



Dankbare herinnering aan
Pater Alfons Jozef SMET

Passionist

Geboren in een groot gezin te Vrasene op 24 juli 1926,
Na zijn noviciaat geprofeet te Kruishoutem op 8 september 1947,
Priester gewijd op 7 april 1953,
Missionaris in Kongo van 1968 tot 1993 en van 1955 tot 1998,
plots overleden te Wezembeek-Oppem
op Goede Vrijdag op 3 april 2015.

In memoriam Prof. Fr. Alfons J. Smet

1926 – 2015

On Good Friday 2015, Prof. father Alfons J. Smet, Passionist, just died suddenly. The last few years in Belgium he was only known in his community and in some prayer groups. But in a publication, made in Kinshasa in 1997, the publisher did not hesitate to write: "*Le nom de 'Père Smet' est aujourd'hui des plus connus dans le monde philosophique africain. Les chercheurs africains voient en lui l'homme qui aura sorti la philosophie africaine de sa préhistoire*" (Mr. Buassa Mbadu, *Père A.J. Smet et la philosophie Africaine*, Kinshasa, 1997, p 122 - *Recherches Philosophiques Africaines* n° 27). Whoever did research on the Internet with the name A.J. Smet, in connection with African Philosophy find only confirmation of this in many languages.

Father Smet defended with great success a doctorate of philosophy at the University of Leuven in 1958 and stayed there a few years at the Centre De Wulf-Mansion as a researcher in the field of medieval philosophy. Nothing could foresee the importance that this could have on his later career of almost 30 years in Congo/Zaire in the '70s - '90s. During the years of unrest in Paris in '67 -'68, he prepared himself to become a missionary in the Congo by taking courses on African thought from the well-known specialists at that time, G. Balandier and J. Maquet. Thus prepared, he was invited in 1968 to give philosophy courses at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University Lovanium in Kinshasa (Congo). In 1971 he left Kinshasa to become head of the philosophy department at Lubumbashi. He returned to Kinshasa in order to become also head of the Department of Philosophy and African religions of the Kinshasa Faculty of Theology from 1977 to 1981. His career of philosophy teaching in Kinshasa 1974-1991 were sometimes cut off by a few years of being the rector of the Philosophat Saint Augustin in Kinshasa or reduced to a part-time basis at the Faculty of Theology. From 1991 to 1993 and from 1995 to 1998 he became full time rector of the Philosophat Saint Augustin. But reasons of poor health forced him to return to Belgium at the convent in Wezembeek-Oppem where he died suddenly on April 3, 2015. When I met him in 2012 he knew that his health was failing him one day, but he was happy to have finished its task by preparing all texts for a critical edition of the work of the father Pl. Tempels, a work he knew like nobody else. For lack of publication by print, one can find all the texts in digital version at <http://www.aequatoria.be/tempels/>.

During his sabbatical in Paris in 1967-1968, he discovered "African thought". An interest he will keep all his life. During the first years in the Congo he sought more information and discovered the work of well-known Father P. Tempels: *La Philosophie Bantoue (The Bantu Philosophy)*,

¹" *The name 'Father Smet is today the best known in the African philosophical world. African*

published in 1949 in French by Presence Africaine and later on several times republished in French, English and German. It was only at the instigation of his young colleague of Benin, prof. Hountondji Paulin, at that time a philosophy professor at Lubumbashi and well known later for his criticism of ethnophilosophy, that he will release his first bibliography of African thought in a new bulletin he had founded: *Cahiers Philosophiques Africains*.

Back in Kinshasa, the dean of the faculty, Professor Ntedika Konde, invited him to teach a course on African Philosophy, seen the material that Father Smet had already collected. This course gave us the publication in two volumes, now highly sought after, "*Philosophie Africaine – Textes Choisis et bibliographie sélective*" (Kinshasa, PUZ, 1975, p 557), in which father Smet provided the texts of the 'prehistory' of the African philosophy, difficult to find but important to understand the importance of father Tempels' text on the Bantu Philosophy. From 1974, he provided a syllabus ronéocopié *Notes d'histoire de la pensée africaine* (notes on the history of African thought) which became an important article: *Histoire de la philosophie africaine: problèmes et méthodes* (pp. 47-68) in another new founded publication *Recherches Philosophiques Africaines* (1977) which also contains the edition of the first acts of the Philosophical Week of Kinshasa in 1976.

This 'history' will become the basis of a systematization of various African philosophical texts: texts before the time of father Tempels; texts after the time of fr. Tempels and his 'disciples'; critical texts and political-ideological texts, e.g. LS Senghor and Nkrumah. His *Histoire de la philosophie africaine contemporaine: courants et problèmes* contained at the end in 1980 299 pages.

From the years '76 his interest will go more to the work of Father Tempels: his known writings but also his writings lesser known or unpublished. He thus saved them from oblivion and prepared them for a critical edition "*Philosophie Bantu augmenté du huitième chapitre inédit*" (2008), unpublished at this moment, but which forms the basis of the Italian edition of 2005! We will here mention that it's a bit unfortunate that African Presence reissued *la Philosophie Bantoue* of P. Tempels in 2014 in its original version, without critical notes. A missed opportunity we think. But everyone can find the critical edition in digital version on www.aequatoria.be/tempels.

Father A. Smet has rarely taken a position on what should be 'African Philosophy'. In this regard, he was very clear: « *Ce sont les Africains qui doivent construire leur avenir. Ils ne le feront pas sans philosophie, implicite ou explicite, classique ou africaine. C'est à eux de décider quelle philosophie les mènera à une nouvelle Afrique, qui assume son passé et forgera son avenir. Mais l'Afrique par l'Afrique ne se fera pas sans le peuple, sans sa langue, sans son génie.*» (Quoted in the préface de *Père A.J. Smet et la Philosophie Africaine*, 1997) ²

The contribution of father A.J. Smet to African philosophy may not be underestimated and is often recognized by all those who know the problems of African philosophy in Africa and many other parts of the African Diaspora:

- He has only given opportunities to its African philosophers colleagues to freely develop their own thoughts, not slavishly copying a Western philosophy;
- He encouraged his African students of philosophy to work with 'African material': local language, proverbs, stories ... without forgetting the academic level. At a certain moment he decided to invite them to translate philosophical texts in their own language to forge an original philosophical language, as it happened in the Europe where we had to develop a new philosophical language in French, German, English, Dutch different from

² It is for Africans who must build their future. They will not do it without philosophy, implicit or explicit, classical or African. It is for them to decide which philosophy will lead them to a new Africa that assumes its past and forge its future. But Africa with Africa will not happen without the people, without language, without his genius.

the current language in philosophy and theology at the time: Latin;³

- He invited philosophers from across Africa and Europe to meet in philosophical weeks of Kinshasa in 1976. He thus gave a platform for co-workers, but also for young assistants and students who would make their first philosophical 'apparition'. Many of them have become known names across the world. They also came out of anonymity by the publication of the proceedings in the famous *Recherches Philosophiques Africaines*. Thus was discovered the so-called hermeneutic school of Kinshasa with prof. Nkombe Oleko and Tshiamalenga Ntumba;
- He collected texts of the early pioneers of African philosophy, difficult to find. They are still the much sought basic works published as the famous two red books: *Philosophie Africaine – textes choisis et bibliographie selective'* of 1975, 557 p.
- Already as a researcher at the University of Leuven, he was aware of the importance of an inventory of all the texts on the subject. So he carefully collected all the documents related near or far to the issue of African philosophy in his bibliographies. In 2005 there was a first 'full' publication: *African Philosophy: A Bibliographic Survey from 1729 to 2000 - Volume 1* (to the letter M), issued as *Recherches Philosophiques Africaines* n°33. A next volume was never published, but in the meantime researchers will find his bibliographic legacy on the internet till 2004 by the effort of the Institut de Philosophie de Université de Louvain-la-Neuve (<http://www.isp.ucl.ac.be/recherche/philafr/>) Who will continue this important work?
- His bibliographic research and collection led him to publish his famous *Panorama de la philosophie africaine contemporaine*, published in *Mélanges de Philosophie Africaine*, 1978, p. 263-281, in collaboration with the young and talented prof. Nkombe Oleko (who also died recently)⁴. They distinguished four currents: an ideological current; a current recognition of a traditional African philosophy; a critical current and a synthetic current. This panorama is still used in many textbooks on African philosophy in Africa and elsewhere;
- His greatest merit is probably the publication and defense of the originality of the Bantu Philosophy of fr. Pl. Tempels. The several editions and translations in French and English (less in Dutch or German) have also given sometimes unfortunate interpretations. Prof. Smet is one of the few authors who know and can read the "original" edition in Dutch (the subtitle of the Dutch edition is: 'original text!'), but also the hand written annotations of Tempels himself. Thus prof. Smet made at least two important points that interpreters often forget:
 - 1. The title in French and English unfairly gave the impression that father Tempels would have written THE Bantu philosophy, possibly even extrapolating to all Africans. The original edition in Dutch (and German) did not have the 'THE' in the title. It was only 'Bantoe-Filosofie' or 'Bantu Philosophy'. Prof. Smet always insisted that father Tempels

³ The only problem is: who can read all these texts. We estimate that there are some 4000 local languages in Africa!

⁴ In less than one year, we regret the loss of 4 'pioneers' of African Philosophy. These are the other ones:

1. le prof. **Marcien Towa** of Cameroun in August 2014

(<http://cameroonwebnews.com/2014/07/15/cameroun-le-deces-du-pr-marcien-towa-fait-couler-de-lencre/>)

2. le prof. **Nkombe Oleko** in oct. 2014 (<http://acpcongo.com/acp/deces-le-week-end-a-kinshasa-du-dg-de-lisealodja-le-professeur-francois-nkombe-oleko/>)

3. le prof. **Elungu Pene Elungu** in march 2015 (<http://acpcongo.com/acp/le-professeur-emerite-alphonse-elungu-pene-elungu-sest-eteint/>)

was also very hesitant to write that he had written THE Bantu philosophy. It was only a hypothesis without purpose of writing the basic work that claims to say the final word on Bantu Philosophy. But it was for father Tempels a “more ethnological and less (academic) philosophical” contribution in order to found his Christian catechesis, recognizing "a" philosophy underlying the conceptions of the Bantu. Everything became clear when Prof. Smet discovered the famous eighth unpublished chapter in which fr. Tempels expresses once again his reservations and contradicts some unfounded criticisms. Interpreters who read only the French and English versions of *Presence Africaine* editions miss these points;

2. Fr. Tempels has been widely criticized that “being” was “force”. He thus opened an old philosophical discussion that Prof. Smet immediately understood from his earlier studies of medieval philosophy. Some (e.g. E. Boelaert) criticized fr. Tempels that he had not complied with the Thomistic scholastic view by identifying 'be' with 'force'. St. Thomas said that “being” was something in itself and the rest could only be understood as a predicate. Which gave a rather static conception of being. By making 'being' as a dynamic being (being = force), fr. Tempels seemed to reject the 'perennial philosophy' supported by the catholic church. But Prof. Smet, a specialist in this matter, has acknowledged that fr. Tempels was inspired rather by the philosophy of Duns Scotus, a Franciscan brother of the Middle Ages, who gave a more dynamic range to the concept of being by identifying its essence with 'force'. Noting that in the early twentieth century other European philosophers were already of the same opinion that it is better to understand “being” in a more dynamic way (Bergson, Heidegger, ...).

A Flemish newspaper in Belgium announced briefly the death of father A.J. Smet. But the Congolese Passionist Provincial, Father Vital, said during the funeral precisely: *With the death of the father Smet, many intellectuals in the Congo, but also in Africa and outside, we lose someone who has been an important man in the recognition of Africa.*

It was the lifestyle of the father Smet in all modesty: at the service, being for others. In African philosophy he gave a platform to the others, and in the first place to Africans themselves, by the foundation of journals (*Cahiers Philosophiques Africains*, *Recherches Philosophiques Africaines*), by providing the texts and bibliographic publications, or by regular meetings (*Semaine Philosophique de Kinshasa*). In his function as professor or as head of the department he used the resources and opportunities to give the floor to Africans themselves, to speak freely, to seek their own way through the maze of what philosophy could be for them. Many will be grateful to him, in Africa, but also elsewhere in the African diaspora.

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Oostende, 15 April 2015

PS : The full CV and bibliography may be found at <http://www.aequatoria.be/tempels/AJSmet.htm>