became perceived as 'indigenous', as 'traditional' or even as 'African'. Formulated in the dichotomous vocabulary that accompanied the European presence, one can say that 'indigenous' Africa was a 'modern' invention.

The confrontation unavoidably produced a new political vocabulary. Introducing the idea of 'traditional' African systems in contemporary political discourse was automatically recasting them in new words and conceptual schemes, giving them new meaning and political significance, and therefore practising neo-traditionalist reconstruction. Representing what was there in terms of what came in was thus not the malicious product of westernized, évoluté culture, but an inescapable condition of African political thought in and after the confrontation with Europe. This book reveals that the various

14Political and meta-political reflection has not been absent, of course, in African societies from ancient Egypt to the kingdoms and empires in the 19th century.
15Strictly speaking, European penetration into South Africa occurred earlier. However, the situation there was quite different.
16Mudimbe 1988, Appiah 1992. Maybe the less discursively structured forms of life, like music, family life or dealings with the supernatural, could survive the confrontation relatively unharmed exactly because they could not be re-represented easily through the new vocabulary.
17The enforcement of Western discourse as the medium of exchange generates its own murky dispensations, often hard to track in terms of who is doing what to whom. The "native" proves adept at using the symbols and signifying practices of the colonial in ways that fortify a "newly marked" sense of indigenous difference." (Simone & Pieterse 1993, 59).
restatements of African traditions were, in fact, quite potent hybrids. Re-interpreting the African past, whether as liberal, socialist, humanist, pan-African, or democratic, has constituted one of the vital inspirations for political thought and action during the past century.

The correctness of a study's chronological limitations cannot be established *a priori*. They have to be proved by the result. Let me, therefore, set out on this venture, but not before I have critically selected my methodological vehicle.

Hybridity can be said to be the normal condition in a globalizing world (Bauman 1990, Appiah 1992, Appadurai 1990); "purity" of intellectual traditions is mostly only a myth. See Keita on Mazrui in "Africa's Triple heritage: Unique or Universal?", *Presence Africaine* 143, 1987.