



Traits of the African cultural proper and their relation to the sacred

Traços do *proprium* cultural africano e sua relação com o sagrado

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Abstract

In the wake of the colonial conquest of Africa, unleashed in the second half of the 19th century, some European anthropologists and missionaries, who established a long association with societies from various regions of the African continent, managed to make the early academic collections and systematizations of the cultural imaginary of traditional communities. Taking such a context as a backdrop and counterpoint, this article highlights some voices of “native” theoreticians (Ki-Zerbo, Hampaté Bâ, Honorat Aguessy), in order to make explicit and discuss some traits of the African cultural proper. According to the conception of those traditional cultures, religion, erected on the same arch of oral culture, sets up all other components of social life. On this assumption, the text discusses four main aspects: the (naive) conception of an African cultural unity; the importance of oral tradition with regard to knowledge of history and imaginary of societies from that continent; the imbrications of political action and cultural issues; and the (unnecessary) polarizations of Europe versus Africa for purposes of adequately characterizing the African cultures.

Keywords: African cultures; African traditional religion; orality.

Resumo

Na esteira da conquista colonial da África, desencadeada na segunda metade do século XIX, alguns antropólogos e missionários europeus, que estabeleceram longa convivência com sociedades de diferentes regiões do continente africano, lograram realizar as primeiras recolhidas e sistematizações acadêmicas do imaginário cultural de comunidades tradicionais. Tomando tal contexto como pano de fundo e contraponto, este artigo destaca algumas vozes de teóricos “nativos” (Ki-Zerbo, Hampaté Bâ, Honorat Aguessy), com vistas a explicitar e discutir alguns traços do *proprium* cultural africano. Na concepção daquelas culturas tradicionais, a religião, assentada no mesmo arco da cultura oral, funda todos os demais componentes da vida social. Sobre tal pressuposto, o texto discute quatro aspectos principais: a concepção (ingênua) de uma unidade cultural africana; a importância da tradição oral em relação ao conhecimento da história e do imaginário das sociedades daquele continente; as imbricações da ação política e das questões culturais; e as polarizações (desnecessárias) de Europa *versus* África para fins de caracterizar adequadamente as culturas africanas.

Palavras-chave: Culturas africanas; religião tradicional africana; oralidade.

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Introduction

Within the Victorian period, theorizations on the religious fact favored the search for the origins of religion, generally conceiving it as the first stage of human development. The idea that there are “primitive” peoples and “archaic” forms of religion dates back from that time – conceptions that spread towards the constitution of common sense and still remain with regard to the subject.

Referring to the context of inegalitarian relationships that governed the formation of foreign historiographies on Africa, the Congolese historian Elikia M’Bokolo (2009, p. 50-51) points out:

The wonderful, almost obligatory component of any encounter with the Other, has always mixed, in the African context, with the most absolute nothing, either the darkness of paganism, which we should dissipate anyway, or men whose humanity, whatever the cost, should be denied to turn them into commodities.

In this context, the arbitrariness of the “evolutionary” conception of the religious phenomenon, often constructed on a hypothetical hierarchy of sacred expressions, is just one link in the great chain of the geopolitical arbitrariness of the 19th century that ensured and justified the colonial conquest, sharing the “primitive” Africa between the “evolved” European powers, and the end of African sovereignties.

In the wake of this movement, being opposed to European ethnocentrism, however, there are some changes. Let us see. In the first half of the 20th century, in a sort of reverse perspective with regard to the arrogance of Western judgments on the African world, the ethnological practice, particularly the French one, and some approaches derived from the hands of missionaries, engaged in studying the “symbolic systems” of that world. The expression is intended to highlight the

symbolic dimension expressed in the manufacture and use of everyday life utensils, in the literature of oral tradition (myths, tales, legends, proverbs), in languages, in music, in songs, in dances, in festivals, in ritual objects from African societies. They are interested, above all, in understanding and showing the rationale of knowledge, the consistency of thought systems, expressed by the myths, rituals, cosmogonies, typical of the so-called “traditional” societies – a symbolic building that those anthropologists and missionaries, in an overt opposition to the European world, although taking it as their reference, do not hesitate to name “philosophy” or “theology”.

These first steps towards a revolution of looking – in the sense of a certain break with the idea of centrality of the European world and a better understanding of the African world – were taken by professional anthropologists and European missionaries who established a long association with societies from various regions of the African continent. We may highlight, among others, the names of Marcel Griaule¹, Placide Tempels², and Raul de Asúa Altuna³. Some of the earliest collections and systematization of traditional African thought, with undeniable academic value, are attributed to them.

Given this context – and under the focus of interest in listening to the African world – this question necessarily emerges: “And the countless voices from that continent, where are they?”

This article highlights some voices of African theoreticians, seeking to make explicit traits of their culture, particularly with regard to the sacred realm. In this effort, some questions emerge: “Is there an African proper with regard to the

¹ Marcel Griaule (1898-1956), graduated in Religion from École Pratique des Hautes Études and, late in life, Full Professor of Ethnology at the Sorbonne, is regarded as the founder of French Anthropology. He lived among the Dogon, in the Bandiagara Escarpment, for over twenty years. Between 1931 and 1933, he directed the Dakar-Djibouti Ethnography Mission, with the objective of registering customs, languages, festivals, songs, rites, and “collect” pieces for the Ethnographic Museum of the Trocadéro (named Museum of Man, since 1937). Regarding this project, read the interesting “diary” written by the archivist secretary of the mission, Michel Leiris (2007).

² Frans Tempels (1906-1977), whose religious name is Placide, was a Belgian missionary, a Franciscan Catholic priest, who worked in the Belgian Congo (nowadays the Democratic Republic of Congo) from 1933 to 1962.

³ Raul Ruiz de Asúa Altuna, a Catholic priest at the Basque Diocesan Missions (Basque Country, a province in the far north of Spain), became a missionary in Angola by the late 1950s and he lived with that people for about thirty years.

sacred?"; "Which aspects would stand out in the African look at the sacred?"; "Which voices – from African theoreticians – would express this look?"; "Would there be the possibility of a dialogue between the European view and the African view with regard to the sacred?".

1 African voices on the sacred

In early 2007, shortly after the death of the Burkinabe historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Lopes (2007) referred to him as a “baobab” of the African culture and situated him in the

[...] generation of Africans who, using the methodological tools of the European schools, operated a deep epistemological break with the dominant paradigms and constructed a discourse that allowed deconstructing the European discourse about the Other who dominated the historical sciences within the colonial period – [a generation that undertook] a huge effort to resurrect the immense and very rich historical and cultural heritage of African societies.

This statement, in its amplitude, certainly allows including countless other voices (Hampaté Bâ, Honorat Aguessy, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and others) – voices politically and intellectually committed to the struggle for independence of African peoples and the appreciation of their culture, voices that have led the African world to be academically recognized in the West. These intellectuals bear in common traditional African heritage; they come from within traditional world. They also carry influences from the European academy. They are educated by it. They are included in their faculties. Wherever they have worked, they are recognized as great masters of African tradition, which, as a system of founding principles of the totality of existence, covers, in the diversity of its historical forms, social life, politics, religion.

One of the most distinguished names at the top of the list of these African intellectuals is certainly Joseph Ki-Zerbo⁴. In **História da África Negra** [History of Black Africa] (KI-ZERBO, 1978)⁵, published in 1972, the author shows an image of Africa different from that imposed by colonization. This work consecrated him as a historian, besides making him repeatedly remembered as the first African man who has written a history of Black Africa. He was also the first black professor who has taught History at the Sorbonne, in the late 1950s, and he was among the first ones to refute, on academic bases, the Hegelian thesis of an Africa devoid of history.

Regarding **História da África Negra** [History of Black Africa] (KI-ZERBO, 1978), its prefacer, Fernand Braudel (1978, p. 5), says:

This is a book of hope, woven with love. I am pleased to think that history will reward the historian, that he has led, with a single throw, to a whole continent, to a huge mass of sympathetic men, the message, the identity words that will enable them to live better. Since, in order to be hopeful, to keep on walking, there is also a need to know from whence we come.

In the general introduction to the first volume of **História geral da África** [General history of Africa] (KI-ZERBO, 1982)⁶, devoted to methodological issues and prehistory of Africa, the author makes explicit the four major principles that should guide historical research on Africa: interdisciplinarity, able to gather various sources and methods; requirement that the African history is seen from within, from the African pole; obligatoriness to comprise African peoples as a whole, as a history of peoples; greater interest in civilizations, institutions, structures (technical, arts, commerce, form of power, cults, religious conceptions, etc.), avoiding to be excessively factual. According to Ki-Zerbo, after all, it consisted

⁴ Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1922-2006), son of the first Christian couple from Upper Volta (nowadays Burkina Faso), studied in Catholic mission schools and, thanks to the excellence of his school performance, got a scholarship to attend a university course in Paris. Between 1949 and 1956, he studied History at the Sorbonne, graduated in Political Sciences at the Institute of Political Sciences in Paris, and became a Ph.D in History at the Sorbonne. For more details, cf. the biographical note written by René Holenstein (KI-ZERBO, 2006, p. 163-170).

⁵ Translated from the French **Histoire de l'Afrique Noire: d'hier à demain** (1972).

⁶ Ki-Zerbo was a member, since 1965, of the International Scientific Committee for Drafting the General History of Africa, created by the UNESCO, publisher of the large **General history of Africa** – a project, conducted in eight volumes, in which Ki-Zerbo has took leadership and coordinated the first volume.

in rewriting the history of Africa – disfigured and mutilated by centuries of oppression, which designed and exacerbated an image of misery and barbarism –, in search of an “authentic conscience”, an “actual scenario”, of “modifying the discourse” (KI-ZERBO, 1982, p. 22).

His last book, **Para quando a África?** [For when Africa?] (KI-ZERBO, 2006), published in 2003, shows to be a living picture of Africa in times of economic globalization. In this work, particularly, his perspective is expressed not only in order to resume the historical and cultural heritage of Africa, but also to refound the general history of Western peoples through the African matrix. Thus, asked by René Holenstein on the principle of “reparation”, having in mind those who should take responsibility in face of the deliberate destabilization suffered by the African continent, particularly by means of the institution of slavery and slave trade, Ki-Zerbo (2006, p. 32) replies:

When I speak of reparations, I do not have as a target, above all, the economic aspect, the aspect, I would rather say, of the “rights of special credits”. What I ask is not so much recognizing the error committed against blacks as blacks, but the error committed against mankind through the blacks. I do not think there are human groups that have been made more inferior than the blacks. On the day we recognize this, we will be integrated into the human species. It is not enough just saying: “Yes, they are black, we were too hard with them, we hit these poor Africans too much, we have to apologize...”. The reparations of which I speak involve many stages. There is a need to know and recognize what has happened, take our responsibility with regard to what has happened and take into account the fact that we ourselves, the blacks, have a responsibility in this matter.

Ki-Zerbo has become an undisputed reference for African studies, particularly in the field of History sciences. His interdisciplinary perspective, along with the work of other Africanists and Africans, by investigating new sources of historical knowledge and adopting new methodological research perspectives, unveiled the importance of various genres of oral tradition, traditional rites, religious conceptions. There, particularly, lies the interest of his legacy for studying the African sacred.

He added to the brilliant academic career, as a researcher and historian, political activism for the independence of colonies and the endogenous development of African peoples. Along with other African leaders (Kwame Nkrumah, from Ghana, Amílcar Cabral, from Guinea-Bissau, Patrice Lumumba, from Congo, and others), he has committed to the anti-colonial struggle and, by creating the National Liberation Movement, he were at the epicenter of various movements that fought for the independence of colonies.

Less due to small gestures and attitudes of a good Catholic he was and, certainly, much more due to his engagement as an intellectual and political man, Ki-Zerbo embodied, with his own life, the sacred in its deepest sense, the sacred observed in any glimmer of humanity – due to the political option of changing the order of things, the political gesture as an act of faith, by seeking not to allow the African “vital energy” fade away, the hope of finding, as a historian, “somewhere under the dead ashes of the past... coals impregnated with the light of resurrection” (KI-ZERBO, 1982, p. 42).

Another important African voice that may be highlighted is that of the writer and poet, historian and ethnologist Amadou Hampaté Bâ⁷, a leading expert in the African culture, particularly the traditions of savannas. He devoted much of his life, especially the last twenty years, to the collection of West African oral tradition (stories, myths, legends, fables, reports, and genealogies) and to the transcription and description of traditional knowledge, institutions, customs, rites, and religious worldviews. As a member of the executive board of the UNESCO, during the 1960s, he led his warning cry, in favor of the African cultural and spiritual heritage, to be heard. He advocated – like Ki-Zerbo and others – for recognizing orality as a source of historical knowledge. He pointed out the urgency of gathering

⁷ Amadou Hampaté Bâ (1900-1991), son to an aristocratic “Peul” family from Bandiagara (Mali), who had an Islamic education, was among the first generation of Africans from the former French colony of Upper Senegal and Niger having a European education. [Note: The name Upper Senegal and Niger dates back to the colony establishment, in 1904. Then, since 1920, the colony was divided into French Sudan (nowadays Mali) and Upper Volta (nowadays Burkina Faso)]. Hampaté Bâ was a researcher at the Institut Français d’Afrique Noire, in Dakar, since 1942. Along with Ki-Zerbo and a large team of researchers, most of them Africans, Hampaté Bâ was a member of the scientific committee of the UNESCO to draft a **História geral da África** [General history of Africa] (KI-ZERBO, 1982).

testimonies and teachings from African traditionalists⁸. To the warning, his well-known assertion is added: “In Africa, when an old man dies, it is a library that burns”.

In the “A tradição viva” [The living tradition] (BÂ, 1982, p. 181-218), chapter of particular interest to a proper understanding of oral tradition, precisely because it was produced by someone “from within” the tradition, Hampaté Bâ explains that, in traditional African societies, there is a strong connection between man and word. Man is the word he utters. Social cohesion lies on the value and respect for the word. The spoken word has moral value and a sacred nature, due to its divine origin and the dark forces therein deposited. The speech is understood as a gift from the Being-one, the Primary living-void⁹. It materializes the vibrations of the vital forces. In the universe, everything speaks – the author explains. The speech can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched. The oral tradition, which is constructed on such conception of the word as sacredness, is not limited to the *corpus* of stories and legends or mythological and historical accounts. This, indeed, consists of stories, myths, and legends that become living knowledge and have a high level of pedagogical effectiveness in community life, covering its entire existence. The author says:

[The oral tradition] is, at the same time, religion, knowledge, natural science, introduction to art, history, entertainment, and recreation (BÂ, 1982, p. 183). In the African tradition, speech, that takes from the sacred its creative and operational power, has a direct relation to the preservation or break with harmony in man and the world around him (BÂ, 1982, p. 186).

Although they derive from the hands of an intellectual and expert, his writings on oral traditions, either in the form of reports or in the form of ethnographic records, burn the vitality of good storytelling. Thus, for instance, in **Amkoullel, o menino fula** [Amkoullel, the fula boy] (BÂ, 2003), worldview and

⁸ This is a particular type of traditional craft, a sort of historian of oral tradition, having her/his corresponding initiation and duties of her/his own (BÂ, 1982, p. 208-212).

⁹ Expressions taken from the Bambara myth of creation (see BÂ, 1982, p. 184).

religious rites exceed in richness of details and meanings: Kadidja, Amadou's mother, talks to an old and respected female Marabou Stork, which knows traditional Islamic sciences, before undertaking the search for the whereabouts of her husband, arrested by French individuals (BÂ, 2003, p. 79-80). A detailed description of rites and festivities around the circumcision ceremony of Hammadoun, Amadou's brother, occupies several pages (BÂ, 2003, p. 191-199). Other religious elements appear on every page, according to the peculiar fluency and simplicity of storytellers: the description of God Komo's exit¹⁰, with his sacred mask, to welcome the birth of a child (BÂ, 2003, p. 122-125); the identification and religious tolerance between Islam and traditional religion; a ceremony for initiation into Islam (BÂ, 2003, p. 135). The examples are many.

In his writings, generally, alongside historical information and a description of customs, the "intromission" of a narrator/author who comments and participates in the narrative is revealed, becoming an overt character in it. Such textual marks construct an interesting absence of boundaries between literary writing and ethnographic research. If, according to Hampaté Bâ, any attempt to know the history and spirit of African peoples must rely on the heritage of oral tradition, he stands out by himself, in his transmission chain, among the most important references.

Another name that should not be forgotten, in favor of a better understanding of the African world, is Honorat Aguessy¹¹. In "Visões e percepções tradicionais" [Visions and traditional perceptions] (AGUESSY, 1977), a chapter of **Introdução à cultura africana** [Introduction to the African culture]¹², the author offers what may be regarded as a true synthesis about the African culture.

¹⁰ As explained by Hampaté Bâ (2003, p. 121), "Komo is an ancient religious Bambara society, reserved for adults, whose god, represented by a sacred mask, is also called Komo".

¹¹ Honorat Aguessy, from Benin, Ph.D in Sociology and in Language Studies and Sciences from the Sorbonne, founder in his country of the Institute for Indigenous Development and Exchange, has become known worldwide for his researches on issues covering the relationship between traditional culture and biodiversity. His significant presence in international events discussing the issues of agrobiodiversity attests the importance of his investigations.

¹² This book accomplishes a decision from the 18th Section of the General Conference of the UNESCO, i.e. publishing an introduction to the African culture aimed at the general public, covering literary, artistic, and cultural values of traditional and modern Africa.

According to him, Europe had constructed some “views and perceptions” on the African continent, which constituted a building of characteristic biases: thinking that the non-European societies had never had ideas similar to those of Europeans; thinking that similarities always stemmed from a European influence. Seeking to define the African proper, compared to the European procedures and biases when approaching the African culture and, sometimes, refuting those biases, the author points out, among other aspects, the “distinct” nature of this culture. Undoubtedly, the movement from written to oral, among other elements, appear as a common mark, unitary, with regard to the various African societies. There is, however, a set of variables defining the diversity of the African proper: physical and ecological influences on the modalities of settlement, communication, and way of thinking; the “size” and “extension” of societies (rather isolated groups, groups with multiple contacts); mentality derived from the specific history of each African society.

Regarding the European studies on the African culture (Griaule, Tempels, Lévy-Bruhl, Louis-Vincent Thomas, Janheinz Jahn et al.), particularly in relation to the importance given to “African principles” of life, strength, and unity, Aguessy asks: “How can we assess the accuracy, at all levels, of European theories?”; “What is their significance or ‘sterility’ degree to the African culture?”; “How can we explain the arbitrary correlations between the African conception and a favorite Western system?”. As for the controversy between Europeans in order to know whether there is a “philosophy” or not in Africa (Janheinz Jahn, Griaule, and Tempels versus Thomas), Aguessy (1977, p. 101-103) says: The European controversies on Africa have no effect on the African cultures; the statements by an investigator on the “philosophical” nature of the African culture do not highlight the statute of traditional African cultures; statements that African thought is devoid of synthesis and abstraction will not make the values produced and renewed by the African spirit disappear; the high level of a culture cannot be demonstrated only through abstraction and logic; philosophy, in turn, stems from not only a logical order, but also from delirium.

Against the fixative conception of tradition, generally observed in the European readings on Africa, the author shows that tradition is not repeating the same sequences, it is not an immovable stage of culture transmitted from generation to generation. Tradition is synonym for activity. Aguessy (1977, p. 112) summarizes: “Traditional culture makes itself, breaks down, remakes itself”.

By examining realms of the African cultural proper, Aguessy (1977, p. 124) highlights the dominant role of religion: “The African religion is, in some sense, the effect and origin of the orality civilization”. In the religious realm, initiation, with its own rites, plays a key role as an institution that takes charge of informing and educating the individual. In this realm, the myth is highlighted as “the key discourse on which all justifications of social order and counter-order are based” (AGUESSY, 1977 p. 128). The mythical narrative is distinguished from other narrative categories by its nature of founder and donor of a meaning related to daily life realities, due to its significant connection to the religious realm and an “open” kind of language that requires its updating.

The conception of sacred involving the word, in the context of a predominantly oral culture, ensured that the African cultural acquisitions would not suffer losses and rapid degradation. In the sacred framework, took place, according to the author, the needed establishment of standards and worldviews governing social life setting. The author overtly states:

Since language is constantly threatened by the risk of saying, re-saying, and contradict, and having in mind that every community needs a minimum of stability and the requirement of a regulatory framework, the African religions worked, within the culture framework, as the reference field in relation to norms, collective ideas, and ideals, stabilizing the values conveyed by language (AGUESSY, 2002, our translation)¹³.

¹³ In the original, in Spanish: “Puesto que el lenguaje está constantemente amenazado por el riesgo de decir, redecir y contradecir y visto que toda comunidad necesita un mínimo de estabilidad y la exigencia de un cuadro normativo, las religiones africanas funcionaron, en el marco de la cultura, como campo de referencia en cuanto a las normas, las ideas colectivas y los ideales estabilizando los valores vehiculados por el lenguaje” (AGUESSY, 2002).

The African religion is not only mystical. It “scientifically” founds and it is founded on botanical, zoological, biological, mathematical, artistic, human aspects, after all. This means, at the same time, the environmental realm and the respect it is due. The whole pedagogical process and that of the knowledge realm, in traditional African culture, is sustained on the same mark of oral culture and religion. According to Aguessy (2002, our translation):

It is within this framework of culture precariousness based on orality and the precious assurance and protection provided by religion that we understand the density of education and training of successive generations: thanks to the initiation groups, to the extensive content of the knowledge field, to the word place, to the conception of world of spirits, ancestors, and deities (or divine messengers), to the importance of ritual, to the prohibitions place, to the “numinous” meaning of human psyche, to the “status” of every deceased person...¹⁴.

In his researches on issues covering the relationship between traditional culture and biodiversity, Aguessy claims that the African traditional religion can offer significant guidance to the studies on the subject. In face of the holistic nature of biodiversity, traditional practices, grounded on the religious factor, illuminate the ecological practices and reflections with their cosmo-theandric focus, i.e. a focus that joins, in any circumstance, the cosmic, the divine, the human.

2 Is there an African proper related to the sacred?

When talking about the African culture or African tradition, we should not generalize. The warning comes from none other than Hampaté Bâ, a leading expert in African tradition. It would be, indeed, a gross mistake to imagine an African unity, regardless of variations observed in various regions and in various African ethnicities. There is not *an* Africa, there is not *an* African man, remembers that author.

¹⁴ In the original, in Spanish: “Es en este marco de la precariedad de la cultura basada en la oralidad y de la preciosa garantía y protección que le aporta la religión, que se comprende la densidad de la educación y de la formación de las generaciones sucesivas gracias a los grupos de iniciación, el contenido extensivo del campo de los conocimientos, la posición de la palabra, la concepción del mundo de los espíritus, los ancestros y las divinidades (o mensajeros divinos), la importancia del ritual, el lugar de las prohibiciones, el significado ‘numineux’ del psiquismo humano, el ‘status’ de todo muerto...” (AGUESSY, 2002).

Occupying a dominant place in the African culture, when compared to the realms of games, arts, proverbial wisdom, religion, too, cannot be understood from the perspective of a unified worldview. There are, certainly, in the African culture, generally, and in religion, particularly, elements that appear with some consistency: the presence of the sacred in all things, the harmonic relationship between the visible and invisible world architecture, the dynamic relationship between alive and dead individuals, access to the successive stages of technical and human maturity based on pedagogical processes of affiliation and initiation, identity construction grounded in the community sense. This does not mean, however, that deities, religious language, interdicts, social customs arising from these prohibitions are the same. Thus, for instance, the architectural organization of the voodoo pantheon in Dahomey (nowadays Benin), with its deities and dynamics, has little to do, in its peculiar language, with traditional religious manifestations from southern Mozambique. The differences cannot be explained only by geographical distance. Sometimes, variations may occur from village to village, within the same ethnic group¹⁵.

Honorat Aguessy remembers that African societies “move in a dynamic framework, where the migration of groups simultaneously constitutes a significant metaphor and metonymy” (AGUESSY, 1977, p. 106). In this sense, what is usually characterized as “traditional religion” refers not to a pure and identity element of “Africanness”, but it stems from reciprocal and dialectic enrichment processes between African societies. It is also worth recalling the secular processes of Islamization and Christianization that marked the history of the African continent. Hampaté Bâ, in his memoirs, refers to good neighborly relations between the Muslim religion and traditional practices of the Bambara environment¹⁶. In his researches on the Bantu religion, Placide Tempels (1949) already observed that

¹⁵ Regarding the issue of diversity of peoples in Africa and their cultures, cf. Appiah (1997), particularly the first chapter, entitled “A invenção da África” [The Invention of Africa]” (APPIAH, 1997, p. 19-51).

¹⁶ For the Muslims living in the Bambara region, Hampaté Bâ tells, there was a formal affiliation to the traditional religion of Komo, so that they were not isolated from the community. Muslims “were exempted from sacrificing to the images, they did not eat the food of sacrifices, they did not drink alcohol, and they did not attend ceremonies, but at least they also were not forced to get closed during the exits of Komo” (BÂ, 2003, p. 135).

many elements he presented as being part of traditional religion were no longer, in fact, but in a very uncharacterized way in certain urban environments.

Despite the effort by the missionary Asúa Altuna (1985) to claim the “crucial unit” of traditional Bantu religion, or even that we take into account the requirement by the Cotonou Colloquium¹⁷ to stick to the term “traditional African religion”, it would be naive to think of *an* African religion, as if there was a single “Africanness”. Although it is possible to point out elements contained in the variations of sacredness that are documented in Africa, what we find are necessarily “blends”, the dynamic result from intercultural contacts that a more detailed study of the history of the African continent makes clear.

Another element, which requires a less reductionist treatment, in the search for understanding more adequately the African culture, concerns orality. Hampaté Bâ recalls that tradition, with regard to the African history, refers to oral tradition; he claims that any attempt to know the history and spirit of African peoples must rely on this heritage (BÂ, 1982, p. 181-183).

Thanks to modern ethnology and to other efforts concerning research and dissemination of the African culture, for some decades, the Hegelian concept, widely spread and turned into common sense, according to which peoples without writing were peoples with no history and culture has begun to crumble. This concept, lacking any foundation, certainly came from cultures where writing and the book constituted an important vehicle of cultural heritage. These cultures not only attributed a huge confidence to writing, they also raised the issue of validity of statements based on orality. Hampaté Bâ answers to the question by saying that nothing proves, a priori, the written account is more reliable than the oral one. By the way, writing is not only born from orality, crystallizing traditions, the former does not overcome or eliminate the latter.

¹⁷ The Abidjan Colloquium (1961) decided to name traditional African religions “Traditional Religions” or “African Religion”; the Cotonou Colloquium (1970) asked everyone to stick up to the expression “Traditional African Religion”, or an equivalent expression, repelling “derogatory and unfounded terms, such as animism, paganism, fetishism, ancestralism, manism, superstition, etc. that were used to identify the African religion” (ASÚA ALTUNA, 1985, p. 369).

Ana Mafalda Leite (1998) discusses a number of biases – to be avoided – related to orality, observed in the critical discourse on the African literature. One of the most frequent concerns the dichotomy between writing and orality, and it is correlated to a European “essence”, and this to an African “nature”. According to Aguessy (1977, p. 108), an aspect having particular importance, with regard to orality, concerns the fact that it is a dominant feature, but not exclusive, in the African cultural field. Notwithstanding the objections – lack of agreement to include ancient Egypt into the traditional cultural area of Africa, the influences of Islam to explain the intellectual vigor of the University of Timbuktu, Christian influences to ratify the name of great African Ph.Ds, such as Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine – “there were many African thinkers who developed in a written form and for centuries the values produced by society and the fruits from their own inspirations and elaborations” (AGUESSY, 1977, p. 111).

It is worth answering to the objections, with Aguessy, in these terms: no culture develops and expands in an autarkic way; cultural synthesis, symbioses, blends are not mere copy or repetition of another culture. And, even if there was not the University of Timbuktu, or if we had forgotten the Christian Ph.Ds from the Mediterranean Africa, we would have to admit: orality is not a hypothetical inability to use writing. Aguessy remembers that, even knowing writing, many African societies did not use it, however, just as other cultures. Orality, in its peculiar correlation to the traditional religious worldview, presents, at one time, as effect and cause of a certain way of being “African”, defining social relationships, social stratifications and differences, word possession, authority, initiation, and traditional knowledge (AGUESSY, 1977, p. 108-112).

A third aspect to consider with regard to the African proper involves the correlations between politics and cultural issues. Ki-Zerbo’s example would suffice – in Holsen’s words, “the African intellectual man who best succeeded in associating science to political action” – to understand the overlap of the political and cultural fields. According to the words of Jacqueline Ki-Zerbo, his wife:

They say Joseph could be able to play another role if he had not gotten involved in politics. But he could not. All his analysis led him to take a stand against what he observed. It is precisely the extension of the intellectual man who invests in politics to change the order of things¹⁸.

In the prolegomena to **Introducción a la cultura africana** [Introduction to the African culture] (SOW, 1982), the author complains about the lack of participation of African intellectuals in the ideological debates concerning the culture of their own peoples. He weaves a list of questions pointing out the political dimension involved in cultural issues. One question particularly reveals the acuteness of the issue:

We must ask ourselves if national sovereignty has released and given strength to cultures that previously the colonial powers had suffocated or disfigured. We wonder if the people's culture, yesterday ignored, can flourish today (SOW, 1982, p. 10, our translation)¹⁹.

For Westerners, generally, polarizations with an ideological nature seem to have been overcome, particularly after the fall of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. People even talk of a “post- ideological” era. However, although it would be possible to pass through a world without ideologies, this universe, anyway, would not be Africa. Thus, for instance, it is not possible to think of the modern African literature – that born from the entry of Europeans into the continent, which uses the colonizer's language – without mentioning its political engagement in favor of the independence struggles, the search for a black African identity, the endogenous development. A few decades after independences, the various African literary projects slowed down, obviously, their marks of anti-colonial struggle. Civil wars, post-colonial administrations, poverty, lack of direction, exclusion from the processes of economic globalization for a large part of African societies keep, however, imprinting their marks in the most recent African culture.

¹⁸ From the biographical note prepared by René Holestein (KI-ZERBO, 2006, p. 170).

¹⁹ In the original, in Spanish: “Debemos preguntarnos si la soberanía nacional ha liberado y potenciado a las culturas que anteriormente las potencias coloniales habían sofocado o desfigurado. Nos gustaría saber si la cultura del pueblo, ayer rechazada o ignorada, puede florecer hoy”.

A final consideration with regard to the African proper proposes to avoid, for the purposes of adequately characterizing the African culture, the usual confrontation Africa versus Europe. People repeated, at different times and under different circumstances, that emotion is black and reason is white; or that black reason is intuitive, while the white reason is analytic; that orality is African and writing is European; that rhythm is from Africa and melody is western; or, also, that dancing is a typically African recreation, opposed to reading, reading alone, as something characteristic of Paris or London²⁰.

This type of confrontation reveals two opposing attitudes: one, inherited from the Victorian anthropology, puts the African culture in the place of primitiveness, as opposed to the civilized Europe; another regards it as exemplary, or even higher, when compared to the European world.

Certainly, it is possible to establish parallels and comparisons, in order to construct a profile of the African culture, based on elements that show to be constant. However, establishing an extreme bipolarity between industrial West and traditional Africa means misplacing the issue – as if Europe was the crystallization of modernity and Africa was the essence of tradition; as if Europe or Africa had a “pure” identity essence, without any kind of blends. For rejecting usual polarizations, the warning by Ana M. Leite (1998, p. 23) is significant with regard to the domain of literature: “Insisting on a monolithic and undifferentiated view of an African aesthetics is also a way of denying the heterogeneity and complexity of the African cultural universe”.

Avoiding the confrontation Europe versus Africa is set as a requirement also for the domain of religion and the sacred. It would be absurd to imagine that Durkheim’s sociological school could not provide any contribution to the study of African religions. It would be absurd to think that the taxonomy of sacrednesses

²⁰ In the domain of literary studies, read, to illustrate, Coetzee (2004, p. 47). From a more markedly political perspective, a characterization of the African cultural diversity, as opposed to the European world, can be found in the works by the Senegalese politician and writer Léopold Senghor (1906-2001), ideologist of the blackness movement, along with the Antillean poet Aimé Césaire.

suggested by Eliade could not be useful to organize sacred documents from Africa; or that Rudolf Otto's religious worldview had no elements in common with African conceptions of God. A lack of academic reasoning would be revealed by making devoid of all value the contributions by Junod, Kagamé, Griaule, Tempels, and others – even if Europeans, children of European individuals, or assimilated Africans – to knowledge on the African worlds. It would also be absurd, at the other extreme, to think that Léopold Senghor, Ki-Zerbo, Hampaté Bâ, Honorat Aguessy, Kwame Appiah, and so many other African theoreticians had nothing to say of interest to the West.

Instead of the polarization, it would be better to recognize that researches and theoretical reflections on the African culture and, within it, on the religious fact, constitute a simultaneous construction through the contribution of Africans and Europeans – a still unfinished building, which goes on in works equally in Africa and Europe.

Conclusion

In contrast to “colonizing” perspectives, African theoreticians (such as Kwame Appiah, Honorat Aguessy, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Amadou Hampaté Bâ, and others) indicate a broader view of the various domains of the African culture, with regard to which the sacred and religion occupy a preponderant place. While using methodological tools from the European schools, the view “from within” proposed by the African look on Africa managed to offer a new discourse on the history and culture of African societies. Among other aspects pointed out by the African theoreticians, the role of religion stands out.

In the traditional African conception, religion, erected on the same arch of oral culture, founds all other components of social life. Everything participates in the sacred, understood as the vital force with which absolutely everything in the universe relates. A core trait of the overlapping between oral culture and the

sacred, the speech is understood as a gift coming from the Supreme Being and it has moral value and a sacred nature. On it sit down the potentialities of power, will, and knowledge. On the word as sacredness sits down the special value of stories and myths, with its nature of founder and donor of sense to the social order and everyday life realities.

In spite of the conflicts and contrasts between the different looks – the European and African – on Africa and its culture, on the other hand, this difficulty is brought about: the African continent does not constitute a homogeneous unit, and there cannot exist, as a consequence, an essentially African worldview. Claiming such a conception would fall into the same trap of the triumphant European scientific rationality from the Victorian era: a manipulative generalization. In short: certainly, we can point out limitations of the Western sciences when addressing African cultural facts. It is also possible, recognizing the breadth of such a statement, to talk about the African self-understanding in the realm of religion. It is also possible, avoiding specialized focuses and preferring the rather expanded perspectives, to use the sciences of religions – typical European constructions – when addressing African religious facts.

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