

THE BANTU PHILOSOPHY ACCORDING TO PLACID TEMPELS by

Edmond Boelaert, with a reaction from Tempels.

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Preliminary note

We reproduce this text because it comes from one of the rare "*reasoned*" opponents of Tempels' "*Bantu Philosophy*". Like him, Edmond Boelaert was a missionary in the Belgian Congo and had the same introduction to scholastic philosophy as he had. He manipulates in this text the same categories as Tempels, using a Latin terminology, taken from the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Boelaert was thus particularly well placed to understand, and eventually criticize, "*La Philosophie Bantoue*". The quotations from "*The Bantu Philosophy*" have not been checked, nor have those from the writings of Saint Thomas. The numbers in brackets refer to the Lovania edition of "*La Philosophie Bantoue*". Boelaert published another review, in Dutch, in *Zaire* 1(1947)4, 387-398.

Honoré Vinck, 27-4-2002

¹ The translation of the quotations of *La Philosophie Bantoue* have not been checked with the English version *Bantu Philosophy* (1959)

On November 19, 1945, the Information Service presented to the public "*one of the most outstanding works that has ever appeared in the Colony.*" "*Masterful work of high philosophical significance.*"

The book, published by the "Lovania" Publishing House in Elisabethville, caused a great stir. E. Possoz, in his short preface, predicts that "*Ethnology, ethnological philosophy, juridical ethnology and catechesis of the patriarchal peoples will take a new direction and a new impetus from the study of Father Tempels.*"

I would like to try to give a faithful synthesis of the author's theory and to follow it with a short critique.

I. BANTU PHILOSOPHY ACCORDING TO R.P. TEMPELS

1. There is a Bantu ontology

"Human behavior cannot be universal for all, nor permanent in time, if there is not at its base, a set of ideas, a logical system, a complete philosophy of the universe" (7). But the universal Bantu behavior is permanent. Therefore, there must exist - and we must be able to find - as a foundation of their intellectual conceptions of the universe, basic principles, and a philosophical system, derived from a logically coherent ontology (8).

"This ontology exists: it penetrates and informs all the thought of the primitive, it dominates and directs all his behavior" (9), *"it provides him with a complete solution of the vital problem"* (13). *"The whole custom of the Bantu rests ... on their knowledge of being"* (18).

This Bantu philosophy *"rests on the external evidence of the authority and dominant life force of the ancestors; it rests at the same time on the internal evidence of the experience of nature and of vital phenomena from their point of view"* (55), *"and that is why I presume that it will be traceable in all the non-civilized"* (57). It is *"the only key to penetrate Bantu thought"* (9). *"For not having penetrated the ontology of the Bantu, we have remained unable to offer them an assimilable spiritual doctrine and an understandable intellectual synthesis"* (14).

2. Bantu ontology is different from ours

"Bantu have their own ontologies" (99), *"their own psychology"* (74). *"The metaphysics of Christian thought...has been based on a rather static fundamental concept of being. This is where the fundamental difference between Western thought and that of the Bantu and primitives appears"* (31). *"We have a static concept of being, they have a dynamic notion".* (32).

"Bantu have a different notion of human relationships, causality, and responsibility" (15). *"We grasp causality according to our realist metaphysics; the blacks follow the causal principles of their philosophy of forces"* (74).

3. Fundamental notion of Bantu ontology

A. TO BE=STRENGTH.

"For them the force is more than a necessary attribute of the being: the force is the being, the being is the force. Where we think the concept of being, they use the concept of energy. Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. When we would say that beings are distinguished by their essence or nature, the Bantu would say that forces differ by their essence or nature. In opposition to our definition of being "what is" or "the thing as it is", the Bantu definition would be formulated "what is force" or "the thing as force" or "the existing force"... It is the notion of force that takes the place of the notion of being in our philosophy. Just like us they have a transcendental, elementary, simple concept: in them "force", as in us "being"" (33). It is, by the force that all the beings resemble each other (31), it is the force which is the common reality to all the beings, or rather identical in all the beings (31). The force is the supreme final cause, the ultimate standard, the fundamental notion (144).

B. ATTRIBUTES OF FORCE.

1. The strength is simple: For us *"we have human nature or we don't have it. One does not increase it and one does not decrease it. Development takes place in the qualities and faculties of man. The Bantu ontology, or more exactly their theory of forces, is radically opposed to such a conception. When the Bantu say: "I am becoming strong", they mean something quite different from when we say that our strengths are increasing... When he says that a force increases, or that a being is strengthened, it should be expressed in our language and according to our mentality by: "this being has increased as a being", its nature has become stronger, increased."* (36-37).

2. The strengths are essentially different. *"When the Bantus thus designate categories of men (stronger or weaker) it is not in their eyes a classification based on accidental differences, but rather a gradation in the essential quality of man according to the intensity of their vital force" (79).*

3. Force can grow or decrease in its essence: All acquisitions constitute an increase in force; everything that impairs force constitutes a decrease in force in its essence; force can decrease ontologically, until it reaches the complex evanescence of its very essence, which deprives it of the power to be an active force, a vital cause (78). *"By the fact that a man becomes a clan chief, he is no longer what he was, he is modified in his essence" (89).*

4. Forces do not exist in themselves. *"Bantu ontology is rebellious to the concept of the individuated, self-existent thing. Bantu psychology cannot conceive of man as an individual, self-existent force." [80] "The creature is by nature permanently dependent on his Creator for his existence and subsistence. We do not conceive of such a relationship between creatures. Created beings are designated in scholastic philosophy as substances, i.e., beings that exist in themselves: in se, not in alio. {in itself, not in another} The human nature of the child does not remain permanently in causal relation to that of its parents. This conception of distinct beings, standing side by side, totally independent of one another, is foreign to Bantu thought. For it, creatures keep a link between them, an intimate ontological relationship comparable to the causal link that connects the creature to the Creator... In the created force ... the Bantu sees a causal action emanating from the very nature of that created force and*

influencing other forces ... This causality is a metaphysical action that flows from the very nature of the creature." (39). *"The human life force (its being) does not exist by itself, but is and remains essentially dependent on its elders"* (50). Individuals *"are individualized within their clan by the intimate vital influence of a deceased, whose individuality is reborn in the newborn, informs the newborn, and whose vital influence is constitutive of the very essence of the new being."* (88) *"No force constitutes an autonomous force"* (106) *"All forces are in a relationship of close interdependence, of essence to essence"* (105) *"All forces stand in a relationship of necessary influence"* (106). *"Man's life is not limited to his person alone but extends to all that is fathered by his vital influence, to all that is ontologically subordinate to him: offspring, land, possessions, livestock, and all other property. Thus anything that infringes on his material property will be an infringement on the owner's intensity of life."* (114) *"The existence of children detached from that of their progenitors is not conceivable, they can only have strength in their relationship with the parents"* (122).

4. Hierarchy of forces

"The world is a plurality of coordinated forces" (95) *"The forces are hierarchical according to their rank, their birthright"* (69). *"Above all forces is God, Spirit and Creator, the One who is force, power by himself"* (41), who is the source of all force, to whom is attributed the origin, subsistence and annihilation of all other forces (37). He has his existential cause in himself (76) and is the causal force of all life (87).

The first forces created are the first men, the founders of the clans (41,75) because man is the center of the universe, the strongest being in creation (75).

Between the founders and the living, there is the chain of ancestors, the vital lineage (70). The dead, who do not form a chain, are considered equal (128). Next to these dead there are the spirits, similar to the wind, who do not possess a body, who have never been men... They can protect the man (128).

Among the living, the clan chief is the link between the ancestor and his descendants, the intermediary and channel of forces (79).

After him come, according to their birthright, the other living beings of the clan and all the other vital forces of his land: animal, vegetable, inorganic, which are under his ontological hierarchy, and from which man sustains and increases the life of the forces (77,79).

5. Causal metaphysical laws

"The possible causalities of life can be formulated in a few metaphysical laws, universal, unchangeable and stable" (47). These are the causal laws, governing the interaction of beings (81).

Although the author does not expressly mention it, it seems to me to find in his thought a double interaction. First: the sustenance action which is constitutive of the very

essence of the being reached, analogous to the divine action which preserves the beings in existence. All the texts quoted about the fourth attribute of force refer to this sustenance action. Then: the occasional action, analogous to the divine action effecting an increase in grace or infused virtues.

The sustenance action is necessarily and uniquely exerted of superior force on all the inferior forces which depend on it in the ontological hierarchy, although here again "*the elder can restrict his paternalization, abandoning the younger in a reduced vital force*" (123).

The occasional action, which strengthens or de-strengthens its object, is possible from a stronger force on an equal force or on a weaker force, both in the ontological hierarchy and outside.

Occasional action reaches its object either immediately or mediately. Mediated action is that which reaches the object by means of an inferior force which is: 1° either captured (30), added to the force of the acting cause (59), appropriated (59) and used (60); 2° or reinforced by the force of the actor which the latter communicates to it (47), excited by it and directed "*towards a determined use*" (64).

The inferior forces which one can thus appropriate or strengthen with one's own strength, are simple natural forces (127), but which act only through the vital force of man (70) and which we so improperly call magical forces.

It seems that all the "*forced*" actions are reduced to a sustenance, to a reinforcement either of oneself (appropriation) or of another force, and to a deforcement². All these actions are done metaphysically, from essence to essence, like the divine action.

6. Universal laws of knowledge

1° **Law of Similarity:** Similarity is not the causal basis of vital influence (60) but merely indicates that similar force can be used (60).

2° **Law of contact:** the fact that a force has been in close contact with a person shows that this force participates in the vital influence of its owner. It is neither contact nor sympathy that are the active elements of the action, but exclusively the vital force of the

² Boelaert uses a term that does not exist in French: *déforcer*. See Tempels, *Ph. B.* - ed. Lovania, 1945, p. 29: Sickness and death do not come from our own vital force, but from an external agent, from a superior force that *distorts* us; p. 39: One force will reinforce or *distort* another. In the English translation of 1959 : Illness and death do not have their source in our own vital power, but result from some external agent who *weakens* us through his greater force... One force will reinforce or *weaken* another. In Dutch, Tempels may have thought of "*rebut* (an argument) "(*ontkrachten*). Usually understood in a figurative sense, but here in an almost literal, as well as metaphysical, sense: *ont-krachten* : to reduce the force, to lose the (vital) force, zo 'weaken'.

owner who acts, because it is known that it adheres to the being of the thing possessed or used by him (60).

3° **Law of imitation:** words or gestures have no power except to make forces known (61).

These are, according to Father Tempels, "*the transcendental and universal notions of being and its force, of action, of the relationships and reciprocal influences of beings which constitute the Bantu philosophy*" (55).

II. CRITICAL

The author of Bantu Philosophy promised us a logically coherent and complete Bantu ontology. This philosophy would be opposed to the "*universally human philosophy*" (53), to a rational critical philosophy (68). Its first concepts would be fundamentally different from ours. How then to understand them? The Bantu intelligence would work according to laws absolutely different from the laws of our knowledge. How then can we criticize them? And how can we reason with them? It is the "*East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet*" of Kipling. Obviously, the author does not admit this since he exposes this Bantu philosophy to us so that we understand and correct it. Yet he asks us to disregard our own philosophy and hides behind the imperfection of his own terminology.

1. Self-criticism of the author

The author has not only discovered one Bantu philosophy, which is a disconcerting revelation (135), he discovers two. "*Among contemporary Bantus we find a magical philosophy, dominating thought, and practically universally received, and beside this block we find some scattered elements of an earlier, more ancient and truer philosophy, which does not know the interference of ontological influences*" (4). "*The erroneous deviations, the inadequate applications of the primitive philosophy... are generally of recent date; the older, healthier and purer thought is to be found precisely among the most conservative tribes*" (136). "*The evolution from a simple philosophy, passing through the erroneous conclusion of the ontological interaction of forces, towards ever more factitious cases of "magical" application... seems to constitute the common thread of the history of the thought of the Bantus*" (129).

This longing of the Bantu soul for a strengthening of life has gone astray. It was originally subject to the divine guidance of the world and was limited to the use of the natural forces placed at its disposal by God to achieve its end (p. 85, note 1). Their fundamental concept of the being led them easily to the deduction, erroneous of the principle of the interaction of all the beings, of all the living, of all the forces. From this, their notion of "*paternalisation*" and the derivation in the practice of "*manga*", which is currently innumerable, are derived.

In its worst deviations and degenerations, the original ontology of the Bantus is however always easily traced: it is always expressly linked to the unshakeable ancient faith, according to which *"all life, all increase of life comes from God.* (Note a). *"The present-day Bantus have kept their faith in the elements of their original theistic religion, and yet we see them at the same time as mânistes, animists, dynamists, totemists and magic practitioners. It is thus necessary to admit that all these diverse manifestations are attached to a single conception, to the same idea of the universe, to the same metaphysical principle, whose successive deductions have led to falsify the system."* (19)

What then remains of the universal and logically coherent philosophy of the Bantu? *"We have the heavy responsibility of examining this primitive philosophy... of discovering in it the kernel of truth, which must necessarily be found in a system so complete and so universal... We must go back to the sources to the point where the evolution of the primitives, (the author nowhere proves that the sound theistic philosophy is older than the other) has gone down a false path by erroneous deductions, and from this valid starting point, reconstruct a true, solid and ennobled Bantu civilization."* (141)

For the author this valid starting point seems to be the fundamental Bantu concept of being = strength and the possibility of increasing this strength by *"using the natural forces placed at man's disposal by God to achieve his end"* (143). But this alone does not constitute a *"Bantu philosophy that can serve as a foundation for raising a Bantu civilization"* (146) or else it implies precisely the *"degenerate"* magic philosophy, *"with humiliating practices"* (148). If the central principle of the usable Bantu ontology lies in being = force and in the internal and intrinsic increase of being (148-149) through the use of natural forces, it is hard to see how the ontological causality of these forces would be an erroneous deduction.

But the author goes even further in his self-criticism. He admits that this internal and intrinsic increase of the being, this *"ancient Bantu wisdom"* (149) is a product of the Bantu imagination, a subjective idea not answering a reality *"from the purely rational point of view"* (148), that *"in the order of the reason there is no possible assuagement of the Bantu ideal"* (150).³

Beside these self-restrictions by which the author destroys completely his own construction, we should still notice the numerous occasional contradictions. How to speak otherwise, if the being itself is not being, but force, and if any possible proposal is built on the being as any syntax teaches us.

And if all force is only force, simple force, force in its essence, how does the author explain that each of the faculties of the being is a force, (50) that knowledge and wisdom are forces (77)? Where does he place the external appearances of the man distinct from the *"muntu"* = the person? and the tooth of the lion?

And if forces do not exist in themselves, how does he explain that *"concrete things have in themselves their nature and their potential for action"* (63), that individuals are specified (85), are individualized (85), are specified as individuals (87), that men are persons (87), personalities (99), that vital forces act in themselves and on themselves (105)

³ *"Christianity, and especially in its highest, most spiritualized form, is the only possible fulfillment of the Bantu ideal."* (ed. Lovania, pp. 149-150)

And if the rites are not effective, but simple criteria of the knowledge, what does it mean that "the animated instrument of the destructive vital force of the link resides in its formidable canine (58), that this canine is the materialized link between the lion and the man (59), that the anathema is the formidable weapon of the elders (112)?"

2. Error on the Thomistic philosophy

The great fault of the author seems to me to be his ignorance of the "*philosophia perennis*", the universally human philosophy (53).

According to this philosophy, the proper object of intelligence is the real being, which we know by concepts (*species intelligibiles*){*Intelligible species*} abstracted from sense data (*phantasmata*){*Phantasms*}. These concepts are universal (quiddités). The singular is reached only by the senses or by the reflection of the intelligence on the phantasmata. The spiritual is known by our intelligence only by analogy.

But the real being, directly known, does not exist as it is known by the concept = as universal: man does not exist, there are only men.

Certainly, one can say that these concepts are "*static*". All concepts are static in the same sense, even the concept of action, of force. To claim that the Bantu notion of force replaces our notion of being is a nonsense, it is to claim that the Bantu has an intelligence essentially different from ours, that he can think a real force which is not being.

But the known being is no more static for the Thomist than for the Bantu. "*Esse et agere convertuntur*" {*being and action are interchangeable*}; "*ens est diffusivum sui*" {*being is self-diffusive*}. Even: pure being is pure act, and being is only through act. All this is said of being "*extra mentem*" {*outside the mind*}.

The concrete being, *extra mentem*, exists '*in itself*'. It is either by itself (*a se* = God), or by God (*ab alio* = the creatures). The creatures are either spiritual or material. All are "composed" of essence = '*id quod est* {*that which is proper*}', and of existence = '*id quo est* {*that which is*}. But spirits are pure forms: each singular spirit constitutes a special species, and is "composed" of substance = '*quod est in se*' {*What is in itself*}, and of accidents = '*quod est in alio, in substantia*' {*What is in another, in substance*}. Material beings are, moreover, "composed" of matter and form. It is the matter which is in them the foundation of the individualization in the species.

But all these "compositions" are "*real*" in a metaphysical sense; these constituents of being are not beings, but principles of being, postulates of ontology, which studies the causes of being. Principles are separable "*secundum rationem, licet non secundum rem*" {*according to reason, but not according to reality*} (Metaph. L. 7, lect. 1). Essence and existence "*non possunt separari etiam potentia absoluta Dei*" {*cannot be separated by the absolute power of God*} (St. Th. *De Potentia*).

Unfortunately, these "*compositions*" are too often misunderstood; they then lead to the error of dualism, which makes it easy to reject this ontology for a monism such as that which the author implicitly attributes to the Bantus.

It is the same error that makes the author say that Bantu paganism, the ancient Bantu wisdom (149) can only find its complement, its fulfillment in the purest Christianity (150), that the Christian supernatural order teaches and provides the possibility (non-existent in the natural order) of internal, intrinsic vital growth, in the way that the Bantu teach (149). All theology, on the contrary, expressly teaches us that "*divina natura nobis communicatur accidentaliter, eo sensu quod qualitas in anima nostra imprimitur.*" {*The divine nature is communicated to us accidentally, in the sense that a quality is imprinted in our soul*}.

3. Mistake about Bantu thinking

We find three types of assertions in the Bantu.

- a) **The affirmation of facts:** I see a stone, there are spirits; I see the sun rising; I saw a man change into a cat; I saw the magician pull a snake out of my ear.
- b) **The affirmation of the properties of certain beings:** fire burns, manioc nourishes; an amulet brings good luck; meeting a black cat brings bad luck.
- c) The affirmation of being and its properties: being exists; being is good; being is true.

The certainty of all these statements can come from faith as well as from experience and personal reasoning. Even the certainty of faith is much deeper - in practice - than the other: it cannot be shaken by direct arguments. The proof of this is the inextirpable belief of our Christian populations in superstitions that are two thousand years old, or that of the Protestants in the worship of images by the Catholics.

But all these certainties based on faith do not extirpate the certainties of internal evidence. In man, the two kinds of certainty can exist side by side, even if they are opposed to each other; just as there can be two opposites. In a traditionalist environment, few superior and independent minds are aware of this opposition, or try to systematize their certainties, even fewer try to extract a philosophy from them.

But let us come to the so-called internal evidence of the Bantus. First of all, the data of the senses: "*The testimony of the senses about their own sensible object must be taken as certain, provided that there is no defect in the organ and no impediment in the intermediary*" says St. Thomas (1, q. 85, a. 6). The perceptions of our senses are not false, but in everyday life we always assert more than their content - "I see a stone" we say, where the eye perceives only visible appearances; "*I saw a man change into a cat*", says the primitive, but he did not see the change, he saw a man before, a cat after. In such assertions the grossest errors are therefore daily. Under the influence of imagination not sufficiently controlled by intelligence, of credulity, of collective psychology, we affirm more than reason. But all this does not prove that the senses of the primitive work differently than ours, or that the primitive does not trust his senses. He trusts them too much and imagines he sees many things that he does not really see. He lets his imagination deceive him.

The affirmations of second order, on the properties of the beings, are already science, physical science. They are abstracted from the data of the senses, either exact and obvious data, or data distorted by the imagination. And it is not only the primitives who are mistaken here: Saint Thomas believed in the occult forces of gold, Suarez in astral influences, many of our famous generals believe in horoscopes. It has been said that "*for centuries the moralists*

were more superstitious than the sorcerers, but it was not their metaphysics that was erroneous, they were mistaken in the "apparentia", and in their systematization, which is the object about science: "salvare apparentia" {Save the appearance}" (note b).

Still on these scientific certainties, the scholastic theory was much more cautious than the practice. "*Mens nostra axiomatibus experimentalibus, quae mediante legitima inductione efformantur, certo et indubitanter assentitur ob motivum omnino cogens in ipsis rebus inventum et clare visum, nimirum determinantur ad unum a sufficienti singularium observatione, adiecto principio causalitatis*" {Our mind acquiesces to experimental axioms, which are formed by means of legitimate induction, with certainty and acquiesces without any doubt to a compelling motive which is found and seen clearly in the facts themselves} (Cg. 1. 3. c. 2; De Ver. q. 22, a. 1). Scientific error is therefore easy, and all the more easy as the scientific mind is less developed and the imagination is less controlled.

Certainly, the primitives believe that these properties, that we call magical, are natural properties of the beings. At most we could speak of "natural magic" (Cfr. *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, June 1931: *Sacrements et magie*, by E. Hocedez, pp. 481-507, n. 3p. 498)⁴. The explanation of the Middle Ages, implying the intervention of the devil who would be invoked formally or implicitly, does not apply to the "magical" manifestations of the primitives; there is no more material sin of superstition in them than in an apprentice-horticulturist who would believe he could graft a lettuce on a stone. But all this is outside the central problem posed by Father Tempels: Bantu ontology. Let us therefore come to the metaphysical affirmations.

Scholasticism teaches that the "*intellectus humanus in ferendis iudiciis circa veritates communes et omnibus per se notas nunquam decipi potest; circa veritates vero deductas non errat nisi per accidens*" {The human intellect can never be deceived in making judgments about common and self-evident truths. But concerning deduced truths it is only accidentally mistaken} (S. Th. I, Q. 85, a. 6). On the first principles the intelligence cannot err: principles of contradiction, of identity, of causality. It can err accidentally on subsequent deductions.

⁴ <https://www.nrt.be/fr/articles/sacrements-et-magie-3397> . Note 3, p. 498 refers to the *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la Philosophie* (A. Lalande, Paris, 1926, t.I, p. 437-438): 'magie'. " After pointing out the meanings of the word {magic} among the ancients, he enumerates its meaning in philosophy. B. Among Western peoples, the art of acting on nature by occult processes and producing extraordinary effects in it." - "Ceremonial magic is that which acts upon spirits (other than the spirits of living men) by means of a ritual. - Natural magic has been understood in several senses. It seems to have been conceived at first as operating, in an illicit and occult manner, on the elemental forces or spirits which govern matter... This traditional conception has been modified by a great number of writers in a rationalist sense... *Magia naturalis seu physica nihil aliud est quam exactior quaedam arcanorum naturae cognitio...* {Natural magic or physics is nothing more than a more precise knowledge of the mysteries of nature... }.

Finally, according to Bacon, natural magic is understood to be those operations which depend on formal knowledge... as opposed to those which require only the knowledge of an efficient cause, the intimate mechanism of the phenomenon being ignored. - Others distinguish between divine magic, theurgic [angelic], goetic [demonic] and natural magic. - " C. Among contemporary sociologists, this word is used in two senses: 1° Frazer... 2 This word is applied to all operations which do not fall within the rites of organized cults and which are based on beliefs analogous to those manifested by magic in the B sense, notably on beliefs in correspondences and in the sympathetic effects which result from them." See also ZÖCKLER, *Magie*, in *Real Encyclopädie...* t. XII, 1903, pp. 67-70.

And it is here that the author wants to impose on the Bantus an ontology against which the intelligence of every man must protest. The notion of being and its properties as well as the laws of knowledge that the author imputes to the primitives are the very negation of intelligence. "*Quapropter frustra sunt, imo vehementer errant et periculosissime falluntur, quicumque ea ratione ducti, quod motiva dantur dubitandi de omnibus, demonstrandum sibi esse existimant, valorem primarum notionum, legitimitatem facultatum, objectivitatem perceptionum nostrarum.*" {Therefore, those who, led by the reason that there are grounds for doubting all things, have demonstrated the value of the first notions, the legitimacy of the faculties, and the objectivity of our perceptions, are mistaken, and very dangerously so}.

The primitive has an intelligence like ours, the first principles of being and knowledge are the same for him as for us. His first notion of being must be the same as ours. To claim that he denies physical causality, as the author says, is to deny him any experimental evidence. Moreover, here again he contradicts himself: gesture, movement are not causes of influence, but of knowledge, as if a cause of knowledge were not a cause of influence too. Besides, a natural force that does not operate physically, naturally, but metaphysically, seems to be a contradiction.

All this is so opposite to the common sense, that the author himself is obliged to subtract from his synthesis all the "*utilitarian shapings*", which "*are away from wisdom*", "*childishness*" (67). But these utilitarian shapings are precisely all the actions that the black man poses "*according to a critical reasoning marrying the nature of the things*". (67). And it is precisely these actions which make the weft of the daily life. The author says that "*all of a sudden, however, one observes that they abandon all reasoning and make success depend on the help of the spirit or the bwanga*" (67). But if a believer expects divine help for the success of his enterprise, will we say that he does not believe in physical causality?

If the author had tried to base a Bantu ontology on these rational manifestations of the primitive, he would have found a primitive intelligence identical to ours, a rational philosophy, an ontology of common sense. He would not have slandered his dear Bantus as he does implicitly. Only, he let himself be deceived by appearances. No one denies that magical imaginations are just as widespread among the primitive as they were among us in the Middle Ages. These imaginations strike us, especially because an ever-increasing ethnographic literature tries to make us believe that these manifestations are the fundamental stone and the keystone of the primitive mind, just as in our country writings and stories and the inquisition had led people to see almost nothing but magic. But above all this nonsense, products of an imagination haunted by mystery, the thought of the Bantus is revealed in their everyday life, in their "*profane*" acts. This thought exists as it existed in our country, in the Middle Ages, as superior to all the elucidations of the realm of fear, as reason is superior to imagination, and as Thomistic philosophy is superior to the ramblings of sorcerers. The author has not noticed that these famous laws of the beings and of the intelligence are only the laws - well known in the experimental psychology of the imagination as it manifests itself for example in children, dreamers, drunkards. These laws exist as well among us as among the primitives. But also the philosophy perennis has its roots, not in the western man, but in the man at all.

Finally, let us pay tribute to Father Tempels for encouraging us to translate the values of our civilization and religion as much as possible into the indigenous language and mentality. Where we speak in terms of perfection and happiness, they prefer to express

themselves in terms of a strengthened life. Let us adapt. This is perhaps the essence of what the author wanted to teach us.

Notes

(a) *Where is the deviation?* On several occasions the author tells us that "magical remedies are only natural forces (127) which exist, by the will of God, only with the aim of increasing the vital force of men" (45,28). Our contemporary Bantus would say, in speaking of mânism, fetishism, animism, etc., that "magic" is not the same as "totemism". (Dynamism, totemism, magic): "all this is willed by God, the supreme Being, and all this has been given to help men" (20).

(b) Cfr *De wetenschappelijke natuurkennis bij den H. Thomas en bij de moderne geleerden*. A. Van Hove, in "Ons geloof" 1928, p. 349-365.
E. Boelaert, M. S. C.

Reply of f. Pl. Tempels

In a letter of 28 July 1947 to Gustaaf Hulstaert, Tempels reacts to the article of E. Boelaert. We take up the text of : François Bontinck, *Aux origines de la Philosophie Bantoue. La correspondance Tempels-Hulstaert (1944-1948)*, Faculté de Théologie Catholique, Kinshasa, 1985, p.154-156.

Reverend and dear Father Hulstaert,

On the 7th of this month I had sent you a letter by airmail - and you write me a letter dated July 13, 1947. If my letter had not yet arrived, you must have received it immediately afterwards. Thank you for your letter.

You persist in asking for an answer to Fr. Boelaert's criticism. That gives me great pleasure. But you know that I cannot answer personally: I am still *sub judice*. {inculpated}

Moreover, Fr. Boelaert starts from a wrong point of view; he does not start from the ethnological point of view, the only necessary and essential one. He starts from the theological and philosophical points of view; just look at what he has just written to Possoz: "Our discussions do not help us. Let's not talk about it anymore between us. But if you can find someone who wants to reason philosophically on the question, I will always be delighted with his remarks".

You see that an answer is impossible, because first and foremost one must deal with the ethnological question. Even where Fr. Boelaert speaks of the ethnological aspect of the question, he still starts from his philosophical point of view, from his philosophy which he calls "*philosophia perennis*". He makes me say that the Bantu philosophy is opposed to the *Philosophia perennis*! And as an ethnologist, he reasons as follows: Thomism gives the *Philosophia perennis*. The first elements of the *Philosophia perennis* constitute the object of human intelligence. So the Blacks possess these elements, otherwise they would not be men, they would not have intelligence.

I would add: therefore ethnology is useless because we know a priori that any new people, as well as any primitive people, has no other philosophical concepts than those of Thomism, which is identical to the "*Philosophia perennis*."

I had not pushed my thinking that far. Naively, out of a certain charity no doubt, I wanted to go into the thinking of the Blacks, to live together with them in this mentality and thus (out of charity) to see Christianity with them from this mentality. I have described this mentality simply as it is or as it seems to me to be and I have indicated, for Europeans, what nuance in this ontology seems different from the dominant presentation of Western philosophy. This nuance of the Western philosophy reassured very clearly your first objection: you do not give a concept of the being, because the force is only an accident".

Now, there are people who are able to rise above certain nuances in the conceptualization and expression of *Philosophia perennis* and who do not identify with *Philosophia perennis* what is only a one-sided nuance of a certain expression of *Philosophia perennis*. These people, without knowing much about the Primitives, judge as philosophers the given system (i.e. Fr. Boelaert's point of view) and they find :

- 1° that I have indeed formulated a concept of being
- 2° that this concept of being expresses an aspect of reality other than that of the static vision, predominant in the West;
- 3° that this ontology is not a nonsense, as Fr. Boelaert says, but that it is also a *Philosophia perennis*, the eternal philosophy of the forces which exists universally beside the static philosophy.

Thus, the included attestations constitute a philosophical judgment of specialists (not of thoughtless thurifers, as Fr. Boelaert calls them) and a judgment that differs somewhat from Fr. Boelaert buried me; perhaps others will resurrect me and perhaps wash away Fr. Boelaert's accusation that "the *author's great fault seems to me to be his ignorance of the Philosophia perennis*" (p. 86).

Fr. Boelaert should put himself in the ethnological point of view, then we could talk. He says it so well: "*Certainly the Primitives believe that these properties (of the beings) that we name magic, are natural properties of the beings*". And therein lies the very great flaw in his criticism. He should have written how and why Blacks, from their point of view, look at these properties as natural properties of beings. I think it is because of their theories of forces (force of being, growth of being, influence of being, cohesion of beings, hierarchy of beings).

Fr. Boelaert is content to affirm without more that this synthesis does not render the thoughts of the Blacks. But when he says a priori that the system of the Blacks must necessarily be of the *Philosophia perennis*, with its own nuance, with its own determined conceptualization, with its own aspect close to the Western or Thomistic or static philosophy, then he puts himself in the impossibility of being able to even think of an own nuance in the others, to suppose it or to look for it without prejudice.

Let's keep all this between us; it is not intended for publication. For personally I want to stay (temporarily) on the strictly ethnological ground. Ethnological testimonies from all over the Congo and South Africa continue to pile up. Don't worry about our vicariate; adapted catechesis is in use everywhere and was even before *Bantu Philosophy* was written.

Please don't mind if I speak harshly. I have only one goal: not to lose courage and to continue trying to help you "understand" in order to reach this: "*let the black Christians live with what is good in their conceptions*" or "*let Christ live in the soul of the Primitives*".

If only this could be realized in your vicariate too!

Sincerely, Placide