

Postmodernist Binarism and African Anti-Colonialist Discourse

Ahmadou Siendou KONATÉ
Felix Houphouet-Boigny University
siendou.konate@univ-fhb.edu.ci

Abstract: Using Heidegger's notions of being and nothing and how this plays into binary oppositionality, this article looks at the binarism presiding over European colonial and imperialist rationality in Africa. In fact, the Us/Them hierarchization of peoples and cultures resulted in the resolve of those feeling such powerful that they could invade the space of the ostensibly weak and impose a Eurocentric worldview now seen as universal and normal. To this binarism, there have been mitigated and yet successful attempts made by some African writers and critics to reverse the table of laws, thereby reasserting the people once peripheralized and positing them as of one the various centers of power needed in order to induce cultural solidarity and respect, cohesion and peace no less fundamental for a "glocal" space.

Keywords: Africa, self, alterity, colonialism, discourse, global, local, language, voice

Résumé: Cette contribution s'appuie sur les notions de l'Etre et le Néant chez Heidegger et comment cette opposition s'est inscrite dans le discours impérialiste et colonial européen en Afrique. La hiérarchisation des peuples et des cultures a travers le binaire Nous/Eux fut et continue d'être le levier servant à l'immixtion occidentale pour imposer la manière de voir européenne à l'Afrique, manière qui est érigée en norme universelle. Cette étude montre comment un contre-discours a été produit par certains écrivains africains afin de permettre que la solidarité culturelle, le respect mutuel, la cohésion et la paix soient la condition de possibilité d'un espace d'interaction entre le global et le local placée sous le vocable du « glocal ».

Mots-Clés: Afrique, soi, altérité, colonialisme, discours, global, local, langue, voix

Introduction

"Our civilizing mission can alone justify our occupation of the lands of the uncivilized people" says the Belgian missionary in the Congo, Father Placide Tempels¹ by way of rationalizing the imperialist and expansionist movements of European powers into such places as Asia and Africa, to cite but these two continents. Not only does this pronouncement by Tempels constitute the basis of European economic, political and cultural imperialism but also it exposes us to the way in which Western thought dichotomizes and codifies the (power) relations between the West and the non-West. In other terms, Tempels' statement hierarchizes the world in civilized and barbarous; the former being the West and the latter its Other. That this

¹ Refer to Father Placide Tempels, the Belgian missionary in the Congo, who is quoted by Tsenay Serequeberham in *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, p. 31.

rationalization comes from the mouth of a Man of God explains how first of all religion was put to the service of imperialism and then how knowledge related to power during colonialism.

The process of imperialism or colonialism unavoidably created two categories of people: the colonizer and the colonized. The latter –the people whose humanity is denied, those who are represented by the colonizer– reclaim their voice, the possibility of restitution of the truth about themselves. In other words, they want to represent themselves and that self-representation is, I believe, what the project of postcolonial writers and critics is about. What is called post-colonialist theory and criticism, however, has a similarity with the critique that postmodernists – here my reference is *deconstruction, post-structuralism*– make of the Western mode of thought since the Enlightenment. The critique that deconstructionists levy against Western traditional thought is the hierarchization of the world in oppositional terms or binaries.

There is a wide range of these binary oppositions, some of which are general and others culture bound. Among the commonest binaries there are: the center vs. the margin (or periphery), good vs. evil, truth vs. falsehood vs. masculinity, rationality vs. irrationality, thought vs. feeling, mind vs. matter, nature vs. culture, purity vs. impurity, white vs. black, to cite but these. One of these terms, usually the first term almost always functions as the center, i.e., it is privileged over the second.

The literature and other critical works that follow the period of colonization, either in Africa or elsewhere, see their representation by the West in the second term of the above-mentioned binaries. Here, the task is to investigate the similarities and differences between post-modernism and anti-colonialist works of art and literature in Africa and its Diaspora, if not, to see how much the latter is indebted to the former. More importantly, it shows how the two concepts get enmeshed in the anti-colonial discourse on the question of identity among Africans of the continent and those of the Diaspora. Some of the guiding questions include the following: Does the “post” in postmodernism equate to the one in post-colonialism? What are the pointers of post-colonialism? How is post-colonialism at work in African literature? These are the questions to answer in this study.

In order to better grasp the Western mode of thinking, it will be good to visit the works of Martin Heidegger and Derrida who are the precursors of deconstruction.

According to Heidegger, the western mode of thinking or the onto-theological tradition relies on differentiability, or in other words, the structuration of things in a binary opposition,

which has its source in the origin/end paradigm. In his vast project of destruction or *destructuring*, which Heidegger defines as the putting to the fore of the potentiality of that which is cast as an Other, he starts with thinking Being as substantiated by what it is opposed to; that is the *Nothing*. The latter, however, as Heidegger says,

is neither an object nor any being at all. The nothing comes forward neither for itself nor next to the beings, to which it would, as it were, adhere. For human existence, the nothing makes possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather it originally belongs to their essential unfolding as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs. (Heidegger 104)

My understanding here is that the nothing, rather than being the second term of the oppositional binary as the onto-theological tradition has us believe, stands as its first term insofar as the nothing is the condition of possibility of the Being of beings. In other words, were it not for the nothing the being of beings would not have been disclosed because the nothing is the background against which Being casts itself in order for it to be what it is. According to Heidegger, the proposition “*ex nihilo nihil fit* - from nothing, nothing comes to be” (Heidegger 107), by which ancient metaphysics explains the ontology of the nothing, does not explain the Nothing. For, the description of the nothing brings into play the copula *is*; the nothing *is* that which *it is not*, or it is used to determine the essence of Being, then the nothing has a substance, an essence which happens to be the essence of Being. After all, the nothing is something that *is not*.

With destructuring, the fact of putting forward the hidden potentiality of something either consciously or unconsciously obscured, the old proposition of the *ex nihilo nihil fit* pushes to the forefront another proposition, which Heidegger formulates as follows: “*ex nihilo omnes ens qua ens fit* –from the nothing all beings come to be”.

The discourse of Heidegger at first sight seems to be purely philosophical and/or metaphysical. And yet, it has a political significance that interests me. That significance lies in the oppositional binary that flows from the original binary of western metaphysics-Being/Nothing.

Heidegger’s project illuminates and paves the way for postcolonialist theory and criticism insofar as it is in the binarisms of the West -as the latter are critiqued by Heidegger- that the anti-colonial critiques are rooted. They are so because novels, pamphlets, and other critical works by the former colonized deal with the stereotypes, the distorted ideas that West makes of them.

Postcolonial works intend to rectify the representations that are made about the people of the former colonies. Edward Said, in referring to the relation between the European and the Oriental as conceived by the West, puts those Western stereotypes in this way: “The oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal” (Said 40).

Like the Being/Nothing oppositionality the Civilized/Barbarous paradigm or simply put the West/Other binary opposition discloses the potentiality of the second term of the opposition. The Other who is the Barbarous, the Uncivilized, the degraded, is in actuality the condition of possibility of the Civilized or the west. The representation of the Other, possibly the Colonized, the oppressed and the Oriental, reveals the limits of the re-presenter, the West whose possibility of being is contingent upon the otherized. How does that happen?

By way of example, let us take the binary opposition of light vs. darkness, which will help understand that there is no actual opposition between in the very idea of binary opposition as it seems to be. Arguably, light needs darkness. If there were no darkness, we would certainly not have light simply because we would not be able to recognize it for what it is. Without darkness we would have light but we would not be *aware* of it inasmuch as it would be the only thing around us and we would not have the idea or concept of light. For, the concept of light implies the possibility of something non-light.

In the light of what is said above, it follows that dependence and/or interdependence are what governs the relation between the colonized and the colonizer, the Self and the Other, and therefore the interactions of differences or the shades of alterity.

For example, in the process of colonization the imperialist powers of Europe, strengthened and enlightened by imaginative productions and other critical works done by Europeans represented the worlds to be occupied as inhabited, if not occupied by savages, by people without history, culture.

The West literally enslaved and subjugated its Other, to refer to Hegel’s dialectics of the Master and the Slave, and the Other had been rendered nothingized, it stands as the one upon whom the West depends, the one without whom the West is not. Those who the colonizer represents in sad and vilifying terms, are the means by which the West actually manages to shape a clear idea of itself. It is in relation to the non-West that the West forms an identity. In other

terms, were it not for the barbarian and savage of Africa, there would not be a basis for the civilizedness of the colonialists.

In order to exemplify revisiting Edward Said's account of the rationale behind the imperialist moves of Western powers into the East will prove necessary and interesting. According to Said, the Orient, which is posited as inferior to the West appeared for Napoleon Bonaparte as the condition for France's fame, grandeur and power amongst such imperialist nations as England, to cite but this. Said quotes from Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Fourier who writes about the conquest of Egypt as follows: "One remembers the impression made on the whole of Europe by the astounding news that the French were in the orient" (Said 85).

Contrary to the thesis of imparting good manners and/or civilization to the "uncivilized" the rationale behind the move of Napoleon, and by extension all the so called civilizing missions that History has known, was power, and in the case of Napoleon the fact of invading Egypt, which is said to be the cradle of one of the ancient civilizations, was meant to aggrandize France, its posture in world politics by way of serving its interests above anything else. Thus, the "otherized" is the condition of completion of the "otherizer."

Not only does the colonized help the master build and affirm his identity but also, the colonized, in the process becomes a man; he moves from the status of nothing to humanity. For the colonized during his subjugation is forced to resist, and call for a new order, which creates out of the thing he was, a man. Fanon describes this process in the following terms: "De-colonization is the veritable creation of a new man. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes a man during the process by which it frees itself." (Fanon 37-8)

Colonization and its consequence, which is de-colonization, are a dialectical process in which the master is represented by colonization and the "slave", de-colonization.

Taken on the economic plane, the partition of the non-western world between the imperial powers of Europe was serving an economic purpose. Not only were these colonies a source of raw materials for the burgeoning industries of Europe but also they were markets for the surpluses of production of European industries on the one hand, and on the other they were a place where they could form settlement colonies for the demographic surpluses of Europe. Fanon gives an idea of the division of the colonial world- not really in terms of demography or economy, in militarist terms- but at least, it gives us a sense of how present the population of

imperial France was in Algeria. He says: “The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by the barracks and police stations. In the colonies, it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-between, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression.” (Fanon 38)

The population of colonists and the interests of the imperialists were safeguarded by this military display for the only reason to keep these two categories of people- colonialists and the natives-as much separated as possible.

For, these discourses are rooted in the opposition between the West and the Other. For instance the colonial subject reveals his necessity for the colonial Master to simply be. And most importantly, the colonized reveals his potentiality by subverting the West/Other paradigm in re-representing himself. How does the former colonized reject the representation made of him by the outsider thereby dismissing Marx’s offer in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he says: “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented”? How does he disrupts the paradigm and posits himself as the equal of the colonizer?

For the sake of brevity, I will choose to analyze only two novelists from Africa: Chinua Achebe an Anglophone African and Cheikh Hamidou Kane a francophone from Senegal, who respectively wrote *Things Fall Apart* and *Ambiguous Adventure*. Both novels are imaginative accounts of the encounter of the West with Africa and the scar that the contact left on Africa.

Things Fall Apart, as the title of the book indicates, is the account of the social, political and economic organization of a people, the *Igbo* and how the life of this community was disrupted by the “mission civilisatrice” (colonizing mission) of the West. Achebe concisely describes the truth of the tragic moments of the history of Africa. In fact, the novel ends with the suicide of Okwonko, the warrior and the main protagonist of the novel and the turning of Obierika into an informant explaining to the District Commissioner the abominable character of his friend and says: “The man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog [...].He could not say anymore. His voice trembled and choked his words.” (Achebe 191)

The suicide of Okwonko is both evocative of the alienation that colonialism has created in Africa. In fact, Obierika renounces his past companionship with his friend because of his suicide and the bloody character of colonization. Very interesting is the last paragraph of the book where the District commissioner finds a very good topic for one of the books that explorers

and area specialists write once they visit a place. It is interesting because, the colonizer has achieved his goal; that of the pacification of the savages. The book ends this way:

The story of the man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph [...]. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *the Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. [Author's Italics] (Achebe 191)

The killing of Okwonko –for his suicide was actuated by the affront of colonialism– is an indication of the violence upon which colonialism was based. It did not leave many choices. Either you assimilate the Western values or you are crushed by the system.

In Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel –*Ambiguous Adventure* – is about the impasse in which the protagonist finds himself after he is caught between his traditional Islamic belief and western values, which he partially internalized. The novel closes again with the death of the main character suggesting that the “new man” that colonization has created should be able to keep his traditions and at the same time internalize the imposed values or else the demise of the continent is consumed. These kinds of representation are what characterize African anti-colonialist works. Achebe recognizes his duty of writer.

According to him, the writer or the intellectual in the former colonies has the responsibility to restore the truth about their people; he must recreate and reaffirm the dignity and integrity of their people. To Achebe the novelist's task is “to help [his] society to regain belief in itself and put away the years of denigration and self-debasement” (Umelo 3). He believes that his past works were intended to teach his readers that their past “was not one long night of savagery from which the European acting on God's behalf delivered them” (Ibid.).

From this statement it follows that the people of the regions, which have been politically, economically and culturally assaulted by Western imperialist powers, had their own ways of doing things, their culture and their history. However, these people have been represented as uncivilized, savages as opposed to the West. Achebe, like many other African writers who re-represent themselves, contributes to the de-centering or the dis-locating of the logos, which is assumed to reside in the West. African anti-colonialist discourse-by this I mean all the literary and critical works by Africans during and after colonialism –by reason of disputing the power of representation with the West, and by attempting to dismantle Western/colonial centers, partakes

in the disavowal and dismantling of narrative of the Master. This is exactly what Indian postcolonialist scholar Homi Bhabha calls the postcolonial perspective. According to Bhabha,

Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of the third world countries and the discourse of “minorities” within the geopolitical divisions of east and west, north and south [...], they formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the rationalizations of modernity. (Bhabha 438)

The postcolonial perspective, from what Bhabha believes, seeks and aims at the multiplication of centers of power, of voice based on difference, basically, because Western traditional thought tended to homogenize all these differences. It did so through the denial of their existence and agency. By affirming their cultural specificities, the marginalized, those of the periphery de-homogenize the world, the way the grand narrative of world is made up i.e., from a one-sided perspective. Among African novelists or writers and critics, he or she who believes that there should be real delinking from the usual order of things is Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’O. One of the staunchest defenders of cultural nationalism as the way out of foreign domination in Africa and against hierarchization of power relations weighing in favor of Westerners for the most part, Ngugi came to the realization that in order for the former colonized to be out of the claws of lasting (neo-)colonialism is to re-assert one’s cultural particularity in a ocean of diverse and different cultures. Ngugi himself sets the example for African writers in general using foreign languages by writing some of his last novels and plays in his own native language, Kikuyu. He reached this decision because to him in the process of colonization, the French, the British, and the Portuguese, among others, were very much aware of the fact that if they had left intact the cultures of the people they sought to colonize and dominate, their undertaking would be doomed to failure. The economic and political (and therefore cultural) subjection of the people of these people’s colonies could not be harmonized with the preservation of their indigenous material and immaterial cultures. Thus, these local cultures had been put under attack of the invading powers from Europe for the most part. In one of his lengthy discussion of the centrality of language and culture in the decolonization combat, Ngugi calls that state of affair “cultural bomb” susceptible of exploding at any time. Of such a bomb Ngugi has this to say: “[I]ts effect [...] is to annihilate the people’s belief in their names, in their environment, in their language, in their struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately

in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievements and it makes them want to distance themselves from the wasteland”(Ngugi, 1986: 12).

Way before Ngugi’s investment in this sort of capitalization on language and culture in Africa as the epicenter from which change has to be instigated, another African cultural nationalist, Amilcar Cabral had stated that the subversive potential of the cultural personality in the liberation struggle of Guinea-Bissau and Cape-Verde from the Portuguese colonial rule had to not be underestimated otherwise cultural domination would be everlasting in Africa altogether. In Cabral’s mind as well as Ngugi’s, the national liberation of a subjugated people passes by the return of these people to their original and authentic history, their culture, which is a very effective means of resistance. About this centrality of culture Cabral has this to say:

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the most vigorous manifestations on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical or historical reality of the society that is dominated. Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people’s history and a determinant of history by positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between men or groups of men within a society as well as among different societies. *Ignorance of this fact explains the failure of several attempts at foreign domination as well as the failure of some international liberation movements.* [Italics mine] (Cabral 41)

It follows from this extensive quotation that if culture is affirmed and re-assessed, which shows the difference between groups, people, this carries the potential of leading to liberation. It carries the potential of subverting the imposition of the Western homogeneous worldview on the world outside Europe and Euro-America. In another book of his entitled *Moving the Centre*, which has a strong postcolonial endeavor of turning the tables over and recalibrating power relations for them to benefit each and every culture and people involved, Ngugi believes that the present critical situation of the world results from the concentration of power within the hands of the few in view of oppressing the vast majority. The center of this power is assumed to be located in the West. In order to perform this counter-domination or counter-hegemonic battle of the oppressed, and make it truly possible and effective, in order for the ostracized and belittled cultures and people to have a voice and thereby breaking down this current situation of monologue, according to Ngugi, the center must be moved from its “assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world” (Ngugi, 1993: xvi).

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it ought to be added that the African anti-colonial discourse from its inception, i.e., from the early independence era in the 1960's up to the present, borders on the post-modern attitude towards the Western tradition of thought. Post-modernism shares with this African tradition of submitting a counter-discourse in the middle of assaulting difference/alterity, the potential of de-centering the monopolar and monovocal fixedness of power and the relations it generates among the various and different people(s) both locally and globally. Both movements seek to dismantle the Western/colonial centers and set out to challenge their power, history and prejudices.

Their presentation of heterogeneity looks alike i.e., according to both movements, the world should not be viewed in homogenizing terms, which re-group everything under the tutelage of the West. Rather the possibility of presenting worldviews should be diversified. The center of power and knowledge about the Other should be more than one, for no single person detains truth, which pertains to the realm of subjectivity. The difference between these two movements may be that anti-colonialist movements put under the tag of post-colonialism are under the influence of Western culture and tradition of thought, which the post-modernist movement seek to dismantle. Colonization exposed African people to Western culture, which in and of itself is not negative, however, it is high time we looked to resuscitate and valorize African cultures and put them to use in global cultural negotiations capital in creating a new world order where peace and cohesion will build on the inclusion of alterity and the destroying of fear of the Other. Thus, Ngugi's moves towards decolonizing the the oppressed's mind appears to be timely and welcome

References

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: A Fawcett Premier Book, 1959.
- Cabral, Amilcar. *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Postcolonial Criticism." In Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (Eds.). *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*. New York: The MLA of America, 1992: 437-68.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Groove Press, 1963
- Heidegger, Martin and Krell David Farrell (Ed.). *Basic Writings*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1972.
- Kane, Cheikh Hamidou. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Portsmouth, N H: Heinemann Educational Books, 1989.
- Ojinmah, Umelo. *Chinua Achebe: New Perspectives*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.1991.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Serequeberham, Tsenay. *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Stephen, Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (Eds.) *Redrawing the Boundaries: the transformation of English and American Studies*, New York: MLA, 1992.

Wa Thiong'o Ngugi. *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Carrey, 1986

Wa Thiong'o Ngugi. *Moving the Center: the Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Carrey, 1993.