

Defeat – Conscientization – Action

African Contributions to a Hermeneutics of Suffering and Capability

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Abstract

This article explores connections between Paul Ricœur and African philosophers working in hermeneutics or with core issues of interpretation. It starts out from the view that hermeneutics is not merely an academic discipline, but forms part of a broader practice of conscientization, itself aimed at improving social interaction. Building on prior work on the political orientation of Ricœur's hermeneutics and on the emancipatory intent of African philosophical hermeneutics, the article seeks to better coordinate these directions of research. The paper consists of two parts. The first part is historical and provides an orientation to the initial reception of Ricœur's work by Africans and in Africa. The second part is systematic and reflects the guiding view of hermeneutics. The work of African philosophers and of Ricœur are coordinated around three related themes: (1) socio-political defeat as initial motivation, (2) the hermeneutic work of increased awareness or conscientization and (3) philosophical reflection on the action required in response to the demands of practical contexts.

Keywords: *African Hermeneutics, Political Philosophy, Conscientization, Transfunctionalization, Capabilities.*

Résumé

Cet article examine les liens entre Paul Ricœur et les philosophes africains travaillant dans l'herméneutique ou sur des questions fondamentales d'interprétation. Il part du principe que l'herméneutique n'est pas seulement une discipline universitaire, mais qu'elle s'inscrit dans une pratique plus large de la prise de conscience, visant elle-même à améliorer les interactions sociales. S'appuyant sur des travaux antérieurs consacrés à l'orientation politique de l'herméneutique ricœurienne et à l'intention émancipatrice de l'herméneutique philosophique africaine, cet article cherche à mieux coordonner ces deux axes de recherche. Il se compose de deux parties. La première partie est historique et fournit une orientation sur la réception initiale de l'œuvre ricœurienne par les Africains et en Afrique. La deuxième partie est systématique et reflète la vision directrice de l'herméneutique. Les travaux des philosophes africains et de Ricœur s'articulent autour de trois thèmes connexes : (1) la défaite sociopolitique comme motivation initiale, (2) le travail herméneutique de prise de conscience ou de conscientisation et (3) la réflexion philosophique sur l'action requise en réponse aux exigences des contextes pratiques.

Mots-clés : *herméneutique africaine, philosophie politique, prise de conscience, transfonctionnalisation, capacité d'agir.*

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1. Hermeneutics as conscientization and as practice

The aim of this article¹ is to expand the web of connections between Ricœur's philosophy and that of a selected strand of African philosophers, namely those who identify their philosophy as "hermeneutic" or whose reflection evidently applies to core issues of interpretation. Since I cannot detach this question from my own understanding of hermeneutics, let me state two points from the outset. While philosophical hermeneutics is an academic discipline with a venerable tradition in the arts of interpretation of several human and social sciences, I associate it more strongly with a widespread human initiative of working on one's own (and others') mode of being conscious of the world. In this sense, *hermeneutics is a mode of conscientization*.² Associated with this point, I consider hermeneutics (and philosophy generally), not only as a body of ideas and arguments, but also as a set of activities, and thereby coordinated and related to other people's actions in social life and history. In this sense, *hermeneutics is a social practice*. As a practice, philosophical hermeneutics holds the potential for instantiating the ability of hermeneuts to commit to socio-political tasks.³

A good part of what led me to these convictions was my work on Ricœur's thought, in particular his writings during the years when his questioning about hermeneutics emerged as entangled with political concerns. But my convictions were also shaped by studying hermeneutics in the work of several African philosophers, where the question of political liberation and continued post-independence emancipation is a major motivation. This raises the question of the relation between these two strands of thought, a question I have only partially dealt with in previous publications. In *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery* I have discussed African authors (not only hermeneuts) explicitly as part of the exegetical methodology: I assessed some of Ricœur's political claims and situated his general stance of the role of culture in emancipation, by comparing his view with those of some of his African contemporaries; I also demonstrated how some of the potential for intercultural philosophy in his work was identified and developed by African scholars. By contrast, in *Interpretation for Liberation: African Philosophical Hermeneutics*, I referred to European authors only as far as this was unavoidable, since I wanted to maximally foreground the

¹ This article forms part of my FWO research project "Ricœur: (de)colonization yesterday and today" (project number G030523N).

² This point is detailed in Ernst Wolff, "Conscientization without moralism, today", in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery. Decolonization, Modernity, Hermeneutics* (Berlin: De Gruyter [2021] 2025), 251-253.

³ This potential has to be qualified to avoid undue exaggeration. My objection is directed against the professional deformation that attributes to philosophy a more socially redemptive role than it has ever really played. Cf. Ernst Wolff, "Hermeneutics as commitment", in *Interpretation for Liberation. African Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2025), 243-288.

originality of the African authors. In this article, I aim to better coordinate these two strands of exploration.⁴

The potential material to be reviewed and the number of strategies for linking the two bodies of work are quite vast. I define the theme of this article with reference to my aforementioned understanding of hermeneutics as conscientization and as integrated in practical philosophy and in socio-political practice more generally. To prepare this discussion, I first want to give an impression of the existing interlacing of philosophy on the African continent with Ricœur's philosophical publications and his own reception of African philosophy. Against this background, I can present my own contribution, not as *the* way to link African philosophies and Ricœur, but as *one* way to do so. Likewise, I do not wish to reduce African hermeneutics to one problem (let alone essentialize what really is a body of diverse philosophical offerings and debates), but rather single out a prevalent theme that illustrates the significance of this strand of African philosophy. I will present this theme in three steps, captured by the article's title: defeat, conscientization and action.

2. Receptions and relatings

Paul Ricœur is a very European philosopher or, if we consider the extent to which he integrated Anglo-Saxon philosophy from mid-career, a Western philosopher. This does not mean that events outside of the West were of no interest to him – quite the contrary.⁵ However, with the exception of parts in his *Symbolism of Evil* where he deals with traditions from the Semitic world, there is little engagement with authors outside of the West in his main publications.

A historical approach to the task of relating Ricœur's thought to that of his African counterparts may therefore start out from the African side, notably in the receptions of Ricœur's thought. This history still remains to be written. For the time being, instead of an encyclopaedic overview, I present four coordinates by which to form an impression of the profile of his initial reception in different African contexts. Since Ricœur's writings were initially only available in French, one would expect his first reception to be in the former French or francophone colonies.⁶ There are indeed some traces of his work being received early by authors from the Maghreb (I refer to Morocco and Tunisia). Then I turn to sub-Saharan Africa, which is the region from which I discuss African philosophical hermeneutics further on in this article. Here the contrast between francophone countries (especially Zaïre/RDC) and anglophone countries (especially Nigeria and South Africa) will serve as pointers.

"Rives méditerranéennes", an association founded in 1959, invited Ricœur to give a presentation in Rabat, which took place in April 1960.⁷ His host, Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi, prepared

⁴ I reference my publications to help the reader follow up on certain points in more detail. However, I have tried to limit this so as not to overburden the text.

⁵ The first chapters of *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery* document this part of Ricœur's thought.

⁶ I say "former", simply because I have not been able to find any text from an African author referring to Ricœur during the colonial era.

⁷ According to the editorial introduction to Paul Ricœur, "Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales", *Confluent*, January (1961): 46-56, here 46. A somewhat different rendering of the event is given by

a doctorate at the Sorbonne at the time Ricœur was professor there.⁸ Lahbabi presented his early philosophy as contributions to personalism and I find in them only scattered references to Ricœur. While I do not see any major influence of Ricœur's on Lahbabi, it is worth noting that Ricœur's paper in Rabat was his famous essay "Universal civilization and national cultures"; during the same period Lahbabi worked on very similar problems, as can be seen from the sub-title "twenty theses on national cultures and human civilization"⁹ to one of his books. It would be worthwhile to examine how this book corresponds to Ricœur and to other receptions of Ricœur's paper. However, there doesn't seem to have been any significant reception of Ricœur in Morocco.¹⁰

From Tunis, we have several testimonies to the early transfer of Ricœur's philosophy to Tunisia from the tribute volume *Présence de Paul Ricœur*¹¹ prepared by the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts. According to Abdelwahab Bouhdiba in 1950 his philosophy teacher at the Collège Sadiki recommended Ricœur's "Non-violent Man and His Presence to History".¹² Preparing the agrégation in philosophy, he attended Ricœur's lectures on symbols in 1958/59.¹³ Similarly, his compatriot Fatma Haddad Chamakh attended Ricœur's lectures from 1957 to 1961 and prepared a D.E.S. thesis and a "doctorat d'État" (habilitation) in 1959-1960 and from 1967 to

Jean Ferrari (former president of the *Association des sociétés de philosophie de langue française*): "On two occasions in the 1960s, he [Ricœur] had come to Morocco at my request — I had intended, after attending his lectures during his first year at the Sorbonne, to prepare a thesis under his supervision — to give lectures on topics relating to culture and civilisation, under the auspices of the Association Rives méditerranéennes, chaired by the dean Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi. I recall his interest in the social problems of that country and his insistence on visiting the shanty towns [*bidonvilles*] of Rabat, which lay hidden behind high walls along the coast". Jean Ferrari, "L'engagement associatif de Paul Ricœur", in Moufida Goucha (ed.), *Hommage À Paul Ricœur (1913-2005)*, (Paris: UNESCO, 2006), 124-134, here 128, my translation.

⁸ Lahbabi was the first Moroccan professor of philosophy, appointed at the Mohammed V University in Rabat and the first Arabophone nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Lahbabi and Ricœur most likely met at least one other time, when they participated in one of the Castelli conferences, cf. Enrico Castelli (ed.), *L'analisi del linguaggio teologico. Il nome di Dio*. Atti del Convegno indetto dal Centro Internazionale di Studi Umanistici e dall'Istituto di Studi Filosofici, Roma 5-11 gennaio 1969, *Archivio di Filosofia*, no. 2-3, 1969.

⁹ Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi, *Du clos à l'ouvert: vingt propos sur les cultures nationales et la civilisation humaine* (Casablanca: Dar el Kitab, 1961). Note that part of this book was published in article form well before Ricœur's paper.

¹⁰ I thank Profs. Mohammed Hashas and Abdelhai Azarkan for e-mail responses to my questions relevant to this paragraph. The latter translated Ricœur's *A l'école de la phénoménologie* and *Du texte à l'action* into Arabic.

¹¹ Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts, *Présence de Paul Ricœur* (Tunis: Beït al-Hikma, 2003). The event on which this publication is based was organized by Mohamed Mahjoub, an organizer of several Ricœur conferences, author of several publications on Ricœur and the Arabic translator of *Being, Essence and Substance in Plato and Aristotle* and *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures*. I thank Prof. Mahjoub for providing me with this information in correspondence.

¹² Abdelwahab Bouhdiba was a professor of sociology at the University of Tunis and president of the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts. He too prepared his agrégation in philosophy, in part at the Sorbonne during the time Ricœur was teaching there at the end of the 1950s. The article in question is: Paul Ricœur, "Non-violent Man and His Presence to History" [1949], *History and Truth*. Charles Kelbley (trans.) (Northwestern University Press, 1965), 223-233.

¹³ Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, "Souvenirs", in *Présence de Paul Ricœur*, 5-10, here 8.

1977 under his supervision.¹⁴ Ahmad Hasnawi testifies to Ricœur's paper on linguistic theories and epistemology in 1967 at the Centre culturel Ibn Rashiq in Tunis.¹⁵ Let me also include a reference, from the same volume, to Georges Zenati (also Zainaty), a Palestinian-born Lebanese scholar who started his doctorate with Ricœur in 1960. He later translated several of Ricœur's books into Arabic.¹⁶ But before that, during the mid-1970s, he lectured philosophy at the Zairian philosophy faculty at Lubumbashi and may thus have played a role in Ricœur's reception there.¹⁷ This brings us close to sub-Saharan Africa, to which I turn henceforth.

When exactly Ricœur was first received in sub-Saharan African philosophy, I don't know. The first trace of reference to him I could find is a reference to Ricœur's hermeneutics of symbols in a famous paper, "Conceptual Take-Off Conditions for a Bantu Philosophy", by the Belgian philosopher Franz Crahay, who taught in Zaïre.¹⁸ Jean Ladrière, Jacques Taminiaux and other Belgian philosophers who taught in the Congo/Zaïre, may also have encouraged students to read Ricœur in that region.¹⁹ There are indications that Ricœur's texts had been received at the philosophy faculty in Lubumbashi by the early 1970s by Kinyongo Jeki,²⁰ Tshiamalenga Ntumba,²¹ and Okolo Okonda.²² Besides, there is a proliferation of master's theses and articles on

¹⁴ Fatma Haddad Chamakh, "Témoignage d'une disciple", in *Présence de Paul Ricœur*, 23-30, here 24. She does not describe herself as a Ricœurian philosopher and learned from him especially history of philosophy. Her thèse d'État, submitted at Paris X-Nanterre, was on *Philosophie systématique et système de philosophie politique chez Spinoza* (Tunis: University of Tunis, 1980).

¹⁵ Ahmad Hasnawi, "Hommage à Paul Ricœur", in *Présence de Paul Ricœur*, 55-58, here 55.

¹⁶ As far as I could establish: *Time and Narrative* volume 3, *Oneself as Another* and *Memory, History, Forgetting*. His doctorate, *La bipolarité de la liberté*, was completed at Paris X-Nanterre in 1972.

¹⁷ Some support for this supposition is found in Okolo Okonda's thanks to Zainaty, his former lecturer, in his thesis: *Tradition et destin. Essai sur la philosophie herméneutique de P. Ricœur, M. Heidegger, et H. G. Gadamer* (Lubumbashi: Université nationale du Zaïre, 1978-1979), II.

¹⁸ Franz Crahay, "Conceptual Take-Off Conditions for a Bantu Philosophy", *Diogenes*, no. 13/52 (1965): 55-78, here 66. Even before this date, readers of *Présence Africaine*, may have picked up Ricœur's name in the section announcing publications, the first occurrence of which was in the second edition, in 1948. The first mention of Ricœur in this journal is by the, then, assistant in philosophy at the University of Dakar, Alassane N'Daw, "Peut-on parler d'une Pensée Africaine?" *Présence Africaine*, no. 58 (1966): 32-46, here 40.

¹⁹ Cf. Herman Lodewyckx, who taught hermeneutics Major Seminary in Boma in 1980, drew my attention to this fact. See also Jean Ladrière, "Perspectives sur la philosophie africaine", *Revue africaine de théologie*, no. 5/9 (1981), 57-80, which is a contribution to African philosophy.

²⁰ See his overview: Jean Kinyongo Jeki, "Essai sur la fondation épistémologique d'une philosophie herméneutique en Afrique: le cas de la discursivité", *Présence Africaine*, no. 109/1 (1979), 11-28. His case for hermeneutics is unambiguous: "the hermeneutic model is better suited than any other to the idea of a specifically African philosophy" (19, my translation). Kinyongo credits Hountondji, who taught in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi (1970 to 1974) for having stimulated his colleagues there in reflecting on the nature of African philosophy and more specifically hermeneutics – cf. Kinyongo, "Essai sur la fondation", 12-13n7.

²¹ Tshiamalenga Ntumba, "Qu'est-ce que la 'Philosophie Africaine'?", *Recherches philosophiques africaines. La Philosophie Africaine. Actes de la 1ère Semaine Philosophique de Kinshasa* (Kinshasa: Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1977), 33-46.

²² Setting aside his dissertation for a "licence" in philosophy (1974), see Okolo Okonda, "L'herméneutique chez Paul Ricœur: instances et méthode", in *Cahiers de philosophie africaine*, no. 6 (1974=1976), 33-60.

hermeneutics from that region in the 1970s.²³ Finally, there were also (non-Congolese) African students who had worked with Ricœur: Paulin Hountondji wrote a doctorate on Husserl and Marcien Towa – however, neither made much of Ricœur in their own work.²⁴ A part of Ricœur's reception in Africa was the result of students who, while not having been formally supervised by Ricœur, still had meaningful contact with him during the process of writing their thesis: as testified in the preface of their doctoral thesis by Theophilus Okere and Nkombe Oleko²⁵ – both of whom are important in the history of African philosophical hermeneutics. Other important academics wrote their theses on Ricœur, like Jean-Claude Bayakissa and Léon Matangila.²⁶

From the authors just mentioned, Okere is already somewhat of an “odd one out” in the sense that, as a Nigerian, he represents anglophone Africa. However, here one should not overlook the Belgian connection: Nkombe and Okere wrote their thesis in Leuven; a younger Nigerian

²³ This is based on Alfons Smet, *African Philosophical Bibliography / Bibliographie de la philosophie Africaine / Bibliografie van de afrikaanse wijsbegeerte*, <https://sites.uclouvain.be/sisp/sites/philaf/default.htm> (last updated in 2004).

Not all of the relevant entries in this bibliography have a strong filiation to European hermeneutics – if at all – see for instance Engelbert Mveng, “Introduction à l’herméneutique négro-africaine” [1973], *Le Critique africain et son peuple comme producteur de civilisation* (Yaoundé: Présence Africaine, 1977), 121-134. On Basil-Juléat Fouda, see Jacob Cléophas Defo Nzikou, “La fonction épistémologique de l’herméneutique dans la philosophie africaine. Le cas Basil-Juléat Fouda”, *Le tournant épistémologique de la philosophie africaine. Pratique de la recherche en contexte post-vérité* (forthcoming). And where studies are oriented to European hermeneutics, Gadamer is sometimes the relevant author.

²⁴ We have this information from Hountondji's own account in Paulin Hountondji, “My Experience with Paul Ricœur”, *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, no. 12/1 (2021), 50-59 and *L'idée de science dans les "Prolégomènes" et la première "Recherche logique" de Husserl* (Paris X - Nanterre, 1970).

In Towa's case, the thèse d'État was well underway under the supervision of Lucien Goldman, but when he died, Ricœur stepped in as supervisor to make submission possible. I received confirmation of this information from one of Towa's students, Charles Romain Mbélé. Towa's thesis was entitled, *Identité et transcendance. Examen d'un dilemme de la pensée africaine moderne* (Paris X – Nanterre, 1977) published by L'Harmattan in 2011. A comparative study Towa-Ricœur holds some promise, as can be seen from the issues about political trauma, general anthropology, and national cultures in this book. Towa is also the author of a paper “Idéologies et utopie”, presented at the Conférence internationale de philosophie de Khartoum, 30 October to 3 November 1977. However, despite the apparent proximity to Ricœur's lectures of the mid 1970s, this does not reflect any evident Ricœurian influence – for which reason it may also be worthwhile to examine the relation between Towa and Ricœur on these concepts.

²⁵ Theophilus Okere, *Can there be an African Philosophy? A Hermeneutical Investigation with Special Reference to Igbo Culture* (Leuven: Institut Supérieure de Philosophie, 1971) and Nkombe Oleko, *Métaphore et métonymie dans les symboles parémiologiques. L'intersubjectivité dans les "Proverbes Tetela"* (Kinshasa: Faculté de théologie catholique, [1975] 1979).

²⁶ Jean-Claude Bayakissa, professor emeritus of the Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo; his thèse d'État is *Phénoménologie et herméneutique du temps chez Paul Ricœur* (University of Poitiers, 2003). I obtained this information from prof. Bayakissa at a conference in Kinshasa in 2023. Leon Matangila Musadila, philosopher and former dean of the faculty of human and social sciences at the University of Kinshasa, submitted a thesis *La catégorie de la faute: approche comparative entre la théorie mbala de la République démocratique du Congo et la conception de Paul Ricœur dans Finitude et culpabilité: Philosophie de la volonté 2* (Paris: University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1998) published by L'Harmattan in 2000.

philosopher, Raphael Okechukwu Madu, did so at Louvain-La-Neuve.²⁷ The Congolese scholar Jean Onaotsho Kawende, who did his doctorate in DRC, finished an important publication as visiting researcher in Louvain-La-Neuve.²⁸

In search of another orientation in anglophone Africa, one may wonder whether Ricœur wasn't received in South Africa where the Afrikaans section of the academic community used to be oriented to European philosophy. Indeed, Fanie de Beer completed a D.E.A. in philosophy with Ricœur around 1970 and he was working on Ricœurian themes at the University of Zululand at least from 1981.²⁹ Incidentally, De Beer is also one of the first to teach African philosophy at a South African university. In 1993 the University of Stellenbosch awarded Ricœur an honorary doctorate, but the exact profile of his reception up to that date still has to be reconstructed.³⁰ The first black South African to have had some knowledge of Ricœur, and perhaps the first to take an interest in philosophical hermeneutics, is Walter Ndaba.³¹

²⁷ Raphael Okechukwu Madu, *Hermeneutics. A Study of traditional African Symbols, Proverbs and Mythes on human Destiny in the Light of the hermeneutic Methodology of Paul Ricœur: the Igbo Case* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1990), and the monograph *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths. The Hermeneutics of Destiny* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1992).

Let it at least be mentioned that this Louvanian influence stretched into other non-European directions – consider the Pilipino Leovino Garcia, whose doctorate was *Between responsibility and hope: the meaning of man in Paul Ricœur's 'Philosophy of the Will' and social-political writings* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1981), recently published as *Ricœur's Early Ethical Philosophy: Explorations of Responsibility and Hope* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025).

²⁸ Jean Onaotsho Kawende, *Appartenance et distanciation. De H.G. Gadamer et P. Ricœur à l'herméneutique africaine* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2016). This information was provided to me by Prof. Onaotsho Kawende.

²⁹ Carel Stephanus de Beer, *Hermeneutical philosophy in dialogue with psychoanalysis and structuralism: the renewal of the subject* (KwaDlangezwa: University of Zululand, 1981). The information about De Beer in this paragraph was received from him.

³⁰ I obtained the motivation document, *Motivering vir die toekenning van die graad Doktor in die Wysbegeerte (D. Phil.)*, *Honoris Causa, aan Paul Ricœur*, together with correspondence between the University of Stellenbosch and Ricœur from that university's library archive with the help of Ms. Marleen Hendriksz and Ms. Karlien Breedts. As can be derived from these documents and confirmed to me by Prof. Willie van der Merwe, who helped in drawing up the motivation, this award was prompted more by Ricœur's international academic standing than by his influence on South African philosophers; however, Van der Merwe also testifies to philosophers at the formerly Afrikaans universities studying Ricœur before this date. This contradicts the impression created by information generated by the *Sabinet* journal platform that, from the mid-1970s for twenty years the profile of Ricœur's Afrikaans speaking readers were predominantly theologians, with a few exceptions in literature, law and other sciences, and hardly any reception of Ricœur in South African philosophy during the twentieth century. Lincoln Michell's doctorate was submitted at an Afrikaans university, but was written in English: *The Recourse of Reflection to Symbols: An Evaluative Analysis of Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutical Philosophy* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 1982). A thought-provoking case is Jean-Godefroy Bidima's appraisal of the article by Stellenbosch philosopher Anton van Niekerk, "Beyond the erklären-verstehen dichotomy", *South African-Journal of Philosophy* no. 8/3-4 (1989), 199-213, as a prime example of a South African philosophical appropriation of Ricœur, within the framework of an exposition of *La philosophie négro-africaine* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 35.

³¹ Walter Ndaba, "The Challenge of African Philosophy: A Reply to Mabogo More," *Alternation*, no. 6/1 (1999): 174-192. Ndaba wrote his MA thesis on Gadamer.

Having now given several points of orientation to the historical reception of Ricœur's work in Africa between the 1950s and 1970s, let us come back to Ricœur himself. Apart from his personal engagement with African philosophers through conference presentations, personal discussions or formal supervision, it is worth mentioning here Ricœur's participation in book projects of UNESCO. By writing the Introductions, he explicitly engaged African authors' contributions: Alexis Kagame, Abdelmajid Meziane, Honorat Aguessy, Boubou Hama, Ahmed Hasnaoui, alongside those of other non-European authors.³² The point is not to exaggerate this dimension of his work, but rather not to forget it entirely.

After this historical survey, let me give an impression of how the receptions of Ricœur's writings fit into broader tendencies of (sub-Saharan) African philosophy. Some of them are about Ricœur scholarship. However, much more often, the reception of his work is aimed at something different from, and outside of, his work: the life and times of African authors. In line with my declarations in the introduction above, I consider hermeneutics to start from everyday experiences of understanding and the culturally specific practices of interpretation aimed at enhancing that understanding. These may be documented in many different ways, in different disciplines, today.³³ It is fully understandable that an early generation of university graduates, then professors at post-independence universities, would find stimulation for thinking about the tense relation between severely damaged local forms of culture (remnants of which testified to life before colonization) and the treasure trove of western philosophy they gained access to. Hermeneutics as the study of any symbol, without prejudice about its modernity, made an enormous impact. In fact, while interpretations diverge, some scholars have seen in hermeneutics a significant role as approach to synthesize and stimulate new developments in African philosophy.³⁴ Up to the 1990s the reception of Ricœur in sub-Saharan Africa was almost exclusively a matter of hermeneutics of aspects of culture (symbolic, narrative, metaphoric, religious), very much in line with global reception of his work and most of his own self-presentations. Only more recently have scholars been more interested in Ricœur's practical philosophy.³⁵ However, if one follows what had been written about

³² Paul Ricœur, "Introduction", in *Cultures and Time* (Paris: UNESCO, 1976), 13–33 and "Introduction", in *Time and the Philosophies* (Paris: UNESCO, 1977), 13–30. These authors were not all sub-Saharan and not all philosophers and not specifically hermeneuts. My point is Ricœur's published engagement and that it was, from his side, philosophical. For more bibliographical detail see Ernst Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest. Interpreting the Technicity of Action* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 178. I discussed Ricœur's contribution to these two volumes in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, 208–219.

³³ A decisive reference remains for me Louis Liebenberg, *The Art of Tracking: The Origin of Science* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990).

³⁴ On the disputed place of hermeneutics in African philosophy, see Wolff, *Interpretation for liberation*, 25–41.

³⁵ In line with Abdelwahab Bouhdiba's personal account, above. Some examples of this trend are Vincent Davy Kacou oi Kacou's trilogy: *Penser l'Afrique avec Ricœur* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013), *Paul Ricœur. Le cogito blessé et sa réception africaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014) and *L'herméneutique du soi chez Paul Ricœur. Prolégomènes à une éthique de la reconstruction de l'Afrique* (Paris: Mon Petit Éditeur, 2014) and the theses: Léopold Kalubende, *De la visée éthique chez Paul Ricœur: Une vie bonne dans des institutions justes* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 1997), David-le-Duc Tiaha, *L'Altérité intime du soi. Sur la phénoménologie de l'agir et du pâtre de Paul Ricœur* (Paris:

hermeneutics by African authors, one quickly notices that it is understood as an element of a range of socially relevant responses to a socio-political crisis. Generally, African authors don't need to read books to find instruction about the significance of this fact; but many authors wagered that working in books may increase and enrich their conscious grasp of this fact and the practical demands that this poses on societies. Whence the prevalent association of hermeneutics with continued liberation.³⁶

These historical pointers suffice to guard the reader against expecting from the discussion below something like a first attempt to relate Ricœur and African philosophy. Rather, the material has become so abundant that I do better to focus on the question demarcated in the introduction and in this way to build out this correlation.

2. Philosophy and its practical orientation

The direction in which I want to build out this coordination between the hermeneutic strand of African philosophy broadly conceived and Ricœur's philosophy, is the *close association between hermeneutics, practical philosophy and socio-political practices*. While Ricœur is not always read in this way, I have elsewhere demonstrated the tight linkage between his socio-political concerns of the post-World War II years and the emergence of a series of questions which would gradually blossom as his four-fold contribution to hermeneutics: hermeneutics as reflection on the methodology of history, as the exploration of the meaningful constitution of action (or the dialectics of action and speech), the hermeneutics of symbols and as an ethic of intercultural exchange.³⁷ All of these questionings emerge in Ricœur's thought during the 1950s in correlation with his political concerns of that time and the development of each line could be traced – more or less clearly – throughout his later work.

It is therefore not by some foreign or anachronistic imposition that I focus on a "hermeneutics of the capable and suffering human" as platform for relating the hermeneutic strand of African philosophies with Ricœur's philosophy overall, but it springs from my understanding of a core impetus and motivation of both – a point which I maintain even when realizing that sometimes this line of reflection continues only in a subterranean way in Ricœur's writings. A last qualification about the notes that follow. In a very unbalanced way, I will relate a diverse selection of African authors with one French author, Paul Ricœur. Only the problem statement for the special edition of this journal can justify this procedure. Moreover, the authors I refer to wouldn't all explicitly claim to be hermeneuts, but the formulation of my question does not require this.

EHESS and ICP, 2012), Godefroid Nzila Yaav, *Les conflits sociopolitiques en République Démocratique du Congo: une analyse dans la perspective de Paul Ricœur* (Université Bourgogne Franche-Comté, 2023), Setsoafia Yawo-Nake, *L'éthique de Ricœur face aux circuits de la corruption. L'Église comme « communauté éthique » face à la corruption dans le contexte togolais* (Paris: Institut protestant de théologie, 2023) and most recently: Augustin Mbenga Isola, *La poétique de l'hospitalité dans la réflexion éthique d Paul Ricœur* (Kinshasa: Université Catholique du Congo, 2026). A valuable project would be a comparative study of all these works.

³⁶ And whence the title of my book on African hermeneutics: *Interpretation for liberation*.

³⁷ Cf. Wolff, *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, chapters 4 and 5.

This exploration of the practical orientation of philosophy is divided into three steps designated by –

- (1) the most significant marker of motivation and context, namely the experience of *defeat*,
- (2) the most general designation for the task of philosophy in response to the long-term effects of this experience, namely *conscientization* and
- (3) the correlation of philosophy to the practical responses to this situation, that is, to *action*.

I draw the three-fold structure from prevalent insights from African authors, knowing in advance that I will relate it to Ricœur's hermeneutics of human suffering and capabilities and his practical philosophy broadly conceived.³⁸

3.1. Defeat and self-affirmation

Understanding as an aspect of human existence and practices of interpretation that are shaped by tradition pre-date all European interventions in sub-Saharan Africa. By contrast, the tertiary interpretative practice called "philosophy" – in the form of institutionalization in secondary and tertiary education, lecturing, writing research publications, and conference participation – is an inheritance of colonization and decolonization.³⁹ The difference of origin and modes of practice between all of the aforementioned rational activities creates a tension that defines the starting point for philosophical work in the independence era. It presents African philosophers with a constitutive dilemma as they try to negotiate the fragmentary aftermath of colonization (and slavery before that), while neocolonial practices are still part of the living present.

³⁸ Each approach to a comparison has its limitations. A fine coordination of European and African hermeneutics is Onaotsho Kawende, *Appartenance et distanciation*.

³⁹ For this reason, I will not pose the question here about the status of ethnophilosophy, Egyptian philosophy, Ethiopian philosophy or the cases of William Amo (a Ghanaian freed slave who worked for some time as a philosopher in Germany) or of Placide Tempels (a Belgian missionary whose book on *Bantu Philosophy* was a major impetus to the development of written African philosophy from the middle of the 20th century). For an encompassing view on the early history of African philosophy, see Peter Adamson and Chike Jeffers, *Africana Philosophy from Ancient Egypt to the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025). Nevertheless, let it be granted here that my claim is not simply self-evident, as opinions about the beginnings of African philosophy diverges among African authors. The position I take is close to that of Eboussi-Boulaga for whom the idea of "Western philosophy" is a pleonasm – Fabien Eboussi – Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis: African Authenticity and Philosophy* (Trenton: Africa World, [1977] 2014), 97. This claim does not at all amount to denying rationality to precolonial Africa, but rather accords each specific form of rationality its due. I refuse to follow the idea (which seems to me still a legacy of Placide Tempels), according to which rejecting the purported irrationality of pre-colonial Africans has to pass by declaring their thinking to be "philosophical" – as if "philosophy" is the ultimate stamp of approval of all real thinking. My own view of philosophy is much more modest: I do not see why the intelligence of care or art or discussion or handiwork must be accredited as "philosophical" to salvage them from irrationality.

Ever since Theophilus Okere's pioneering proposal for African philosophy in the form of a hermeneutics,⁴⁰ the development of African philosophy (and hermeneutics in particular) is set against the background of a violently destabilized world:

It means the crisis of traditional religion in confrontation with both Christianity and secularism. It means Africa in metamorphoses—the dramatic change in material circumstances; the upsetting of traditional spiritual values; the moral ferment and ambivalence generated by this upset and the introduction of strange new values; the fact of belonging to the Third World, and the wrong side of the balance of power and wealth in a world dominated by power politics and greed; the crisis of self-respect resulting from the massive foreign invasion into Africa's intimacy, and Black Africa's self-understanding as victim in the context of world racism. All this, and more, would form the legitimate background of an African philosopher.⁴¹

Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga articulates this in even stronger terms by characterizing the initial context of reflection as one of "total defeat".⁴² In such a context, practicing philosophy, as life in general, is motivated by the sheer struggle for survival. This crisis, captured in his title *Muntu in Crisis*, refers to a kind of anchoring truth, and in that sense an "inaugural myth", the "myth of the crisis",⁴³ in other words the core narrative structure within which any grasp of reality and quest for identity has to be set. Accordingly, any philosophical enterprise detached from conscious working on this fact is devoid of meaning.⁴⁴

Okolo Okonda explicitly motivates the turn to hermeneutics in a similar way:

The interest in going to the past is sparked by the current situation: a hermeneutical situation that is at the same time a practical situation. For us it is a question of spiritual and material survival. We feel invaded by a culture that disposes of powerful means to expand and to dominate. We are also among those who are starving and suffering from material deprivation. This situation has been going on for a long time and is still going on.⁴⁵

The crisis that Okolo captures here in a nutshell, can be described further by examining its subjective, existential or psychological side and its objective social, political and economic side.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Evidently the African philosophies preceding Okere's 1971 doctoral thesis, *Can there be an African Philosophy?*, also demonstrate hermeneutic effort and in this sense may be typified as "hermeneutic" in the widest sense. Okere's text is the first I know to have elaborated this explicitly, but the term already plays a role in Basile-Juléat Fouda's thesis *La philosophie négro-africaine de l'existence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, [1967] 2013). I have commented on Okere from this Ricœurian perspective in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, 227-229.

⁴¹ Theophilus Okere, *African Philosophy. A Historico-hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), 121.

⁴² Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 10.

⁴³ Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 116.

⁴⁴ Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 9.

⁴⁵ Okolo Okonda, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement. Recherches d'herméneutique et de praxis africaines* (Kinshasa: Presses universitaires du Zaïre, 1986), 28, my translation.

⁴⁶ Cf. Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 40-41.

Yet, even if we grant that philosophy for African philosophers can and should then be situated in relation to this practical context, the question remains for now open which kind of philosophy that should be. Again, Eboussi-Boulaga articulates the problem in its severest implications when he argues that (European) philosophy “is an attribute of power”,⁴⁷ meaning that, in the way philosophy was transmitted to Africa, it was part of the means by which African modes of living have been violated. For this reason, the recourse to philosophy of any kind in response to the stated problem has nothing evident to it. Let it also be noted that this diagnostic starting point should not be seen as typical of the hermeneutic strand of African philosophy alone,⁴⁸ and the list of adherents to this view can be extended very far if we go outside of philosophy strictly demarcated.

A result of this dilemma is that African philosophy is doubly oriented to the past – to the violent past with its lingering effects in the present, and to a past of a cultural world that was a treasure of living and from which perhaps still something could be salvaged in response to the present predicament. A lot of early post-independence African philosophy is exactly devoted to this question: in the attempt to think through present day problems, how much should philosophers (a) strive to formulate or even recuperate a mode of thinking from before the traumatic historical break and how much should (b) be borrowed from Western philosophers? Those who are often critically called ethnophilosophers place the emphasis on strategy *a*, while others, many of whom had a formal philosophical education in Europe, follow strategy *b*. The ethnophilosophers can easily point the finger at their “professional philosophy” colleagues for simply taking over the dominator’s cultural goods and thereby implicitly consenting to its claims of superiority; the “professional philosophers” can just as easily point the finger at their ethnophilosophical colleagues for interiorizing a colonial anthropological image of a pristine pre-modern cultural essence to be exhibited for the dominator’s pleasure. This dilemma remains part of African philosophical practice to this day, with African hermeneuts typically situating themselves as a possible third position that seeks to combine the best of both options.

Still, whatever position philosophers take, they largely concur that the merits of philosophy are not solely determined by its scientific qualities, its erudition, the appropriateness of its concepts, or the coherence of its arguments, but it depends on the way it is *oriented to the practical situation* created by the trauma of destruction. In Okolo’s words: “Praxis triggers the hermeneutical process and gives it an orientation. Hermeneutics, in turn, offers praxis a cultural self-identification, required for the ideological struggle”.⁴⁹ What Okolo says here for hermeneutics would be affirmed by philosophers of many stripes: one of the core concerns of African philosophy is self-affirmation, in view of mobilizing towards full emancipation (as will be explained in §2.3, below). Correspondingly, the quality of a philosophy is to be measured by the quality of *self-affirmation* it helps to support and where self-affirmation has to be facilitated over the broad span of trauma suffered: social, economic, cultural, epistemological, political, etc. Or, to reformulate it negatively, insofar as philosophy neglects this task or continues feeding into the logic that made

⁴⁷ Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 2.

⁴⁸ For instance, Marcien Towa, “Conclusion”, in *Identité et transcendance*, 337-346.

⁴⁹ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 46.

initial defeat possible, it is to be considered harmful. That is the normative orientation of a philosophical project of which decolonization remains an enduring task.⁵⁰

Nobody thinks that philosophy is the only or even the most important means for self-affirmation. Philosophy is simply too specific a practice for such a broad social need. Indeed, attempts to realize self-affirmation can be traced to the colonial era in the form of minute acts of insubordination,⁵¹ cultural-religious resistance⁵² or political struggle.⁵³ Moreover, the philosophical inclination to retaliate to misrecognition through a strategy of self-justification, can lead to very ambiguous outcomes of extraversion or one-sided essentialization.⁵⁴ Adam Small insightfully controverts this temptation through the resolute refusal of justifying self-affirmation: “We are not there for Whites. We are there. We are. That will be the fact for us: that we ARE”.⁵⁵ But evidently self-affirmation requires some means to stimulate and maintain it. Fanon argued this point by pointing out the different ways in which national culture – where it is not simply destroyed –

⁵⁰ It is not for the sake of joining the most recent trends in social sciences that African philosophy has to adopt a term like “decolonial”. The decolonial thrust is inscribed in its fibre from the beginning, whether this word is used or not. A well-known essay in which the term figures centrally is Kwasi Wiredu, “Toward decolonizing African philosophy and religion”, *African Studies Quarterly*, no. 1/4 (1998): 17–46.

⁵¹ As Diagne discusses with translation in context of colonial administration – cf. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, “Le truchement et le traducteur”, in *De langue à langue. L'Hospitalité de la traduction* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2022), 53–66.

⁵² E.g. Mongameli Mabona, *Diviners and Prophets among the Xhosa (1593–1856). A Study in Xhosa Cultural History* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004).

⁵³ Cf. Saïd Bouamama, *Figures de la révolution africaine. De Kenyatta à Sankara* (Paris: Découverte, 2014).

⁵⁴ See for example Leopold Senghor’s controversial essays, “What the black man contributes” [1939], in Robert Bernasconi and Sybil Cook (eds.), *Race and racism in continental philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 287–302 and “Negritude, as humanism of the twentieth century” [1967], in Roy Grinker, Stephen Lubkemann and Christopher Steiner (eds.), *Perspectives on Africa. A reader in culture, history and representation* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 477–484. Henry Odera Oruka opposes the excesses of this view on a most ironical tone: “What may be a superstition is paraded as ‘African religion’, and the white world is expected to endorse that it is indeed a religion but an African religion. What in all cases is a mythology is paraded as ‘African philosophy’, and again the white culture is expected to endorse that it is indeed a philosophy but an African philosophy. What is in all cases a dictatorship is paraded as ‘African democracy’, and the white culture is again expected to endorse that it is so. And what is clearly a de-development or pseudo-development is described as ‘development’, and again the white world is expected to endorse that it is development — but of course ‘African development’.” (Oruka, “Mythologies as African Philosophy”, *East African Journal*, no. ix/10 (1972), 5–11, here 5).

⁵⁵ Adam Small, “Blackness versus Nihilism” [1971], in Mokgethi Motlhabi (ed.), *Essays on Black Theology* (Johannesburg: Black Theology Project of the University Christian Movement, 1972), 10–16, here 15. Adam Small was the first “other than white” lecturer in philosophy at a South African university. Cf. also Ernst Wolff, “Adam Small’s Shade of Black Consciousness”, in Leonhard Praeg (ed.), *Philosophy on the Border: Decoloniality and the Shudder of the Origin* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2019), 112–147.

can play a significant role in unsettling a habitus of subservience, change the bodily style and gradually invigorate people to stand up and mobilize.⁵⁶

And if this point is accepted, we are steered back to the question of the role that academic practice and philosophy more specifically can play in self-affirmation. Eboussi-Boulaga draws out a wide range of strategies which start out from the institutional given of participating in Western philosophy. First, one can participate, but with irony and even laughter. Then, one can progressively introduce new concerns and new references, the person and context of the author, gradually developing a counter capacity from within philosophy.⁵⁷ What Eboussi-Boulaga calls the deviations (*écarts*) from the inherited or imposed practices, Okolo considered modes of re-takings (*reprises*). In either case, a capacity for “transfunctionalization” (a term from Eboussi-Boulaga) is demonstrated, by which inherited philosophy is steered away from its initial orientation to new purposes, central to which is people’s self-attestation on their own terms.

That such reworkings of inherited disciplines can have a real, cumulative effect, is documented in Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa*. His survey of the history of several Africanist sciences reveals the roots thereof in a colonial matrix and then, from one scholarly generation to another, the “amplification” and other improvisations that indeed reflect what Eboussi and Okolo had in mind with their “deviations” and “re-takings”. Looking back on this scientific history, one is struck by the ambiguity of truth claims about Africa and Africans all along. More specifically, one is struck by the fact that present day scholarship reveals a demonstrable “epistemological filiation” with the matrix from which they developed, but in such a way that they range between continuity with outdated ideas and practices but also include inventions in view of self-affirmation. To give prominence to this shift, Mudimbe advocates an emphasis on the *practices* of sciences – much in line with Eboussi-Boulaga – where the truth-claims of scientists are dealt with only once these discourses have been considered as “signs of something else”.⁵⁸ A hermeneutics of the ambivalent possibilities of these signs, calls for *double critique*: a “positive” critique of the conditions that made certain discourses possible; and a “negative” critique of the socio-political consequences of people acting according to such epistemes.⁵⁹

With this outline in mind, let us turn to Ricœur. It is equally incorrect to make Ricœur into a thinker of total defeat or extreme suffering as it is to deny that this is present in his thinking and

⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon, “Reciprocal Bases of National Culture and the Fight for Freedom”, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 236-248. I have given an exposition of this text and compared it to Ricœur’s views on culture and decolonization in the same period in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, 143-149.

⁵⁷ Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 120: “Attestation is brought about in two manners, [a] by the irruption of other codes, unexpected and incongruous, into the canonical code of philosophy, [b] by the connection and correlation to philosophy of quite different sets of experiences. The first process is metaphor, whereby the repressing meaning of desire makes eruption, the second is metonymy operating deflections signifying that philosophy does not meet the deriving need behind the appeal to it, and it must open up to the totality of the real.” (my numbering).

⁵⁸ Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), ix.

⁵⁹ Similarly, Tsenay Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy. Horizon and Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 119.

plays an important role in his practical philosophy. His early political thinking is born from concerns about violence, torture, political oppression, colonization, racism, poverty and other grotesque social harms; these are relayed in his later work by reflection on the stranger, injustice, fragility, incapability, misrecognition. His reflection about human suffering is motivated by the alleviation of suffering, the promotion of liberation and the improvement of justice. Yet, somehow, when we consider his entire oeuvre, these socio-political concerns seem to take a secondary place in relation to the themes of his big books, so the contemporary reader must do some work to highlight the connections between the different registers in Ricœur's thinking.

Elsewhere I have already shown that colonization and decolonization, and a wide range of issues related to them, played their role in shaping Ricœur's early philosophy. Here I would just like to underscore the compatibility of a concern for "total defeat" with Ricœur's practical philosophy and, more specifically, his hermeneutics of the acting and suffering human. If one takes Ricœur seriously when he presents *Oneself as Another* as a contribution to a "second philosophy"⁶⁰ or practical philosophy, then the grid of capabilities in that book can be used as a *diagnostic instrument* by which to give an account of suffering in many dimensions.⁶¹ But such a diagnostic use of the grid of capabilities requires that the attestation of capabilities is not reduced to making claims about people's capabilities, but is originally understood as the *practical affirmation* of what one is capable of. More precisely, through attestation people can affirm how capable they are, to which degree, how they are obstructed, by which means, and so on, in practice. And this should hold for each "self" – that is, individuals or collectives – in their relations with others who may support or undermine them, within institutions that are at best relatively just, but more often instruments of abuse.⁶²

What the African authors place centre-stage is the political project of attestation as self-affirmation in the face of enormous violence. Such self-affirmation is not foreign to Ricœur, not even the de-colonial aspect thereof is – as can be seen in "Universal Civilization and National Cultures".⁶³

Likewise, some of the African authors, by insisting on the practical embedding of philosophy in a broader political context, foreground the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion, directed at the complicity of academic practice with the powers that be. Moreover, by setting philosophy "into the medium of ethics",⁶⁴ they also insist that philosophy is being *done*, and in this sense belongs to the domain of capabilities – or incapacabilities – to be integrated into a practical philosophy as in *Oneself as Another*. Practical philosophy is both a philosophy about practice *and* a practice of questioning itself as to its own situation within a network of social practices – or about its failures to make a meaningful difference to social harms. It must exercise a double critique (as with Mudimbe, above), aimed both at society and at itself as integrated in social practices.

⁶⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*. Kathleen Blamey (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 59.

⁶¹ Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest*, 256–257.

⁶² Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest*, chapters 3, 4, 5 – with the case studies of chapter 7 and 8.

⁶³ Paul Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures" [1961], *History and Truth*, 271–284.

⁶⁴ Cf. Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 185.

3.2. Conscientization

As became clear from the previous section, the experiences of defeat, when not resulting in genocide or total obliteration, generate the question of self-affirmation in contexts of sustained undermining. One should consider that a lot of such initiatives remain at the level of deploying “weapons of the weak”, which may not have much impact on social reality or the structures of oppression. However, here I want to consider the very specific form this question takes on when we consider the relative freedom enjoyed by those who are tasked to write and teach philosophy. I focus more on the work done by hermeneuts or what is of immediate relevance for interpretative approaches in philosophy and the social sciences. I do so, while maintaining my line of inquiry, in which the practical aspiration of philosophy is foregrounded. My thesis is that, from this perspective, hermeneutics could be ordered among the *human practices by which to augment and change people’s awareness of their practical surroundings*. This “awareness” was a recurrent point in Ricœur’s early thinking – the “*prise de conscience*”⁶⁵ serving ideally as a conduit from insufficient awareness about, or undergoing, circumstances to taking action. In a similar way, African hermeneuts or hermeneutically-oriented authors present their work as means to “conscientize” others, whether they use that word or not.⁶⁶

If philosophizing in an interpretative way is the *how* of conscientizing, where should we look for the *what*? African philosophers’ responses to this question fan out in a host of objects of study and methodologies. Suffice for present purposes to give a view of them.

A first series of responses focusses on *history* and the light it may shed on the present. Cheikh Anta Diop set the tone for this kind of work, by reframing the cultural production of the whole African continent with reference to Ancient Egypt, but he also strove to sensitize his readers to the contemporary issues of prime practical importance, in a way social analysts or political scientists would do.⁶⁷ Akin to this approach is Sofie Oluwolé’s attempt to recognize an ancient African tradition of thought – that of Orunmila – and to use it in a productive dialogue with the tradition issued from Socrates to stimulate reflection on contemporary issues.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ For example: Paul Ricœur, “The Question of the Colonies”, Ernst Wolff (trans.) *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, no. 12/1 (2021): 26–30, here 28, Ricœur, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History” [1953], *History and Truth*, 21–40, here 32, “Vraie et fausse paix” [1955], *Autres Temps*, no. 76–77 (2003): 51–65, here 58, Ricœur, “The Political Paradox” [1957], *History and Truth*, 247–270, here 252, Ricœur, *Fallible Man*. Charles Kelbley (trans.) (New York: Fordham University Press, [1960] 1986), xlviii, Ricœur, “From Nation to Humanity: Task of Christians” [1965], Hoke Robinson (trans.), in *Political and Social Essays* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 134–159, here 137.

⁶⁶ I have developed this point in relation to Ricœur in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, 251–252. My reflections about the dilemma regarding who conscientizes whom, and under which practical circumstances, apply here as well.

⁶⁷ This trajectory can be traced in the essays collected as Cheikh Anta Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in African Culture & Development, 1946–1960*. Egbuna P. Modum (trans.) (London: Karnak House, 1996).

⁶⁸ Sophie Oluwolé, *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy* (Lagos, Nigeria: ARK Publishers, [2014] 2017). On Anta Diop and Oluwolé, see Wolff, *Interpretation for Liberation*, chapter 5.

This is already close to another set of approaches by which the *deposits of cultural heritage* are systematized and offered for philosophical reflection. This was the terrain of ethnophilosophers, but it has been occupied in different ways by several hermeneuts as their basis for reflection. Thus a lot of work has been done on proverbs and metaphors⁶⁹ or a broader series of linguistic heritage.⁷⁰ Correspondingly, oral culture receives a lot of attention.⁷¹ Some scholars identify the modern novel and literature as a mode of African philosophy in itself.⁷² Others adopt a more anthropological perspective on general aspects of traditional culture.⁷³ On the whole, Okere sees in traditional culture elements which, without being philosophical in themselves, lend themselves to philosophical reflection and merit being called “*philosophemes*”. This term is a keystone to a hermeneutic understanding of traditional culture: it grants ethnophilosophy the stimulating potential that cultural heritage may exercise on reflection, while avoiding reducing that heritage to a waiting-room status, as if it were in need of redemption by philosophy.

A different but still historically-oriented set of approaches focus more on the nexus of *transmission and improvisation* that could be traced over long periods of time, even through the most difficult times of recent history. This is the case with Taiwo’s history of modernity in Africa before colonization or Diagne’s reflection on “translation” as the perpetual transfer and reinterpretation of cultural goods into new cultural spheres.⁷⁴

A last set of objects for interpretative enquiry is *action and practices*. This holds, even while embodied action to some extent shares the characteristic of dancing, music or art, in that they don’t easily lend themselves to being transcribed into claims – a fact I try to capture in this article with the idea of *practical* attestation. As examples of such attention to action, one may think of how Eboussi-Boulaga made the philosophical practice of his contemporaries to an object of interpretation, as mentioned above.⁷⁵ We also saw that “praxis” guides Okolo’s hermeneutics.

⁶⁹ E.g. Nkombe, *Métaphore et métonymie dans les symboles parémiologiques* and a critical response to Nkombe by Okolo, “Le poète, le sage et le philosophe”, in *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 13-23.

⁷⁰ Madu, *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*.

⁷¹ Okolo Okonda and Ngangala Balade Tongamba. Introduction à l’histoire des idées dans le contexte de l’oralité. Théorie et méthode avec application sur l’Afrique traditionnelle (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-L’Harmattan, 2018) and David-Le-Duc Tiaha, “Décoloniser l’herméneutique”, in Collège international de philosophie, *Programme février-juillet 2026* (Paris, 2026), 16-18.

⁷² Cf. Henry Odera Orika, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), xxi, where written literature is presented as one of six trends in African philosophy. Stanley Uche Anozie, *Hans-Georg Gadamer and African Hermeneutic Philosophy* (Chisinau: Generis Publishing, 2020) attributes a central role to novelist Chinua Achebe as an African hermeneut. Finally, African hermeneuts also incorporate commentary on novels to their philosophical arguments – cf. Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement* (using Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le devoir de la violence*) and Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* (using Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s novel, *L’Aventure ambiguë*).

⁷³ As was Okere’s initial orientation to Igbo culture in his thesis: Okere, *Can there Be an African Philosophy?*

⁷⁴ Olúfémi Táíwò, *How Colonialism Pre-empted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) and Diagne, *De langue à langue*.

⁷⁵ This is the theme of my interpretation of *Muntu in Crisis* in Ernst Wolff, “Working under cover. Eboussi-Boulaga and the practice of social critique”, *Philosophy in the Shadow of Racism. Critique, Interpretation and Practice* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2026, forthcoming), chapter 2.

Tsenay Serequeberhan's contribution to African hermeneutics is centred in his focus on action (as will be commented on in §3.3, below). As concerned with action, hermeneutics and interpretative social scientific work in the African context tends to open very spontaneously to political reflection – in a way that cannot be said of all European hermeneutists.⁷⁶

This list is certainly not exhaustive.⁷⁷ The point is that African culture in the widest sense, past and present, is an important matter for reflection. All of these authors understand the phenomena they study as historical, but most strive to understand them as part of a living, changing reality. In fact, they often explicitly oppose a colonial cultural politics of “socio-cryonics”.⁷⁸ Yet, there is a tendency to value past cultural expressions more than present-day ones, with a strange effect of devaluing ambient culture today.

Studying this range of scholarly offerings, one notices the deployment of a *core set of concepts*, by which the authors explore the place and potential of this heritage in the context of today: tradition, transmission, culture, language, meaning, appropriation, authenticity, art, innovation, understanding, discourse, horizon, identity, interpretation, writing, orality, practice, etc. – always in proximity to more critical notions like ideology, power, colonization, exploitation, liberation, etc. These concepts each represent a philosophical problem and go a long way to demarcate the core concerns of African philosophical hermeneutics and African philosophy generally. Evidently, it would not be possible to survey the variations of approach and coordination even of the primary authors. Allow me just to render the overarching view of Okolo Okonda's hermeneutics as an example.

Above I already mentioned that for Okolo the critical state of contemporary living in African countries represents the context and impetus for philosophical reflection. The crisis is itself a “hermeneutic situation”.⁷⁹ To play its part in confronting this crisis as a practical problem, Okolo advocates a philosophy that is structured around three core concepts: tradition, hermeneutics and praxis. Setting praxis aside for the next section, let us look at the intertwinement of the two other concepts. Tradition is the whole of cultural deposits of a group of people and includes both material and spiritual aspects,⁸⁰ which belong to everybody and no one in particular. These deposits are to be dealt with as text-like phenomena which hermeneutics is tasked to “read” in the widest sense of understanding, interpreting and reappropriating or applying.⁸¹

How tradition and hermeneutics fit together, can be derived from three major propositions that structure Okolo's discussion:

⁷⁶ I draw two lessons from Francisco Díez Fischer's book on Gadamer, *La política cuestionada: Hans-Georg Gadamer y el arte de la pregunta* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2024): it confirms the rather a-political nature of Gadamer's own thinking, but one should not exclude its possible value for political philosophy.

⁷⁷ I have not touched upon the hermeneutics of religion, ritual or art.

⁷⁸ Táíwò, “Introduction. Of Subjectivity and Sociocryonics”, in *How Colonialism Pre-empted Modernity in Africa*, 1-17. Similarly Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁷⁹ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 46.

⁸⁰ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 56.

⁸¹ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 37.

1. Every theory of reading presupposes a theory of text and vice versa.
2. Every reading is oriented towards some kind of appropriation or re-taking [*reprise*].
3. Every reading and every appropriation is determined by a worldview of the subject who reads and appropriates.⁸²

The net effect of these three propositions is to portray tradition equally as something to be *discovered* and to be *re-invented*.⁸³ It may be a heritage of the past, but it exists as cultural tradition only in the ways in which it is re-activated in the present.⁸⁴ Consequently, culture is seen as constantly moving, dynamic, unstable – but may also be artificially stabilized or destabilized – open to reshaping and mutual contradiction between opposing appropriations.⁸⁵ Without letting culture evaporate (the material aspect of culture makes this difficult) this is an anti-essentialist view of culture (and therefore opposed to ideas of cultural unanimity). It is a view on cultural life that takes the specific context and living circumstances of people seriously, while opening to the practical question of a different, better, future. There is nothing frivolous about these variations of interpretation, because in those re-takings of tradition the quality of life of people is at stake: re-taking culture has the ambiguous potential as self-affirmation of identity or smothering ideology.⁸⁶ In short, no element of culture is simply unambiguously given, but all are rather up for dispute. While Okolo reserves an important place to agency in appropriation, he is equally conscious of the fact that people live out of the cumulative effect of socially shaped appropriations, which he sometimes calls worldviews, which have enhancing or constraining effects on people's real-life conditions and thus their flexibility in re-taking.

As elements of tradition, cultural heritages of all kinds are “multidimensional”,⁸⁷ in that they can be interpreted in different “registers” (aesthetic, religious, metaphysical, juridical, political, etc.), in other words, according to their nature, but also according to the divergent practical demands of each context of action. That this leads to different readings is not a loss, but part of the reality of interpretation as embedded in different social practices. Thus, Okolo's insistence on the plurality of meanings again contradicts common sense or substantialist views of the meaning and significance of culture.⁸⁸ Moreover, this raises also the question about people's orientation to the heritage of other cultures: either under constraint or by free, creative appropriation. Philosophical hermeneutics is not tasked to arbitrate the final meaning, but to clarify the complexities and stakes involved in interpreting and may have to engage with sciences to help in this task.⁸⁹ Two sciences are of particular importance to Okolo: history – a hermeneutic science – and an economic science, development studies, which is an ambiguous partner in the practical

⁸² Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 33, 42 and 45 (my translation).

⁸³ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 26.

⁸⁴ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 92; Okolo explicitly draws this point from Mudimbe.

⁸⁵ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 53.

⁸⁶ This can slip even into hermeneutics. I have demonstrated, for instance, how Okere struggled with a more traditionalist view of culture and a contextual view of culture, which is closer to the one advocated by Okolo – cf. Wolff, *Interpretation for liberation*, 66–71.

⁸⁷ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 36.

⁸⁸ A similar point is developed in relation to the restitution of works of art by Diagne, *De langue à langue*.

⁸⁹ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 78.

quest hermeneutics is tasked to serve. One of the means to clarify the ambiguity of development is to highlight the contradictory findings offered on the improvement of people's well-being in history and economics.

Looking back at all the objects of hermeneutic concern for African philosophers, we can again re-insert the *what* into the *how*. Whatever the dimension of historical or present trauma – economic, societal, symbolic, cultural, epistemological, political – the varieties of hermeneutics adopt a double critical task: unmasking the destructive and oppressive realities in all their dimensions and excavating the meaning and potential of all the domains studied (similar to Mudimbe's double critique in §3.1) Whatever is studied, the intention is not to remain within the bounds of an academic practice, but to prepare re-entry into the world, now better equipped. In this sense, philosophy is a work of "permanent self-education".⁹⁰ This happens through interpretative clarification, but also with experiments on what could be practiced elsewhere in social reality. Combined, these two undertakings present conscientization through philosophy as a self-education in practical self-attestation, where philosophical practices serve as a "miniature schematization of a protocol of action".⁹¹ What Eboussi-Boulaga says for philosophical practice should be transposable to practices in other domains of culture and society.⁹² And what he presents as a modest act of self-education has to serve a broader, collective pedagogy or conscientization as part of the training for action to be assumed.

Let us turn from this perspective on philosophical conscientizations in African thinking to Ricœur again. Undoubtedly, Ricœur's *Symbolism of Evil* gave substantial impetus to hermeneutics in a wide series of domains. His readers outside of France were quick to pick up on the stimulating implications of his argument for the idea that "symbols give rise to thought." Although not developed in detail, Ricœur from the beginning understood that this approach to hermeneutics had intercultural implications.⁹³ And this point is amplified when linked with the text on the value of non-European cultures for a decolonized geopolitics, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures".⁹⁴ In Africa, these implications were received in divergent ways, spanning from modest exegesis on texts, to more ambitious projects of interpretation of African cultural elements considered as symbols or symbol equivalents, and very ambitious projects of the development of hermeneutics as a distinct strand of African philosophy. This is evidently not to reduce African hermeneutics to a reception of Ricœur – first, because hermeneutics is originally rooted in human

⁹⁰ Eboussi-Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 184.

⁹¹ Eboussi-Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 149.

⁹² Cf. Eboussi-Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 9.

⁹³ Cf. Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*. Emerson Buchanan (trans.) (Boston: Beacon Press, [1960] 1969), 19-24 and his hermeneutics of symbols redeployed in his introductions to *Cultures and Time* and to *Time and the Philosophies*.

⁹⁴ Setting aside authors like Okere or Okolo whose work included substantial commentary on Ricœur, see for instance Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 19-21, Ndaba, "The Challenge of African Philosophy", 183, Tshiamalenga Ntumba, "Qu'est-ce que la 'Philosophie Africaine'?", 39, Monga Oliga Mbambi, "L'approche herméneutique de la philosophie Africaine", *Recherches Philosophiques Africaines (Mélanges de philosophie Africaine)*, no. 3 (1978), 71-83.

experience since times immemorial (as noted above) and, second, not all African hermeneuts used Ricœur as their prime European reference.⁹⁵

These authors testify to the value of the meta-practice of interpretation which is philosophical hermeneutics. As I have illustrated with the example of Okolo (and anticipated in §3.1) hermeneutics is understood to be in the service of self-affirming socio-political initiatives. Should one focus only on a book like *The Living Metaphor*, one may get the impression that this is different from Ricœur. However, whoever has read his earliest texts will know how important “prise de conscience” – the effort to increase one’s aware grasp of a practical context – was for him (as it was for some of his African contemporaries⁹⁶). For Ricœur, one may well be attentive to the surrounding world, but this often is a rather naïve or uninformed consciousness. In several ways, he points to the need to grasp the same reality afresh after a critical detour. Calling this new grasp “second naivety” is an unfortunate choice of words, if it is not simply an incorrect conclusion.⁹⁷ This becomes clear as soon as one considers the fact that this renewed grasp henceforth knows itself to be relativized in a conflict of interpretations and to be constituted by an amplified awareness of the stakes of assuming one’s position, an awareness which can be amplified still further by detours of distantiated explanation.⁹⁸ The aim of renewing one’s initial grasp is therefore neither to find peace despite challenges, nor to reach detached indifference, but to cultivate an “informed sympathy”,⁹⁹ which is another way of saying intensified, critically-tested commitment. Following such a procedure is already a good way on the road to understanding conscientization. And if this is accepted, then we have found a sense in which conscientization is a common concern for Ricœur and for the African hermeneuts.

⁹⁵ Very notably, Serequeberhan makes use of Heidegger and Gadamer.

⁹⁶ Cf. especially Anta Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance*, 47-49.

⁹⁷ Usually associated with Ricœur’s philosophy of religion, this figure of thought is older and used more widely in Ricœur’s writings. See for instance on guilt: “Guilt is a feeling: the feeling passes from naivety to maturity by passing through *distinctions*”, Paul Ricœur, “La culpabilité allemande” [1949], “La culpabilité allemande.” *Lectures 1. Autour du politique*. Paris: Seuil, 1991), 143-154, here 146. Or on the philosophy of history: “Reasoned analysis is a kind of methodical step between an uncultivated and an educated sympathy”, Ricœur, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History”, 29. Or again in dialogue with philosophers from other cultures: “Is not the remedy, however, implicit in the ill? Was it not necessary that modernity would estrange us from our very roots in order that, transcending the rift created by critical scrutiny, we might once again draw near, in a second, post-critical ‘innocence’ [*naïveté*], both to what was farthest from us and to what was nearest to us? Equally estranged from things near and far, can we not find our way back to both thanks to the fact that the scientific revolution has created this equal distance between us and all traditional cultures?” Ricœur, “Introduction”, in *Cultures and Time*, 32.

⁹⁸ This view of a renewed awareness is in line with Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*. Denis Savage (trans.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1965] 1970), 42 and 46.

⁹⁹ This may have been the reason why Ricœur considered philosophy as such to be congenial with efforts of political liberation, as he maintained in his discussion with Dussel. Developing this point explicitly, with means already present in his work, would have gone a long way to convince his interlocutor. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “Philosophy and Liberation”, in Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricœur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation*. Eduardo Mendieta (trans.) (New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1996), 205-212 and Ernst Wolff, “Filosofia da libertação versus hermenêutica? O ‘debate’ Dussel-Ricœur e seu significado contemporâneo”, in Roberto Lauxen, Cristina Henrique da Costa, Andrés Bruzzone (eds.), *Paul Ricœur: Identidade e Hermenêutica Crítica* (São Paulo: Alameda, 2025), 61-88.

The more this understanding of hermeneutics as conscientization is accepted to be, the more difficult it becomes to reduce Ricœur's hermeneutics of symbols, metaphors, narratives, or even social imaginary and human capabilities, to their "cultural" dimension and the more natural it becomes to enquire about their practical embedding. Additionally, taking seriously the insistence with which African hermeneuts grapple with this potential of hermeneutics can only invigorate the question about how to redeploy such tasks of hermeneutics to practical aims. I do not say that all philosophers have to become political philosophers. However, the practical orientation of African philosophy now becomes a constant reminder or questioning when we engage in studious detours: wherein resides our ultimate motivation for such enquiry? From this perspective, we can reconfigure Ricœur's life-work and ask what the potential of each part is, still in the spirit of the marvellous essay "Work and the Word":¹⁰⁰ whatever one may think of Ricœur's conclusions in this article, it remains rich in instruction about how to undertake hermeneutic detours *in view of practice*.

The next interesting domain of correspondence and difference between Ricœur and the African hermeneuts is their thematic focus. One notices how themes like proverbs and oral culture more generally have received attention hardly present in Ricœur's work. On the other hand, Ricœur's philosophy of history and historiography has received comparatively little attention by African scholars. Overall, there is much room left for reflection on traditionality, the creative work on traditions and the imposition of tradition – all of which may require a politics of "deviations" or "reprise".¹⁰¹ Here I have in mind the need for a full phenomenology of the powerful relations that make some people into authors and others readers; accords to some the space to invent and requires of others to repeat or mimic; that archives, studies and appropriates some cultural elements while relegating others to oblivion or to exoticist celebrations, and so forth.

To avoid succumbing to the temptation of thinking "Ricœur for Europe and African philosophy for Africans," it is worth recalling an old lesson of Ricœur's: "I have only one way of getting out of myself: it is to disorient myself in others"¹⁰² or again, "one does not know oneself, [...] one has to go by way of the detour of others, always valuing the detour of critique".¹⁰³ This is very well illustrated in African authors in that their concerted efforts to think about African identity (or identities) always have implications for their view on Europe; likewise, thinking about Europe has to have a knock-on effect on their understanding of themselves, increasingly so as the divergent peaceful and violent ties between the two continents intensifies. A glowing example of this relation of mutual implication is Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* which, while dealing with scholarship on everything African, can proceed only by means of theorizing Europe and, in a sense befitting

¹⁰⁰ Paul Ricœur, "Work and the Word" [1953], in *History and Truth*, 197–219.

¹⁰¹ In *Interpretation for Liberation*, I discussed the importance of retaking (*reprise*) for Okolo. In an early article he explicitly credits Ricœur for this term: Okonda, "L'herméneutique chez Paul Ricœur: instances et méthode", especially 44–49.

¹⁰² Paul Ricœur, "The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth" [1953], *History and Truth*, 41–56, here 51 (translation modified).

¹⁰³ Paul Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction*. Kathleen Blamey (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, [1995] 1998), 33.

his own theory, contributes to the invention of Europe.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, in Eboussi-Boulaga's view, the work of transfunctionalizing philosophy, has effects on the way traditional culture (and not just Western philosophy) is reconceived and reappropriated.

Once this point is properly grasped, it becomes clear how much is at stake in the backward-looking side of African philosophy. The orientation contains a highly *ambiguous political potential*. Hountondji captured the negative potential in a famous passage:

At a time when the gap between oppressor and oppressed is widening throughout our continent and political differences are becoming more radical, the ethnophilosopher claims that we have always been, still are and always will be unanimous. On every side we see terror tightening its stranglehold on us [...]; every word spoken spells danger and exposes us to untold brutality and may even cost us our lives; insolent neocolonial state apparatuses parade in triumph, leaving a trail of intimidation, arbitrary arrest, torture and legal assassination and poisoning genuine thought at its source. And the official ideologue smiles, content, and declares: "Alleluia, our ancestors have thought!"¹⁰⁵

Yet, that doesn't mean that the creative reappropriation of cultural heritage is devoid of progressive potential. The real motivation of this reappropriation remains a progressive self-affirmation, the essence of which Fanon captures: "Some have been surprised by the passion invested by the colonised intellectuals in their defence of a national culture. But those who consider this passion exaggerated are strangely apt to forget that their own psyche, their ego, are conveniently safeguarded by a French or German culture which has proved itself and which nobody disputes".¹⁰⁶

Between these two potentials lies a whole world of more or less violent economic and political reworkings of the material of interpretation and the processes by which they are critiqued and re-appropriated. In fact, one should never forget that the prime instigation of "defamiliarization" or "distantiation" for African philosophers, is the radically violent interference with the familiar lifeworld, dealt with in §3.1 and to which I return below.

3.3. Action

Following my objective to examine intersections of African hermeneutics and Ricœur's thinking with attention to the practical orientation of philosophy, I have taken the lead from African authors who start out from a history of trauma (§3.1). Then, I have looked at a wide range of human matters that can serve as the mirror in which to reflect oneself¹⁰⁷ and to reconsider how to reengage in social life (§3.2). In this last step, I have temporarily underplayed the importance of action. For African hermeneuts, as for Ricœur, action is of course matter for interpretation and, as

¹⁰⁴ Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 171: "This critical reading of the Western experience is simultaneously a way of 'inventing' a foreign tradition in order to master its techniques and an ambiguous strategy for implementing alterity".

¹⁰⁵ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1976] 1983), 170.

¹⁰⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 209.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action*. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (trans.) (London: The Athlone Press, [1986] 1991), 32.

such, has its place in the previous section. By contrast, what I would like to focus on now is initiative, as that which the conscientization by hermeneutic work strives to reinvigorate, set off or inform. That hermeneutics may lead up to a reflection on initiative should not come as a surprise to anybody who has seen that the three volumes of Ricœur's *Time and Narrative* end on a meditation on initiative.¹⁰⁸ However, in this work, Ricœur does not develop in very concrete detail how individuals and groups set out from spaces of experience and project themselves in action to horizons of expectation. In comparison, *Oneself as Another* is more practical, as it is focused on capabilities as constitutive of human agents and opens to the dilemmas of prudential action in context.

Action appears in many different guises in African philosophy and hermeneutics in particular – from the smallest inception of protest (as we saw with Eboussi-Boulaga above) to long-term shifting academic tendencies (as we saw with Mudimbe and Diagne above).¹⁰⁹ But the idea is not to restrict initiative to what academics can do. Okolo, for instance, considers hermeneutics merely as a means to grasp the present crisis, while reserving the term “praxis” for human action in as far as it is aimed at responding properly to crisis. Such responses should be informed by a creative combination of elements from tradition and insights from science, but find their realization only in a wider social project he calls “development”.

But I find the most radical attempt to think about action in Tsenay Serequeberhan, whose whork I would like to use as example here. Serequeberhan's point of departure is the simple claim that human beings are understanding and interpreting beings because of their temporality and historicity, violence against which leads to their de-humanization.¹¹⁰ Neglecting this fact will have a domino effect that may reduce the complex, actional meanings of human existence. This deficiency plays itself out as a lack of hermeneutic sensitivity, instantiated in either an internalized or an extroverted Euro-normativity. These deficiencies are instantiated in philosophy (ethnophilosophy and “professional philosophy” respectively) and in politics (as Serequeberhan identifies with Senghor and Nkrumah respectively) and where the philosophical and political versions are not only mirroring each other, but are often “correlated”.¹¹¹ Space does not allow me to unpack this claim in the detail it deserves, but it helps to establish two major beacons of his thinking: first, disastrous politics can be diagnosed not only on political terms, but also on existential-hermeneutic terms; second, inversely, seeking to remedy the consequences of political disasters – colonization and its aftermath, but also those created by post-independence leaders – requires a proper understanding of human existence and what it entails. It is this political situation that requires and legitimates reflection on human temporality and historicity. If the starting position is that of dehumanization, then reflection on historicity is not only a means by which to theorize that dehumanization, but also an approach to searching what re-humanized humanity

¹⁰⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative 3. Narrated Time*. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1985] 1988), 208, 230-235, 257-259 and Ricœur, “Initiative”, *From Text to Action*, 208-222.

¹⁰⁹ But also in Okere, *African Philosophy*, 128: “This self-interpretation which is also a self-assertion, is no doubt the best way to restore self-confidence to a humiliated culture”.

¹¹⁰ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 20.

¹¹¹ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 32 (for the full discussion, cf. 31-54) and Wolff, *Interpretation for Liberation*, 89-95.

must be and the means to bring about rehumanization. In more concrete terms, human historicity is nothing else than *agency and the capability to exercise it in a humane way*. What makes a reflection on agency a contribution to African philosophy is the specific profile of the situatedness of those who have a “shared destiny”¹¹² because of the similar dehumanization they suffered and the corresponding requirements to remedy this situation.¹¹³

For Serequeberhan, the core reality and normative measure is thus the striving towards a rehumanized living within a given socio-political horizon. “Striving” means: not yet realized, in other words, recognizing the tension between what is actually given and what has to be realized ideally. For this reason, the horizon within which people with a shared destiny think and act is a composite of “autochthonous tradition and [a] history of politico-economic struggles interior to itself [in this case, Africa]”.¹¹⁴ The hermeneutic work, in writing and in political initiative consists of constantly examining this composite to identify which aspects allow for reclaiming agency and which aspects impede this. Or in a formula derived from Cabral, people understand their world of practice in as much as they “return to the source” of human existence, which is autonomous action.¹¹⁵

Accordingly, to philosophize is coextensive with the aspiration to act in freedom – either to promote or to frustrate this aspiration and, in a sense similar to what Eboussi-Boulaga argued for, philosophy has significance only insofar as it makes a positive contribution to this aspiration. Philosophy can do so by furthering the interpretation of the context of action. Such work of *stocktaking*¹¹⁶ would lay bare the violent constitution of the present practical context, with which those directly concerned are already familiar in practice. Philosophy would then also have to play its part in reflecting on the means, even radical means required to lead people back to the source of agency – reflection which is already part of people’s emancipatory undertakings. In this way the view of hermeneutics is opened between the extremes of *violence suffered* and the question of *counter-violence*. This fact accounts for the importance Serequeberhan attaches to authors like Fanon and Cabral, as hermeneuts. Moreover, integrating the modes of thinking of people who were intimately familiar with the difficult demands of emancipatory practice, demonstrates again the permeability of a hermeneutics of action and human agency to real-life politics.

While violence and counter violence represent the scope of actional conditions – let us say between vulnerable passivity and powerful initiative – Serequeberhan has some view of the general direction in which strategic action should steer. Somehow action should reckon with the possibilities of a fusion of horizons (Serequeberhan’s own borrowing from Gadamer) and a plural, planetary humanity. One could, of course, insist a hundred times over that the devil is in the detail or object that Serequeberhan remains too vague on what is meant by violence, counter violence, the analysis of post-colonial situations, etc. But each time this objection would itself confirm Serequeberhan’s insistence on the political stretch of hermeneutics and progressive collective action’s dependence on interpretations.

¹¹² Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 136n5.

¹¹³ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 37.

¹¹⁵ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 90, 102.

¹¹⁶ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 13.

If we want to envision coordinating Ricœur's philosophy with this practical inclination of hermeneutics, we have to take seriously a line of reflection that traverses it, from the question of raising awareness to the practical attestation of capabilities.¹¹⁷ Once this is done, it becomes natural to consider his hermeneutics as integrated into practical philosophy, and the doing of practical philosophy itself integrated into the range of practices of the acting and suffering human. In fact, it gives to thought that practices – therefore also the practice of doing philosophy – are fitted into the capability of narration,¹¹⁸ itself embedded in the normative conflicts of ethics, morality and prudence – conflicts which have their burning *urgency only as part of human existence* (and not merely as sets of ideas).

Serequeberhan's view of emancipation places the striving for rehumanization and the return to the source of agency at the centre; likewise, Ricœur's practical philosophy centres the desire for the good life and the legitimate political will of the people. Within this orientation, Ricœur's philosophy of action is an excellent instrument by which to map the variegated dimensions of human action, ranging between forms of embodied suffering and situated capabilities. Moreover, this orientation remains responsive to a primordial *normative commitment*, which echoes that of Serequeberhan: if our respect for human life is ultimately rooted in people's capacity to act,¹¹⁹ then it follows that Ricœur's hermeneutic anthropology entails a normative commitment that seeks to be realized in practice. Here hermeneutics' role is supportive in deciphering how the capacity to act can be generated and supported by life together in a society; or, to the contrary, assessing how living with others and within unjust institutions undermines this capacity. While it is true to see in the state people's ability to act a familiarity with their practical lifeworld, a familiarity without which there can be no attestation to capabilities or incapacities, it is equally true that distancing from that familiarity may augment one's understanding of the condition of one's capabilities. Such distancing can be imposed by violent circumstances, a fact about which Ricœur was very well aware.¹²⁰ But affirmations regarding the ability to act (who does what? when? to which degree? by which means? under which constraints? etc.) is only something done subsequently in studious reflection; primary remains the *practical attestation* – that which people are capable of as they aspire to the good life individually and collectively. Conscientization does not aim at theory, but at decisions in practice. And thus, we come back, by Ricœurian means,

¹¹⁷ Sometimes Ricœur acknowledges this practical or even actional stretch of his oeuvre as in the "Préface" he wrote for Maurizio Chiodi, *Il cammino della libertà. Fenomenologia, ermeneutica, ontologia della libertà nella ricerca filosofica di Paul Ricœur* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1990), ix-xix. However, in many of his other self-presentations, the political dimension of his thinking is rather neglected. To this tendency Ricœur's *Critique and Conviction* is rather an exception. Approaching initiative from an action theoretical perspective does not bypass the extreme difficulties and ambiguities that make up the political risks of action – cf. Ernst Wolff, "Utilitarianism as an Exercise of Suspicion?: A Challenge to Pragmatism and Hermeneutics" *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* no. XIV/1 (2022).

¹¹⁸ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 152-161.

¹¹⁹ This is the implication of Ricœur's claim that it is people's capabilities to act that ultimately solicit our respect, see Paul Ricœur, "L'expérience psychologique de la liberté", *Le Semeur*, no. 46/6-7 (1947-1948): 444-451, here, 445, Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 181 and Paul Ricœur, *Lectures 1: Autour du politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 164.

¹²⁰ As, for instance, already in Ricœur, "Non-violent Man and His Presence to History".

to the constitutive feature of African hermeneutics and a host of proposals in practical philosophy from the African continent.

In fact, one may even ask what the significance is of Ricœur's incomplete return to practical philosophy in his later writings. My point is certainly not that there is a problem in focusing on the epistemology of history or religious language, etc. But his hermeneutic trajectory itself requires completion in a direction of a poetics of the will (or whichever name we want to give that practical philosophy), announced in his early writings, when Ricœur still affirmed: "I would therefore like to make a case for a philosophy in which political reflection is not an optional detour, but a preferred mode of expression—or rather, an essential part of the process."¹²¹ The African authors rightfully point to this. Moreover, they indicate several ways in which to make philosophy productive today, by focusing on histories and contemporary realities of the violent restriction of the capabilities to act. Their work provides material for describing the complex *prefigurations* of intersecting facilitations and constraints which constitute individual and group agency in all contexts; they could equally help in reflecting on the ways by which agents can "distanciate" themselves with explanatory or narrative *figurations* of that lived reality, and on how this conscientization could critically accompany the search for practical compromises between ethics and morality in practice in initiatives of socio-political *refiguration*.

Finally, this does not mean that philosophy has to set agendas and work out massive plans of action. We can simply concur with Ricœur that there is no science of what is to be done. However, this takes nothing away from the ways in which philosophy and other sciences can help in preparing action. Ricœur illustrates this function of "theory" for "practice", by repeatedly identifying a paradox between two equally strong theoretical claims, for which there is no solution in theory, but for which people acting in real life have to find compromises. In this sense, consciously assumed by Ricœur, philosophy remains incomplete and can be completed only in practice. Accordingly, a scholarly "stocktaking" both on the conceptual level and as interpretation of practical contexts demonstrates the philosophical ability to bring some clarification to action and sets limits to what philosophers can hope to achieve. Philosophy can hope to inform practically-wise decision-making without ever pretending to be a science of decisions.

4. Conclusion

Underlying this study of relations between Ricœur's philosophy and that of his African counterparts, mostly hermeneuts, is a series of shared anthropological assumptions. It would be a very valuable study to draw up the exact profile of this shared view, including the differences that may set limits to an over enthusiastic embrace of anthropological universalism. However, without some assumptions about core aspects of human existence, all comparisons, borrowings and corrections would be vain.

Furthermore, making this claim does not amount to pushing the cultural and socio-political differences between people aside. To the contrary, it gives one of the entries for an increased awareness of the differences within any specific history, tradition or cultural group.

¹²¹ Paul Ricœur, "Le philosophe et le politique devant la question de la liberté", in [editor not named] *La liberté et l'ordre social* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1969), 41-56, here 41.

It is true that the focus on aspects of culture may create the impression of a culturalism.¹²² I would argue that only bad hermeneutics would succumb to reducing the doings of people to cultural facts or to excluding politics and economics from culture. Moreover, throughout this article I have repeatedly pointed out how matters of culture, interpretation and even self-affirmation retain an ambiguous potential – a fact which again calls for more interpretation in view of renewed initiatives. The whole set-up of my argument is against some essentialization of cultures, in favour of a realistic view on social dynamics – again either because of internal movement or by external interventions. This interpretative realism – in which the paradox of politics, the internal conflicts in societies and the struggles for recognition have their place – does not require that we abdicate the desire for living in more just institutions.

This realism, which social history can document in the finest detail, may be reason for despair – for reasons evoked in §3.1. At the same time, the positive side of these ambiguities may contain some motivation to those of us who see in the gradual formation of “neocultures”¹²³ – in letters, arts, in social life and in politics – not merely a degeneration of heritage or the deposit of clashes of power, but also glimpses of other possibilities, which we may try to pursue in academia or in social life as miniature protocols of action, in the spirit of Eboussi-Boulaga. In this paper I paid tribute to several authors who have preceded me in this task and who have thereby “paid the deposit for a history which remains to be made.”¹²⁴ I hope hereby to add my own contribution.¹²⁵

¹²² Not only is culturalism a reductive interpretation, but by sidelining the economic and political dimensions of social reality it can be deployed to the advantage of authoritarian power. In this respect a balanced assessment of the relation between philosophical hermeneutics and the Zairian doctrine of authenticity would be a welcome study. Cf. Tshiamalenga Ntumba, “La vision ‘ntu’ de l’homme. Essai de philosophie linguistique et anthropologique,” *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*, no. 7/14 (1973), 174-196 and Élie Phambu Ngoma Binda, “Pour une orientation authentique de la philosophie en Afrique: l’herméneutique,” *Zaire-Afrique*, no. 113 (1977), 143-158.

¹²³ Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 193.

¹²⁴ According to Ricœur’s expression: Ricœur, “Non-violent Man and His Presence to History”, 229.

¹²⁵ This article as a contribution to a construction of the “common”, as I argue for in Wolff, “Intercontinental philosophy: thinking in and for a plural world,” *Philosophy in the Shadow of Racism. Critique, Interpretation and Practice* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2026, forthcoming), chapter 6.

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