

Western tradition in philosophy, notably the pursuit of rationality as the philosopher's hallmark and as the proclaimed touchstone of all human endeavours.

For this purpose, the author first clears the ground by sketching Hebga's style of writing and his biography, by setting the thesis' theoretical and practical framework, and by defining his own methods as a philosopher – with emphasis on the possible contribution from comparative linguistics, and on the tension – so characteristic of the history of ideas in the Judaeo-Christian tradition – between reason and faith.

Then, in Part I of the thesis the author deals with the cultural rootedness of rationality.

In Chapter I he returns to the historical roots of the discourse on rationality, and sketches the trajectory of this concept in modern Western philosophy. Here one main question line of the author's argument becomes manifest: *how can an African philosopher come to terms with the problem of rationality, given the fact that, for centuries* (both in the specialist domain of philosophy (cf. Hegel,<sup>475</sup> who denied Africans both history and rationality) and in the much wider social domain of perceptions, stereotypes, and social interaction) *the West has defined Africans as the very opposite of Westerners, and as deprived of the kind, or at least of the level, of rationality proclaimedly constitutive of the West?* African and North American varieties of Afrocentricity are invoked to propose a solution to this dilemma: as soon as cultural, including philosophical, continuity is established between present-day sub-Saharan Africa, and Ancient Egypt,. And as soon as the cultural, including philosophical, indebtedness of Ancient Greece to Ancient Egypt is acknowledged, we have one possible way out of what otherwise could amount to an exercise in self-annihilation – I mean the pursuit of Western-style philosophy by an African philosopher like Hebga. In passing we note that in the latter's case this dilemma is doubly felt because Hebga is not only

1. a philosopher but also
2. a Roman Catholic priest,

and thus, as an African, has built his social and intellectual life around his personal commitment to two highly successful North Atlantic cultural and institutional complexes whose presence in Africa is as recent as it is problematic from a point of view of the global politics of knowledge and of what Mudimbe (another prominent African philosopher, with a somewhat similar background as Hebga's) has so aptly called 'the liberation of African difference'.

M. EGYPTOCENTRIC AFROCENTRISM AS PROBLEM AND AS SOLUTION. Yet the issues involved here are rather more problematic than Afrocentrist-orientated intellectual opinion in present-day Cameroon would seem to realise.

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<sup>475</sup> For details see above, footnote 351.

The continuity between present-day sub-Saharan Africa, and Ancient Egypt, claimed for two centuries by African American thinkers, has become a matter of more general international scholarly debate in the last few decades (Diop, Asante, Obenga, Bernal, Lefkowitz, Fauvelle). One cannot simply close one's eyes for the complexity of that debate, and for the force of evidence on both sides, and simply proceed to take such continuity as an established and unproblematic fact. Even the many correspondences that undeniably can be noted, may be explained in two fundamentally different ways: Ancient Africa engendering (in part) Ancient Egypt, or Ancient Egypt engendering (in part) present-day Africa.<sup>476</sup> Recent Afrocentrist scholarship, aided by the somewhat unfounded assertions which Bernal spuriously derived from the *Black Athena* debate, has more and more stressed the indebtedness of Egypt to sub-Saharan Africa, interpreting as Egypt as the first-born and best developed a child of Africa. However, it is time the scale are made to swing back to equilibrium, for in the three thousand years of its existence as *one of the most powerful states in the world*, the Egyptian inroads into sub-Saharan Africa have been so extensive, so persistent, and so well documented both in written texts and in the distribution of artefacts, myths, and cultural and political institutions, that in many ways we are entitled to see latter-day African cultures as partly indebted to Egyptian prototypes of five to two millennia ago.

But there is an even more fundamental problem at hand here. Suppose the attempt at historical reconstruction via Ancient Egypt could be demonstrated to be unsuccessful, to be based on data that, on further scrutiny, could not stand the test of both African and global scholarship. Suppose we would be forced, by unpredictable future advances in scholarship, to sever all links between Ancient Egypt and Africa in historical times. Would that be enough to, once again, deprive Africans of their rationality? Certainly not! Assist in the proceedings of one African court case at the village level, and one is forever convinced that sound argument, deliberation, balancing of opinion, – all the ingredients of Ancient Greek rationality, also qualify as eminently African in nature, if not in origin. In other words, in addition to the historical argument one needs an ontological argument, based on an empirically underpinned philosophical assessment of the modern life worlds of people inside and outside Africa.

This is, in other words, the debate on the rationality or irrationality of modern African life, such has been waged for a century or more by the students of African societies and African religious forms.<sup>477</sup> We cannot summarise that debate here in a few words, but some of its stakes are clear:

- there is the need to avoid hegemonic, essentialist, othering and ethnocentric constructions – in critical awareness of the historical fact that the global North has, for centuries, sought to define itself by denying the global South
- hence there is the need for African voices to correct the distortions so typical of Western intellectual appropriations of African life and thought
- and to the extent to which the debate under (2) is typically an intellectual debate,

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<sup>476</sup> This sums up 'Fairman's Dilemma', cf. Fairman 1965; O'Connor & Reid 2003; van Binsbergen 2010, with extensive discussion and references.

<sup>477</sup> Some important steps in that debate have been: Evans-Pritchard 1972 / 1937; Gluckman 1955; Horton 1967, 1971, 1975, 1993; Hountondji 2007; Sogolo 1998; Hebga 1998; MacGaffey 1978.