THE INTERPRETATION OF POLITICAL DISCOURSES

History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of its origin.  

Michel Foucault

Recovering the history of African political thought seems to be a straightforward task at first sight, involving a description of political ideas in the political context in which they were produced. A number of questions arise, however. For instance: Which are the appropriate concepts to use in the description? What is involved in order to understand the ideas correctly? How exactly are ideas related to the political situation in which they were developed? For any study of political ideas across boundaries of time or culture, there are several serious methodological issues to be considered. Without giving these attention, historiography risks being no more than a confirmation of our present views by "making history into a pack of tricks we play on dead men."  

A sensitive interpretation of discourses in African political thought requires an excursion into the theory of historiography. I will proceed here first by identifying key methodological problems. Subsequently, I propose to tackle these problems with the historical hermeneutics proposed by Quentin Skinner. Finally, I suggest an elaboration of Skinner's approach in order to forge a set of appropriate methodological tools for my archaeological reconstruction of African political discourses.

Writing African intellectual history: two examples

One of the most thorough and extensive studies of African political ideas is the book *Panafrikanismus* by Imanuel Geiss. Geiss's project was in fact broader than Pan-Africanism. He tried to grasp the various intellectual reactions in Africa to the sudden confrontation with Europe, often comparing Pan-Africanism with Pan-movements elsewhere in the world.

In Geiss's view, the basic issue for Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries was the transition to modernity, which he perceived as an unavoidable historical process. Many people undergoing this process, however, experience the dislocations and pain which it causes and hesitate or try to escape. Pan-Africanism, in its various forms, is caught within this dilemma of modernization.

Geiss' detailed and insightful historiography stages historical events against the background of a squarely modernist view of the historical process.

18 Foucault 1984, p. 80
19 Skinner 1969, p. 37
This modernist view consists of at least three elements: the notions "tradition" and "modernity" which define a basic polarity, the idea that tradition will eventually give way to modernity and the appraisal that this process is all in all a desirable thing. Describing the historical material within this framework has several immediate consequences. African political thinkers become ordered as 'modernizers', that is those who have the courage to face the challenge of change, and 'traditionalists', those resisting the trend of history and who constitute the "romantic reaction" of the thinkers who "broke down" in the face of the requirements of the time and turned to folk-tales, adopting African names, clothes and traditions. African history, as represented by Imanuel Geiss, thus becomes a battleground of great historical forces which are driving forward or restraining the historical process.

Another interesting interpretation of African history is provided by Jan Vansina. In Paths in the Rainforest, he retraced millennia of historical developments in the Congo-Zaire rain forests which are often considered to lack history. Vansina also greatly contributed to the field of oral history. His article "A Past for the Future" states his theoretical assumptions, especially the idea of traditions in African history. Vansina argues that there exist various cultural traditions which define their own historical route. For the southern half of Africa, for instance, he identifies two major traditions: the Central African Bantu and the Eastern African Bantu which "derived from a single ancestral culture developed in south eastern Nigeria in the third millennium B.C." Vansina explicates his theory of traditions and of socio-cultural evolution as follows: traditions are real things 'out there' and they constitute the "pervasive fund of perceptions, beliefs, values, norms, expectations and practices common to the people within a community or a set of communities." A tradition has a 'core' (or 'preset framework') which "consists of collectively held principles about ultimate reality"; it constitutes a world-view. A tradition, then, "determines its own future,...as long as the societies which carry it retain their self-determination." This results, generally, in a basic continuity of traditions over long periods of time interrupted by "short periods during which a major rearrangement of basic choices and principles is being made." From Vansina's idea of traditions follows an analysis of the present condition of Africa and its intellectuals. Africa suffered a catastrophic break in its major cultural traditions as a result of colonialism: "Each colony was conquered region by region, village by village against determined resistance. By 1920, the conquest had cost the lives of perhaps half the population of East and Central Africa and had ruptured the continuity of the old traditions." In this way, the source of cultural and social continuity was destroyed, whereas

20Geis 1968, p. 85, p. 162, p. 242
22All quotations here from Vansina 1992, p. 10 and p. 11.
23Vansina 1992, p. 16
the alternative European tradition did not become firmly established. The majority of the people live by the remains of the old African traditions, while the elite is Europeanized. To characterize this situation, Vansina typically uses an organic metaphor: “the social organism...rejecting a foreign organ transplantation.”

African nationalism and the building of nation-states became conceptualized in terms of western notions but these states could not overcome the 'deep crisis of tradition'. To manage such a state, divided between the Westernized elite and the African majority, a system of clientism and control had to be worked out, which meant organizing society along indigenous African lines behind its official facade of Western type institutions defined by formal law. According to Vansina, the pre-conditions for African development are not fulfilled unless the African leadership reconnects to the majority traditions and the general cultural dichotomy is overcome by the growth of stable 'neo-African' majority traditions.

The problem of anachronism

In both Geiss's and Vansina's types of historiography a particular conception of the historical process shapes the interpretation of African political thought. Geiss's conception of history relates political discourses to the question of modernization, whereas Vansina relates political discourses to the question of rebuilding vital African 'traditions'. Typically, the effect of these background conceptions is not only the ordering of historical discourses, but also their valuation. Geiss values on a scale between courageous modernizers and regressive anti-modernizers, Vansina suggests a choice between representing the majority tradition and supporting a foreign transplant. Their quite general convictions about what is at stake in modern African history thus entice historians to become, in a way, part of the discussions they study, even taking partizan positions in some cases.

A historian unavoidably infuses an individual orientation in the presentation of the historical material, but there is more at issue here. My contention is that convictions about the historical process, such as the idea of modernization or of continuity of traditions, preclude understanding historical authors within their own frame of mind and within their own historical context. The historian, in such cases, enters the field with a prior substantial theory of history. Having some a priori knowledge about what this period in history really is about, the historian does not have to ask the historical actors what is at

24Vansina 1992a, p. 20
25Vansina formulates the idea of traditions very clearly, although he himself did not write much about political thought.
26In the case of Geiss, his excellent and comprehensive account is harmed by the tendency to pinpoint what he considers useful or harmful.
issue. The historian pretends to know beforehand the drama that they were enacting. The historiographers task, then, is to document how the process unrolls and to identify the roles of specific political ideas and actors.

The possibility should be left open, however, that the people who are subject to historical study considered themselves to be actors in a different drama and that we are just burdening the past with the present by projecting our problem definitions upon them. There is some evidence that this actually happens in a number of interpretations of 19th century African political thought. Can one, for instance, speak of `nationalism' where the actors concerned did not have the concept of a `nation' or were not primarily concerned with it? Can there be Pan-Africanists when the idea of an African identity had not been formulated?\textsuperscript{27} Can there be modernists without the notion of `modernity',\textsuperscript{28} and traditionalists without the idea that African societies were `traditional'?

We are facing a general problem in the methodology of historiography, namely that of anachronism. Fitting historical authors in 20th century categories is always a tricky affair. We run the risk of saddling a historical author with "a debate the terms of which were unavailable to him, and the point of which would have been lost on him." As Quentin Skinner suggested: "the key to excluding unhistorical meanings must lie in limiting our range of descriptions of any given text to those which the author himself might in principle have avowed."\textsuperscript{29} In African historiography, for instance, we sometimes read that actors 'really' were nationalists but did not realise that yet, so they were 'cultural nationalists'; or they really were Pan-Africanists but did not express that idea 'fully', so they are called 'proto Pan-Africanists'. It is likely that these exercises in creative application of our own notions rather obscure our understanding of the theorists concerned than that they disclose their thought.

A paradigmatic example of overcoming anachronistic historiography is provided by Thomas Kuhn's discovery of the idea of paradigms. In the preface to \textit{The Essential Tension}, Kuhn described his failed struggle to discover the 'pre-history' of Newtonian mechanics in Aristotle's \textit{Physics}: "On a memorable (and very hot) Summer day the confusion melted as snow under a hot sun [when I] discovered a new way to read a series of texts,"\textsuperscript{30} namely by taking their own agenda seriously, by "learning to think like" the author. The most accessible ways to read a text are often not the most appropriate ones in the case of historical texts, he says. So Kuhn advised his students to look especially for the apparent absurdities in a text because making sense of these could lead to a proper understanding of the other passages.

For my present undertaking, Kuhn's lesson is clear. One cannot reduce

\textsuperscript{27} Note that the notion "African identity" was coined only in 1893 by E.W. Blyden.

\textsuperscript{28} The notion of 'modernity' became prominent in early 20th century social science.

\textsuperscript{29} Skinner 1974, p. 33 and p. 102

\textsuperscript{30} Kuhn 1977, p. 10
historical African authors to the 'pre-history' of late 20th century endeavours. Instead, we will have to suffer some "hot Summer days" to come to a more appropriate understanding of historical African discourses.

The curious situation which we face when studying African political thought spanning the last 150 years is that the historical process described is simultaneously the construction-process of many of the notions used in the description. The notions of tribe, nation, race, identity, Africa, modernity and tradition, as we know them, were in fact the result of the formation of groups, constellations of power and emergence of disciplines and discourses in the 19th and 20th centuries. Unreflective use of these notions clearly involves the danger of disregarding the political and discursive situation of the theorists whom we try to understand and thus of misunderstanding what they were talking about.  

Take the example of 19th century political thinkers in West Africa. In the next chapter I will give a more comprehensive account of their discursive situation but some remarkable contrasts between their conceptual outfit and ours can be sketched here already. 'Africa' as a continent in a political sense or as a focus of identity did not exist as we know it today. The notion 'Ethiopia' was frequently used to denote the vast continent as perceived from across the Atlantic as well as for a mythical identity and a God-given mission of black peoples. The notion 'Ethiopia' itself developed only within the Christian-eschatological tradition and was thus a recent phenomenon in Africa.  Within the abolitionist discourse in the 19th century focusing on missionary work, we also read the notion 'Negritia'.  As late as 1911, the prominent West African J.E. Casely Hayford, in his work *Ethiopia Unbound*, used "we from the East" when he talked about Africans, thus conceptualizing Africa within the vocabulary distinguishing Orient and Occident. 

Similarly, the notion of 'race' was not available in 19th century discourses in the way we know it. Cultural and biological issues were very much mixed. In his fascinating study *The Image of Africa*, Philip Curtin recounts how the vocabulary of race-thought, with its categorizations and hierarchizations of races, the assumed essential characteristics of each race and the specific political morale connected with all this, developed for a hundred

31"This special authority of an agent over his intentions does not exclude, of course, the possibility that an observer might be in a position to give a fuller or more convincing account of the agents behaviour than he could give himself. ...But it does exclude the possibility that an acceptable account of an agent's behaviour could ever survive the demonstration that it was itself dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent himself."(Skinner 1969, p. 48)


33Blyden 1857

34In *Ethiopia Unbound*, the word Africa is used but only in the geographical sense. See also Mudimbe 1988.

35Racist discourses today often practice that mixing of biological and cultural issues.
years. It solidified into a standard image in the 1850s and remained intact for the whole colonial period.

My examples of the notions of 'Africa' and 'race' show that using present-day concepts in historical description may be inappropriate. The same problem may arise from present-day general assumptions about humanity, culture and history. The examples of Geiss and Vansina showed such instances. Some of these assumptions are so entrenched in our intellectual make up that it is hard to even identify and question them. The idea of modernity, embracing a characteristic and powerful ensemble of science, the bureaucratic nation-state, individualism and continuous advancement, is a case in point. More generally, this idea involves distinct 'orders' of society, like species constituting a functional whole.

The idea of modernity, as fundamentally distinct from previous types of human society, can suggest convincing and beautiful representations of African history. Traditional African cultures, it narrates, could not produce an effective response to modern science and technology with its superior armoury and production capacity. Nor could they compete with the efficiency of 'modern' formal political, administrative and military structures, as well as universalist religious and ethical systems. Africa's 'modernisation-deficit' here explains its subjugation to the European power.

The same idea is expressed in a moving story told in Maryse Condé's novel Segou. When the shadow of the French power approaches the city of Segou and a sequence of disasters strike the Traoré family, then the insight, clairvoyance and powers of Koumaré, the medicine man and adviser, reach their limits. Koumaré had always identified the deeper meaning of calamity, sometimes only after the greatest exertion in meditation and hallucination, in the wrongdoings of an individual, the family, the king or the whole Bambara people. But the events accompanying the approach of the French are beyond his grasp, they were of a different order, a total drama, so that a Götterdämmerung evolved.

In many ways, the confrontation between African societies and the overseas powers presents itself as a confrontation between two different orders. The vocabulary of 'tradition' and 'modernity' presents itself, therefore, as the 'natural' analytical tool for understanding this confrontation. It is worthwhile, however, to attempt to resist its charms and analyze the analytical tool itself. This leads to the conclusion that even some of our most general assumptions, such as the idea of modernity, may have to be avoided in historiography.

There is, for instance, a methodological problem with the idea of modernity. It serves to explain the almost constant revolutionizing of the world ever since the time of the scientific revolution and the establishment of the global hegemony of western societies. But there is a circularity here: western hegemony is explained by its modernity but when we ask what this modernity is an (albeit idealized) description of the West is given. Strictly speaking, we have not acquired new information in this circular movement from the West via
modernity to the West. We have a description and not an explanation. If Africa did not correspond with the modernity syndrome and in actual fact could not compete, we have stated two distinct facts. Theoretically, the possibility is still open that European victory was accidental and that Africa could have gone a different path, distinct from western modernity. In that case, it was not Africa's non-modernity but its less competitive system or insufficient development of this system which should account for its loss.\footnote{Further problems with the idea of 'modernity' may be pointed out. It is an unempirical stereotype: the diversity of successful countries in the present world can hardly be reduced to one model. Finally, it conceals the much wider scope of possible alternatives, of different strategies and maybe of different modernities}

A non-anachronistic historiography requires that we should avoid describing the world of the people we study using in an unexamined way categories and concepts which we use to understand our world.\footnote{They "impose...a deeply anachronistic sense of how to divide up the world." (Skinner 1988, p. 248)} We cannot simply assume that the people we study were proposing different answers to the same problems that we see; they probably proposed different (or the same) answers to different problems. If, therefore, we want to understand their ideas, we need a hermeneutic approach, a positive historiographic program that finds out what the relevant problems, agendas and concepts to understand their work are from the historical actors themselves. A methodology is required that involves a more empirical attitude towards African political thought than is common.

\textit{The historical hermeneutics of Quentin Skinner: "Words are Deeds"}

Much of 20th century development of the theory of historiography, like that of many other fields, can be understood as the discovery of always new and more radical implications of Wittgenstein's \textit{Philosophical Investigations}. Quentin Skinner is a case in point. The basis of his approach to the historiography of political ideas is a Wittgensteinian understanding of the intertwined nature of language and action. In the well-known words of Wittgenstein, meaning is constituted in "language games" which are embedded in "life forms".

An important consequence that can be drawn from these basic considerations about language, meaning and action, is that a language game is \textbf{a conventional whole} supplying the context in which individual statements make sense. The meaning of linguistic expressions, their implicit connotations, procedures for determining their truth value etcetera, depend on this larger linguistic context. Language games are holistic and cannot, in a simple way, be proved or disproved by experience because we have no access to some non-
linguistically represented reality to provide an independent anchoring point. 

Because of this holistic and `floating' nature of language games change is normally change within such a whole. "Retailoring a body of conventions", as Quentin Skinner calls this, still means that most of the discursive texture remains intact. Using the metaphors of Neurath and Wittgenstein, it is like "rebuilding a ship out at sea" or like "a river which adjusts its bed in the process of streaming." If one speaker would revolutionize his language too much, he or she would not even be understood any more by the community. Influential political thinkers manage to 'retailor' the discursive texture in which they operate, while leaving enough common ground with their public to remain understood.

A second consequence of the relation between language, meaning and action is that linguistic representation of reality is an act; representation of political reality in political thought is a political act. A language game 'creates a world' (as the constructivist jargon has it), it depicts the political problem situation in a specific way, suggesting key issues, possible solutions and lines of action. Political thought is therefore political intervention which changes or solidifies current representations of political reality.

Both points can be formulated more strictly in the terms of Skinner:

1) A political text is always a restatement or adjustment of a "body of conventions" (which thereby remains for the most part intact). Therefore, a political text is "an ideological manoeuvre". 

2) A political text is, however, also a directly "political manoeuvre". The practical political aspect of a text is what Skinner calls its "pointe" and expresses the "intention" of the author: "the political theorist is responding to the political problems of the age" and "theories are about contemporary legitimation crises caused by shifting political relations." Skinner uses Wittgenstein's phrase: "Words are Deeds".

This double aspect in the constitution of meaning, in being located in a 'body of conventions' and in a field of action, is inherent to the use of language in general. Skinner refers here to Austin's analysis of speech-acts as both conveying a locutionary meaning (semantic reference of words and sentences) and having an 'illocutionary force' (you do something in saying what you say, for instance warning, promising, drawing attention to something or away from something). Understanding a speaker involves grasping both the locutionary and the illocutionary aspects of a speech-act. Understanding a text thus involves not just understanding the language of the text, but also tracing what

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38This does not exclude all possibilities of assessment. There can be convincing reasons to prefer one language game to another.

39To have impact, the retailoring must be perceived as useful by a relevant public, it must 'fit' social action or changed social or political environments. See Tully 1988, p. 23.

40Tully 1988, p. 10

41Quotes on Tully 1988, p.10 and p.13. Skinner discusses this issue in several articles, see e.g. Tully 1988, p.61. p. 83, p. 84.
the author was in fact *doing* by writing the text (its 'pointe', in Skinner's words).

At this point we have established the claim that language and action, or political text and political practice, are intrinsically interconnected, but we do not yet know what consequences it has for historiography, especially for the interpretation of historical political texts.

Skinner forcefully argues that interpreting texts *only from the texts themselves* (by reading them "over and over again") can never reveal the "pointe" of the text, that is the specific intervention which it intends. On the other hand, only a "contextual reading" of political texts does not suffice for a good interpretation either. To *explain* a text contextually does not mean to *understand* it. Understanding always involves an interpretation of intentions which, because these cannot be observed directly, will always involve interpretation at the textual level. Skinner's contention is that we can *only* understand the meaning of a text by grasping both the textual (ideological) intervention and the practical (political) intervention which it entails. This means that the interpreter should trace the standard ways of representing political reality in that particular time and understand the exact adjustments or reconfirmations of this standard which the text effects. Understanding their "pointe", again, requires an analysis of the practical political "intention" of the texts. Textual and social analysis should thus be combined. The concept of "discourse" is particularly useful here because it combines these two dimensions already and indicates the use of language in concrete political contexts of action.

Another consequence of Skinner's approach is that the contingent and contextually determined nature of political thought is highlighted. It does not make much sense to speak of 'great traditions' of political thought reproducing themselves through the ages because, in fact, political thought is reconstituted again and again in new political circumstances. Old concepts acquire a new meaning as a result of their specific use. The contextually created character of political thought implies that we should trace concrete historical discourses rather than 'influences' or 'traditions of thought'.

When discussing African political thought, this stress on the

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42 Skinner 1969, p. 59-61
43 Skinner's interpreter James Tully identifies five steps in the interpretative procedure of Skinner (Tully 1988, p. 8-16).
44 For a clear comparison of the notions of 'ideology', 'paradigm' and 'discourse', see Edwards 1996, p. 30-41. Edwards describes discourse as follows: "discourse goes beyond speech acts to refer to the entire field of signifying or meaningfull practices: those social interactions - material, institutional, and linguistic - through which reality is interpreted and constructed for us and with which human knowledge is produced and reproduced." (p. 34)
45 For interpreting a particular discourse, the inherited 'body of conventions' is relevant of course: after all some existing discursive texture is 'retailored'. However, the local circumstances will finally determine if conventions are maintained or not.
contextually created character of discourses can have a salutary consequence. Too often interpreters have 'understood' African thought by tracing its 'origins' to some European or American influence. The study of African political thought, however, should concern in the first place concrete African political discourses in their specific historical situation.

**Exemplars in Political Thought**

I can now take another step forward and enlarge the set of methodological instruments which Skinner provides us with. This is done by using Thomas Kuhn's analysis of the role of *exemplars* in scientific thought. The methodological approach thus prepared can guide the analysis of historical political discourses in the rest of this study.

It can be observed that the notions of 'body of conventions' and 'language game' share a similar reference with Kuhn's 'paradigm'\(^{46}\). Skinner's 'conventions' refer to "shared vocabulary, principles, assumptions, criteria for testing knowledge claims, problems, conceptual distinctions and so on."\(^{47}\) The elements which Kuhn mentions for a 'disciplinary matrix' (the notion which replaced the less specific term "paradigm" in 1969) are: basic symbolic generalisations, ontological or heuristic models, values about what are good explanations, predictions, theories and 'exemplars', that is the paradigmatic examples of good scientific work such as Newton's *Optics*\(^{48}\).

In 1969, Kuhn proceeded to identify in the paradigmatic example or *exemplar* the 'deeper' sense of paradigms. The exemplar contains in condensed form the whole disciplinary matrix: "the components of knowledge [are] tacitly embedded in shared examples."\(^{49}\) Learning and thinking organizes itself around these powerful heuristic guides, which contain the shared 'tacit knowledge' of the community of discourse. If, therefore, we want to trace the heuristics of a scientific approach or model of thought, the exemplar is the key: "knowledge is not, without essential change, subject to paraphrase in terms or rules and criteria."\(^{50}\)

The application of this Kuhnian idea to the analysis of political ideas is provided by the Dutch philosopher Lolle Nauta. Nauta suggests, arguing from the same Wittgensteinian foundations as Skinner and Kuhn, that in order to understand political concepts, we have to identify the specific examples which authors (and readers) had in mind when using these concepts:

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\(^{46}\) In his classical text "Meaning and Understanding" Skinner compares his work with Thomas Kuhn (on science) and Gombridge (on art) and uses the concept of *paradigm*. (Skinner 1969, p. 31-32)

\(^{47}\) Tully 1988, p. 9

\(^{48}\) Kuhn 1969, p. 182-187

\(^{49}\) Kuhn 1969, p. 175

\(^{50}\) Kuhn 1969, p. 175 for both quotes.
it is impossible to get hold of abstract concepts like liberty, independence, and autonomy if we are not provided with examples. They are our guide, enabling us to apply the concept, teaching us how to use it. Without a context the life of a concept is left without oxygen; we are unable to decipher its meaning.

Nauta's claim concerns both the facts, namely that concepts are shaped by the examples which people have in mind when using them, and our study of the facts, namely that we cannot hope to understand a (historical) political thinker without grasping the concrete exemplary situations to which was referred in his thought.

This approach connects the advantages of both Kuhn's focus on exemplars and of Skinners analysis of the interconnections of textual-ideological and political-action domains. In Skinner's terms, Nauta's claim is that a "body of conventions" is practically available in, and knowable through, its relevant exemplars. These provide us with a key to the interface of text, community of discourse, and context of action. They represent at once central political issues as perceived by the community of discourse and indicate the heuristics of the discourse, both the social roots and intellectual structure of the philosophical conception.

This double role of exemplars can be understood as follows.

1) Important political texts manage to represent political reality in such a convincing way that others recognise the validity of the representation. They do this by designing their representation around social situations or historical experiences which express real-life key-experiences of the community of discourse. Hobbes exposition of the state of nature, for instance, can be seen as modelled on the early capitalist market, Marx's theory of history, on the relation property master versus property-less worker, and Blyden's theory of African redemption, as modelled upon the new-world slavery experience (see chapter III of this book). In all these cases, the convincing force of the representations derives from their reference to social relations or key historical events which themselves are perceived by the public as fundamental for the whole social fabric.

It should be noted that in this way the connection between 'intellectual' and 'social' phenomena is not made by simply ascribing certain ideas to certain individual or group interests. In such an exercise the interpreter pretends to have independent access to both the meaning of the ideas and to the interests of the historical actor. The radical consequence of the Wittgensteinian conception

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51 Nauta 1985, p. 364
52 There is a qualitative difference between Skinner's basic metaphor of change of discourse as "tailoring and retailoring textures", with Kuhn's metaphor of "Gestalt-switch" or "revolution". The first stresses gradual change in a network of meaning, while the other stresses break in traditions. There have been many discussions about Kuhn's idea of revolution, suggesting that, if studied in detail, every revolution involves a chain of smaller changes. (Gutting 1980; Hacking 1981)
of language and meaning, however, is that such access is impossible. Knowing
ideas involves understanding their use in a specific context of application, and
knowing (perceived) interests involves grasping the actors' interpretation of
their interests.

2) An exemplar, however, not only represents political reality in a certain
way, it also provides an organising principle for the discourse itself. It
suggests the key issues, the key metaphors and the heuristic model for the
perception of a whole range of secondary issues. In short: "certain specific
situations at the back of the mind of social philosophers determine their way of
problem-solving." These exemplary situations provide the heuristic compass
of the discourse. The Chinese revolution, for example, has provided a very
influential exemplar for leftist political analysis in developing countries. The
basic story of that revolution runs as follows: the cities, as centres of power,
exploited the countryside, the periphery composed of the poor majority. Under
the communist party the peasant masses became united and organised and
started an effective guerilla war. By encircling the cities and cutting the links of
unequal exchange between countryside and cities, the power of the cities,
which was itself based upon these exploitative links, was broken and liberation
was achieved. This story provides a heuristic model for centre - periphery
theories, suggesting both an analysis of basic relations of power according to
the 'geographical' metaphor of centre and periphery, and for a strategy of
liberation, as reestablishing autonomy by uniting the periphery and 'delinking'
from the centre. The core of that theory is contained in condensed form in the
story of the Chinese revolution.

The key importance of exemplars within a text or a body of thought does
not mean that they are easily recovered. It requires a process of 'distillation' or
of explication, of recognition of hidden patterns from images and examples to
come to what the analyst suggests as the constitutive exemplar. One could call
it a process of textual psychoanalysis. Identifying an exemplar entails an Aha-
lebnis similar to what Thomas Kuhn referred to in relation to paradigms.

Conclusion

The opening chapter defined the hermeneutical, the analytical and the critical
tasks of the present book. The methodology outlined in this chapter satisfies the
needs of the hermeneutic by facilitating a non-anachronistic representation of
historical discourses. It also provides methodological tools for the analyst by
suggesting a way of practising an archaeological reconstruction of African
political discourses through excavating the constitutive exemplars and thereby
the heuristic, 'the way of problem-solving', of discourses. Whether this method
of reconstruction works satisfactorily can only be judged by the results. The

54 Ankersmit 1997, p. 368
55 Nauta 1985, p. 365
following chapters, which reconstruct historical discourses and their exemplars, can be read as an attempt to test this approach.

Even for the limited critical objectives of this study, the proposed method can be of use. Tracing the heuristic of a discourse also involves tracing what remains outside its scope, such as the questions not asked, the blind spots, the issues not thematized. As Nauta observes: "An exemplary situation is a kind of model and a model opens certain ways of seeing, but forecloses others as well." Thus, Marx's exemplar of the master - slave dialectic was predisposed to a highly idealised conception of the role of the proletariat and to a deficient analyses of the variety of preconditions for moving from a state of alienation to one of autonomy. Similarly E.W. Blyden's exemplar of the color-line, as will be shown in the next chapter, made him see through the paternalistic, half-colonial relations on the West Coast in the 1860s and 1870s but prevented him from making a penetrating political analysis of the fully fledged colonial situations which emerged in the 1890s. Grasping the heuristic of a discourse involves grasping its strengths as well as its weaknesses. This study has equipped itself sufficiently now to take to the field.

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56 Nauta 1985, p. 366
57 Nauta 1985, p. 370-373