

# Does Eboussi Boulaga Criticize Marcien Towa? Setting the Stage for a Discussion from the Preface to *Muntu in Crisis*

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**Abstract:** This article sets out to initiate and foster a posthumous, critical, and constructive dialogue between two celebrated French-speaking (African) philosophers of the 20th century, namely Marcien Towa (1931–2014) and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (1934–2018). It seeks to compensate for the historical absence of such a conversation, particularly on Eboussi Boulaga's part, by carefully scrutinizing and challenging the common belief that the latter criticizes Marcien Towa in his book *Muntu in Crisis*. Drawing on the preface to this book, the article turns its back on unproductive assumptions and hasty generalizations, thus revealing its quintessence, namely to follow a rigorous method that avoids assuming immediate agreement, unintelligence, or disbelief from either party.

*Keywords:* philosophy, fetishism, alienation, ethnophilosophy, dialectics

*Das Barbarische ist das Buchstäbliche.*  
The literal is barbaric.  
Theodor W. Adorno

## Introductory Remarks

There seems to be a conventional, tacit, or otherwise unsubstantiated agreement that Fabien Eboussi Boulaga criticizes Marcien Towa in his book *Muntu in Crisis*. Surprisingly enough, this agreement seems so powerful and authoritative that no one has ever considered it worth delving into a thoughtful examination of this matter, thus securing the pervasiveness of this view. Unfortunately, I ignore who and when started this trend, but to my knowledge, one of the most relevant evocations of this situation is a statement by Norman Ajari, who wrote that Eboussi Boulaga opposes Towa's "voluntarism" (Ajari, "Née du désastre" 125)<sup>1</sup> whereby the latter invites "Africans to imitate the colonizer where they were strongest" (125), namely in possessing science and technology that the native of Endama identifies as Europe's "secret," precisely the secret of their domination on non-European people, including African ones. Yves Akoa Bassong's views seem to align with Ajari's. In a recent piece, he also contends that Eboussi Boulaga opposes Towa's thought, which Akoa Bassong considers as a critical overcoming of ethnophilosophy but with a straightforward adoption of Western philosophy, particularly Hegelianism. Akoa writes that in this regard, Towa's imperative of self-liberation ends up being an imperative of "self-alienation, as long as the reference to the West is maintained" (Akoa Bassong 80. My translation). From there, he concludes, "This is why Eboussi Boulaga sees Towa's philosophy as a form of institutionalized philosophy in which colonial reason is strongly implicated" (80).<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore believed that Eboussi Boulaga's analysis in *Muntu in Crisis* follows a tripartite argumentation that the structure of the book supposedly corroborates. In the first part, Eboussi Boulaga exposes the system of ethnophilosophy, focusing on its goals and method. In the second, he criticizes the criticism traditionally addressed to ethnophilosophy by showing how it mainly supposes and conforms to an ideological concept of philosophy that ultimately legitimizes European domination.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in the third part, Eboussi Boulaga offers suggestions on how to overcome the crisis he presented as affecting both ethnophilosophers and their (ideological) critics. Now, because Marcien Towa is, with Paulin Hountondji, one of the earliest and fiercer critics of ethnophilosophy, and because, on the other hand, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga uses a terminology—some “talking points”—that is commonly associated with Towa's argument in his *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle*, it is believed that Eboussi Boulaga opposes Marcien Towa, even though he never explicitly mentions his name.<sup>4</sup>

This article sets out the initial arguments introducing the meticulous scrutiny of this situation. It provides a detailed explanation of why such views rest on a misreading of both Eboussi Boulaga and Towa. As such, it expands on Norman Ajari's reserved but crucial remark that, on the question of the nature and goals of philosophy, Eboussi Boulaga is “closer to his compatriot Marcien Towa” (125).<sup>5</sup> When taken seriously, this substantial closeness nullifies the possibility of a substantial disagreement between the two.<sup>6</sup>

The study follows two simple steps. First, in sections 1 and 2, I discuss Eboussi Boulaga's relationship to Marcien Towa, as illustrated in the preface<sup>7</sup> to *Muntu in Crisis*.<sup>8</sup> I precisely analyze, in turn, the two cases in which Eboussi Boulaga allegedly argues against Marcien Towa by shedding light on the “talking points” that supposedly relate to the latter. This analysis allows me to demonstrate how evidence drawn from this text does not support the claim that Eboussi Boulaga criticizes Marcien Towa. Section 3 then turns to the second step of the argument. I show how evidence drawn from the preface to Eboussi Boulaga's book supports an apparent filiation between him and Marcien Towa. In fact, as Eboussi Boulaga's claims of filiation are a rarity in *Muntu in Crisis*, this explicit reference is of the utmost interest in appreciating the book's orientation and what such a positioning entails regarding Marcien Towa. In organizing my argument this way, my demonstration runs backward from Eboussi Boulaga's exposition.

### **Eboussi Boulaga's Alleged Criticisms: Case One**

#### *Exposition*

The first case of alleged criticism against Marcien Towa occurs toward the end of the sixth paragraph of the preface to *Muntu in Crisis* when Eboussi Boulaga, in an openly critical vein, writes that, from the perspective of a fetishized concept of philosophy at work in dominated societies—but not only—“To say that philosophy is Western is a pure pleonasm. That being the case, one must do the only philosophy that deserves such a name. One must renounce oneself and die to oneself in order to be reborn to the truth” (Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu* 8/Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis* 2). The critical intent of these remarks is specified and confirmed by the opening sentence of the seventh paragraph. Eboussi Boulaga contends: “Such a language is that of satisfaction, which is the misfortune that ignores itself” (8/2).

Anyone somewhat familiar with Marcien Towa's 1971 essay would remember that he seemingly uses this terminology when he suggests a “new orientation for philosophy in Africa.” Towa precisely writes: “[T]o assert and to assume itself, the self must deny itself, deny its essence, and therefore also its past. By thus breaking with its essence and its past, the self must expressly aim to become like the other, similar to the other, and thereby incolonizable by the other” (Towa, *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle* 42).<sup>9</sup> He goes on writing that “The option is therefore unequivocal: deny oneself, question the very being of the

self, and become fundamentally Europeanized” (45). It is thus a matter of ‘intellectual reflexes’—so to speak—to think that Marcien Towa is the author who is secretly targeted behind Eboussi Boulaga’s phrasing—the so-called “talking points.” Unfortunately, what this claim ignores or fails to acknowledge is the respective contexts of Eboussi Boulaga’s and Towa’s words—the contexts of those “points.”

*Remarks on Eboussi Boulaga’s Side*

Eboussi Boulaga’s context is that of the preface to his book, an essential aspect of which—undoubtedly Hegelian in this respect—is generally overlooked. Indeed, Eboussi Boulaga distinguishes between “what is really at stake” (Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu* 7/Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis* 1) behind “the African claim to possess philosophies,” namely “the desire to attest a contested or endangered humanity and to be by- and for-oneself, through the articulation of having and doing, according to an order that excludes violence and arbitrariness” (7/1) from what is concretely generally achieved in the debate concerning African philosophy, whether by ethnophilosophers or their ideological critics, as both suppose and promote a fetishized concept of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> What Eboussi Boulaga presents as “what is really at stake” is what, according to him, philosophy tends to mean and signify, when performed as a liberating practice, an “active project.” When this project of doing philosophy—and this is what Eboussi Boulaga claims to be showing—is “naïvely undertaken [it] masks and distorts this desire, preventing it from becoming an active project” (7/1). And what “masks and distorts this desire” is fetishism.

Fetishism (type 1) appears as an attitude resulting from a confusion of species. When philosophy tends to designate any activity related to culture, and the desire mentioned above fuels the quest for its existence in dominated societies, its attestation tends to take the form of an apologetic discourse that commands submission to what is. According to Eboussi Boulaga, this is the *raison d’être* of rhetoric in establishing and sustaining the system of ethnophilosophy. Fetishism (type 2) then appears mainly as a response to this previous situation, precisely as the blindness to the conditions by which a philosophical discourse establishes itself as philosophical. This blindness also touches on the ambitions such a discourse harbors. Transposed into the context of the critique of the first form of fetishism, it fails to account for the conditions of formation and exercise of philosophy regarding domination. Eboussi Boulaga mostly calls this second type of fetishism *ideology*.

In any case, fetishism sanctions, in Eboussi Boulaga’s analysis, the inability to acknowledge the interrelatedness of philosophy and history and to relate to philosophy as a *historical product*. The failure to acknowledge philosophy as a historical product results in the sanctification of domination, to its more or less reflexive, more or less tactical, sustenance and perpetuation. Fetishism therefore occurs whenever and wherever philosophy and domination are allies. The “dominated society of Africa” (8/2) offers one instance of this picture. There, “philosophy is an attribute of power. Now, it is the West that holds (and distributes) it. There is no philosophy unless associated with power, with mastery” (8/2). The conjunction of these factors—ideologically, the fascination for the master, and the practical reasons for this fascination, namely science, industry, and technology—establishes philosophy as a forever foreign practice, even when performed at home. At home, philosophy is, indeed, “the dominating difference made thought” (8).<sup>11</sup> From this, it follows that “To say that philosophy is Western is a pure pleonasm. That being the case, one must do the only philosophy that deserves such a name. One must renounce oneself and die to oneself in order to be reborn to the truth.”

What, then, is this truth to which the Muntu—essentially—must be reborn? From the preceding, the answer is somewhat crystal clear: it is the inescapability of Western domination, which translates, by means of conversion, into the irremediability of African (broadly non-Western) subjugation. Nothing could be further from the mind of Marcien Towa, and here, too, the

misunderstanding concerns the failure to accurately relate Towa's words to their context. What follows is merely an outline of the latter.<sup>12</sup>

*Remarks on Towa's Side*

To begin with, I hope no one would dispute that Towa shares with Eboussi Boulaga the fundamental objective of "reflecting on the conditions, for the [African person], to emancipate themselves from the burdens of colonial and postcolonial reason to achieve the full expression of their humanity" (Kavwahirehi 160. My translation).

Secondly, it is worth recalling Towa's methodological commitment, namely dialectics, or more precisely Hegel-inspired positive dialectics,<sup>13</sup> in which the end of the dialectical process is already posited at its beginning and only reappears, after some helpful negative turbulences, as the restatement—however improved—of what was already there initially. And what *is there initially*, according to Towa, is the underlying humanity—and thus the liberty—of the African person, unfortunately obscured by the vicissitudes of colonial reason. In Towa, like in Hegel, self-alienation is merely a means to an end, not the end of the process they describe, that end being self-affirmation. The primacy of the self over the other it encounters in alienating itself<sup>14</sup> is affirmed and reaffirmed throughout Towa's essay. Still, not everyone has taken the trouble to consider his argument carefully. Speaking of this dialectics and its subject (the self), Towa (*Essai* 39) writes, for example, that "The desire to *be ourselves*, to *assume our destiny*, ultimately leads *us* to the need to transform *ourselves* in depth, to deny our innermost being in order to become the other" (My emphasis). And by becoming the other, that is, by alienating itself, the self recovers from the alienation imposed on it because it finds, expressed in the other, what it has been looking for: the full expression of itself in its freedom. Towa expresses this dialectical movement of self-affirmation *through* self-negation more explicitly when he writes:

To appropriate Europe's secret—a new, foreign spirit—we must revolutionize our own [spirit] from top to bottom. In doing so, we certainly become like the Europeans. But *in a more fundamental sense*, we become *like our ancestors* by becoming once again as they must have been in the highest periods of their history: *creative and free* (48. My emphasis).

The failure to identify self-alienation for what it is, namely a means to an end in Towa's dialectics of the self, is the shortcoming by which one can associate these words in the preface to *Muntu in Crisis* to Towa's argument—even when they postulate the objectivity of some "talking points." Indeed, as noted by Nsame Mbongo (109. My translation), what is needed here is a "better handling of dialectics."

Finally, Towa does not understand European philosophy naively, and three primary considerations speak in his favor. With regard to history, Towa is aware that philosophy, as a set of aptitudes, is a historical phenomenon that is not tied by nature to European reality: philosophy is precisely part of a culture.<sup>15</sup> As such, it has been established historically—meaning it has been acquired—by a particular and consistent way of being and doing. In emphasizing this point, Towa reveals how far he is from identitarian and ontological understandings of his views on the nature of philosophy and other related activities such as science and technology. Indeed, Towa writes that it is "historically" and not by a fact of nature that philosophy established itself as "the matrix of the scientific and technical universe" (Towa, *Essai* 7). The mastery it confers on the European is therefore acquired and presents itself as the result of a specific doing. Philosophy is not a gift from nature, and Europe does not possess it intrinsically, as it is naturally part of its concept or culture.<sup>16</sup> This assumption was at the basis of colonial ideology and the colonial fascination for the master it brings in its wake. And Towa, to be sure, was aware of this.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, ruining colonial ideology will mean, in his work, opposing the assumption of a natural link between Europe and philosophy. This is achieved only through a historical approach to the concept of philosophy that departs from the principles of colonial education—what Eboussi

Boulaga calls the “School.”<sup>18</sup> And when this is done, the connection between philosophy and domination becomes evident.

A second consideration relates to the nature of philosophy, particularly concerning non-European people and societies. Here, it is worth noting that Marcien Towa never understands this relationship as free of domination. There is no doubt that he is aware of the “prejudice” (5) by which philosophy, considered a European and broadly Western discipline, is viewed—mainly by Europeans themselves—as a domain that is “definitively off-limits to Africans” (5), to the extent that “the African who wants to talk about philosophy or science is seen as meddling in something that is none of their business” (5). Therefore, defining philosophy and its domain is not a naïve endeavor, only concerned with academic knowledge. What is actually at stake here is domination and its justification because “The dominant ideas of the West, insofar as they concern us, are also the ideas of its domination over us” (23). In other words, like Eboussi Boulaga, Towa contends that “philosophy is an attribute of power.” In turn, the claim to possess philosophy is an act of resistance against this domination,<sup>19</sup> by which Africans—but not only—engaged in the process of “ruining an essential argument of imperialist ideology” (25). In a sense, their objective, what is “really at stake” in their enterprise, is “the desire to attest a contested or endangered humanity and to be by- and for-oneself, through the articulation of having and doing, according to an order that excludes violence and arbitrariness.” By noting what the African claim to possess philosophies hides—the fascination of philosophy as an attribute of power—and reveals—the opposition to Western domination—Marcien Towa proves that his argument does not fall within the scope of Eboussi Boulaga’s criticisms because he is attentive to the concrete conditions by which the discourse that calls itself philosophy has come to signify within European (Western) culture and, furthermore, in relation to non-Westerners, especially toward—which here primarily means against—Africans. But there is more.

This lucid relationship to (European) philosophy—this is the third consideration—is not a view of the mind. It is evidenced, for example, by how Marcien Towa convokes and discusses European philosophers in his *Essai*. Contrary to the view Eboussi Boulaga castigates, Towa never adopts the fetishist stance of opting for an “uncritical embrace” of philosophy as practiced in school. When Towa does not firmly repudiate European theoreticians, he embraces them critically and cautiously, following his commitment to dialectics. Towa’s *Essai* illustrates such a relation to (European) philosophy on three levels when the author discusses, in turn, Georges Gusdorf, Martin Heidegger, and Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, whom he presents—I doubt this list was meant to be exhaustive—under the (uncritical?) label of “guardians of Western orthodoxy” (10). According to Marcien Towa, these philosophers are “guardians of Western orthodoxy” because they all tend to explain and justify Europe’s supremacy and domination over non-European people by arguing for European exceptionalism with regard to philosophy, science, and technology. All these authors indeed explain why Europe was either destined or justified in dominating the world and why Europeans were right to do so.

Drawing on the distinction between myth and philosophy, Gusdorf, for example, considers that the latter is an exclusive privilege of the West. In this respect, Western societies are not only different but, moreover, superior to primitive, that is, non-European societies. The reason is simple: while European and broadly Western societies were able to liberate themselves from the mythical world, non-European societies, primitive in this regard, are incapable of doing so on their own. As such, they are, as they were, trapped in the mythical world, whereas the transition from this world to that of philosophy is, in the highest sense, what defines and exemplifies the entry into the human realm.

I must warn the reader that this reading of Gusdorf should not be taken for granted, for in interpreting Gusdorf, Towa takes some important shortcuts, the most severe being the radicalization, for his own purposes, of the distance Gusdorf establishes between myth and philoso-

phy. However, it is not the question here to discuss whether or not Marcien Towa's reading of Gusdorf is accurate or to what extent it is. The point is elsewhere. It lies precisely in knowing whether Towa embraces Gusdorf uncritically, and the answer is negative. While Towa concurs with Gusdorf that myth and philosophy are separate activities,<sup>20</sup> he nonetheless departs from the underlying assumptions and the outcomes of this theory, of which he is suspicious and doubtful. Towa identifies the underlying assumptions of Gusdorf's theory as that of colonial ethnology and its main sociopolitical outcome as the "absolution for colonial brutalities and massacres" (12). On these two points, he clearly rejects Gusdorf because of the connection his approach to philosophy establishes between philosophy and Western power in relation to non-Europeans. In short, Towa understands Gusdorf's conditions of philosophy as the rationalization of a prejudice against non-European people by which philosophy proves to be, as Eboussi Boulaga puts it, "the dominating difference made thought."

Focusing solely on his *Essai*, the fair-minded reader discovers that this critical relationship with (European) philosophy not only concerns Gusdorf but also Heidegger—whom Towa abhors (13–14)—and Hegel—whose treatment is similar to Gusdorf's but in greater length (15–22 and 61–67). In any event, Towa, who never considers (European) philosophy from an uncritical point of view, never abstracts its functioning in dominated societies from its domination intent and content. The embrace of philosophy he recommends is therefore critical: first, it accounts for this situation, and second, it orients philosophy toward emancipation. As such, the method at work in Towa's writings is not the mimicry of (European) philosophy—as some lazy and partisan commentators have contended—but its reprise, which ultimately aims at self-recapture.

With this, we have covered the whole dialectical path that brings us back to the beginning of this section, where we once again find the same fundamental objective of "reflecting on the conditions, for the [African person], to emancipate themselves from the burdens of colonial and postcolonial reason to achieve the full expression of their humanity." Towa expresses this objective in an even simpler but no less captivating formula when he writes that, defetishized,<sup>21</sup> the concept of European philosophy "directly encounters the very meaning of our project: a free Africa in a liberated world" (68). So much for this first case.

### **Eboussi Boulaga's Alleged Criticisms: Case Two**

#### *Exposition*

It is usual—"common sense," one might say—to consider the occurrences of the term 'secret' in *Muntu in Crisis* as pieces of evidence of Eboussi Boulaga's critical allusions to Marcien Towa since in his *Essai*, the latter refers very early on to science and technology as the "secret" of Europe's power and domination over the rest of the world. At the same time, he asserts that philosophy played the role of "matrix of the scientific-technical universe" (7), that is to say, the secret of this secret.

In the preface to *Muntu in Crisis*, Eboussi Boulaga uses these same "talking points" to qualify philosophy as an expression of Western power, of Western strength. This way of presenting philosophy is for the author the occasion to point out the naïveté and danger of receiving this notion as a pure phenomenon, free of concrete issues consolidated in the West and relative to the function of domination: in short, forged in what the author calls the "School."<sup>22</sup> Eboussi Boulaga writes:

Such a language is that of satisfaction, which is the misfortune that ignores itself. It is obtained by blocking the desire to be by-and-for-oneself and by the emptiness of a form without content, of an abstract universality. The language is that of servility and self-negation, and at the same time that of the tyranny of a power without finality. Philosophy, then, is merely the shadow cast by industrial society; unless it is its 'quintessence,' the secret of its secret, the secret of its strength. Philosophy

yields to magic, which believes it possesses reality by extracting its 'virtue' and quintessence, which wants to take possession of things by possessing their signs (8/2-3).

#### Remarks

It should be remembered that, among other goals, the preface also offers the reader an overview of the argument and division of Eboussi Boulaga's book. In the seventh paragraph, where the term 'secret' appears for the first time in reference to (Western) philosophy, Eboussi Boulaga explains the central axis of the second part of his book, in contrast to, but also in continuity with its first part. Schematically, and I am simplifying to the extreme, the first part of *Muntu in Crisis* depicts the system of ethnophilosophy with an emphasis on the concept of philosophy understood in such a way that it encompasses African culture to the point of being naturally incorporated into it. The use of rhetoric in African ethnophilosophical discourses reflects the need to establish and justify both similitude and difference with Western philosophies considered a standard. This endeavor misses the concepts of Africa and philosophy for the same reason, namely ontology. The second stance examined, and thus criticized by Eboussi Boulaga in the second part of his book can be presented as the attempt to overcome the ethnophilosophical discourse through a very similar fetishism of philosophy that recommends "the adoption, without suspicion nor doubt, of philosophy, as it is practiced in School, as it has become in the West" (Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu* 8/Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis* 2).<sup>23</sup> The two situations proceed from antinomic extremisms that nonetheless rejoin in the same flaws regarding the capacity of a lucid appreciation of philosophy. For the Muntu who claims philosophy for their own sake and who sees it expressed in each of their cultural manifestations is blind to the concrete conditions by which a discourse that claims philosophical characterization for itself emerges as such. A similar blindness is at work on the part of the Muntu<sup>24</sup> who argues against their fellows that they are doing improper philosophy and therefore urges them to align to what is properly this discipline, namely the Western discourse that bears that name. Whether in the first or second case, philosophy exerts the same fascination on the Muntu or whoever comes into contact with it from an uncritical perspective. This fascination takes the form of fetishism. To be sure, here, Eboussi Boulaga is not saying anything different from what he has said earlier on in the preface when distinguishing between the fetishized and defetishized concepts of philosophy, and we have already shown how Marcien Towa's concept of philosophy does not correspond to Eboussi Boulaga's understanding of fetishism. The only refinement to be made to what has been said in the previous section of this article is thus the following.

While type 1 fetishism relates exclusively to the ethnophilosophical enterprise it describes, is it not necessary that type 2 fetishism relates exclusively to the criticism of ethnophilosophy. However, it is clear that the most striking manifestation of this second fetishism of philosophy occurs on the occasion of the condemnation of ethnophilosophy (85/81-2).<sup>25</sup> What is decisive in this second case is the fetishism of philosophy rather than the criticism of ethnophilosophy, that is, the nature of the concept of philosophy that one uses to describe or qualify Africa's relationship to the West and, ultimately, Africa's and the West's relationships to themselves. As far as this aspect of Eboussi Boulaga's criticism is concerned, there is no need for him to refer to a real detractor of ethnophilosophy who is *out there*. The reason for this is utterly simple: Eboussi Boulaga speaks of a general situation. Put differently, someone does not need to criticize ethnophilosophy for maintaining and exhibiting a fetishized relationship with philosophy. On this point, Hubert Vincent (105) proves to be more perceptive than many readers, as he rightly highlights that in the second part of *Muntu in Crisis*, Eboussi Boulaga does not *attack* the detractors of ethnophilosophy but instead criticizes the naïve conception of philosophy which, perceiving the Western becoming of this discipline as a universal fact, fails to notice that this very term *universal* applied to the *particular* Western becoming of philosophy actually speaks the language of "The Symbolism of Domination." Where this naïve—"abstract," writes

Eboussi Boulaga—view coincides with the presuppositions of an actual foe of ethnophilosophy, then Eboussi Boulaga’s criticisms apply to the latter, but this is not necessary from the outset<sup>26</sup> because even without real authors to whom the book would specifically refer, Eboussi Boulaga’s criticisms are capable of, and must therefore be considered as standing on their own, especially in the absence of an explicit reference—which, again, is by no means necessary considering the book’s argument.<sup>27</sup>

As a result, it is not necessary that Eboussi Boulaga explicitly refers to someone when he speaks of philosophy as the “secret of the secret” or the “secret of the strength” of the West.<sup>28</sup> Nor is it necessary for him to refer to Marcien Towa, and whoever sees a necessary relationship between those words and the Master of Endama—even considered under the obscure category of “talking points”—succumbs to the fetishism denounced by Eboussi Boulaga because they conceive of these expressions in an *abstract* manner that ignores the conditions of time, place, mode, relation, and object, in a word the *context* in which they are produced within the frameworks of Eboussi Boulaga’s and Marcien Towa’s philosophical arguments. The context, once again, invalidates any attempt to relate Marcien Towa to what Eboussi Boulaga is contesting. Moreover, instead of merely disproving the claim that Eboussi Boulaga criticizes Towa by providing negative evidence against this hypothesis, the preface to *Muntu in Crisis* offers the reader unambiguous positive evidence to support the contrary claim.

Indeed, although Eboussi Boulaga never mentions Marcien Towa as an adversary,<sup>29</sup> he does mention him—obliquely, admittedly, but with what is at the time an unmistakable proper name—as a predecessor of his own philosophical project. Furthermore, and perhaps even more importantly, this conceptual reference to Marcien Towa appears earlier than the critical allusions to philosophy as the “secret of the secret” of Europe supposedly directed against him. Let us now examine how this plays out in the text and what it implies.

### An Overtly Claimed Filiation

#### *Exposition*

The first sentence of the third paragraph of the preface to *Muntu in Crisis* is probably the only place in the entire book where Eboussi Boulaga overtly claims affiliation with any philosophical tradition.<sup>30</sup> As far as our subject of study is concerned, this solves half the mystery we are dealing with because while Eboussi Boulaga, to some extent, succeeds in concealing whom he *attacks*, he nevertheless explicitly mentions those he *follows*. Their identity is, therefore, no secret. In fact, it is revealed from the outset of the book when the Master of Yorro writes: “The first part of this book sets out to describe the constitution of what we call, *after others*, ethnophilosophy” (Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu* 7. Emphasis added).

#### *Remarks*

The English rendition of this sentence reads slightly differently, in a way that unfortunately obscures the original intention. Indeed, *Muntu in Crisis* (1) reads: “The first part of the present book sets itself the task of describing the formation of what has been dubbed ‘ethnophilosophy’.” In this entirely new sentence, the original filiation is lost—or purposely concealed—and the author is no longer sympathetic—or at least does not claim to be—to those who have labeled a certain practice ethnophilosophy. *Muntu in Crisis* thus creates a—let us say critical—distance between the author and whomever he is referring to. In contrast, *La crise du Muntu* distinctly situates the author in the continuation of an initial movement to which he is sympathetic. That movement is not only understood by Eboussi Boulaga as the mere *naming* of a situation but, moreover, as its *critique-and-criticism*, in a way that establishes a necessary relation between the two enterprises. This allows us to rule out a first, obviously fanciful hypothesis.



Invoking Paulin Hountondji's later clarifications on the authorship of the term 'ethnophilosophy,' an enthusiastic and somewhat pedantic critic might object that Eboussi Boulaga is referring, in this sentence, to Kwame Nkrumah. Indeed, Hountondji has explained, in a short article in part excerpted from what can be considered his intellectual biography—however, twenty years after the publication of his major book—that although “[m]any have believed and continue to believe that the word *ethnophilosophy* is a neologism created by Towa and myself” (Hountondji 112. Original emphasis), the first known occurrence of the word is in Kwame Nkrumah's Ph.D. project. The word *ethno-philosophy* appears, in English, in the subtitle of this unfortunately unfinished work: “Mind and thought in primitive society: A study in ethno-philosophy with special reference to the Akan peoples of the Gold Coast, West Africa.” As Hountondji appropriately notes, Nkrumah did not endeavor to define *and* criticize a particular and relatively new way of practicing philosophy. Instead, he “attempted, in the early 40s, and with the approval of his thesis advisor, E. A. Singer, to promote a new discipline—ethnophilosophy—in taking as a model certain areas of specialization already recognized in cultural anthropology, notably ethnobotany, ethnozoology, and ethnobiology, of which the generic concept would only appear formally at a later time” (118). Eboussi Boulaga, whose book was written in the early 1970s, was certainly unaware of this, as were arguably all the other protagonists involved in the quarrel over ethnophilosophy, including Hountondji himself. Furthermore, even if one assumes that Eboussi Boulaga was aware of Nkrumah's doctoral project, his use of the word does not align with that of Nkrumah. Therefore, Eboussi Boulaga does not name the object of his analysis *after* him. One inevitable conclusion that any consequent reader must then face—when they do not draw it—directly follows from this: under Eboussi Boulaga's pen, the term *ethnophilosophy* does not refer to Nkrumah, and *Muntu in Crisis* never considers this possibility. Fortunately, a second, more realistic option exists, namely that Eboussi Boulaga subscribed to the common agreement of his time that Hountondji and Towa had coined the term *ethnophilosophy*. This might explain why he only writes that he uses the phrase “*after* others” without further clarification. I can think of only one reason to make sense of the absence of additional details without calling into doubt the author's good faith,<sup>31</sup> and that is to postulate that such a clarification was not needed because the subject, here, the term ethnophilosophy, was supposedly well-known to the author's audience.

As a matter of fact, Eboussi Boulaga had already used this line of defense when confronted with a contradictor who reproached him for not revealing his sources and deliberately concealing what he owed to his peers. One of the alleged cases of this misappropriation concerns Eboussi Boulaga's supposedly fraudulent use of the term “rigid designator” in one of his books (see Eboussi Boulaga, *À contretemps* 242–243).<sup>32</sup> Eboussi Boulaga's response (Eboussi Boulaga, “*Adversus Bidimam!*” 101. My translation) invokes “The use of quotation marks, the technical nature of the discussion, [and the] context” in *À contretemps*. His use of the term “ethnophilosophy” in the preface to *Muntu in Crisis* shares many points of similarity with his use of the term “rigid designator” in those disputed pages, to the extent that his defense against Bidima can be reproduced here on his behalf and almost *in extenso*.

Here, too, one must pay attention to the *technical nature of the discussion*, its *context*, and in the absence of quotation marks,<sup>33</sup> to the *mention* “*after* others,” which functions as *de facto* quotation marks as it signals that the author acknowledges borrowing his terminology from some predecessors. However, since the term ethnophilosophy, in the context of Eboussi Boulaga's work, does not only relate to a mere act of naming but is necessarily tied to a spirit that accompanies that very act, the French adverb *après* that Eboussi Boulaga uses bears two different but complementary meanings: it reads as *after* as well as *following*. Hence, in the preface to *Muntu in Crisis*, Eboussi Boulaga explicitly claims filiation because he uses not only the term but also the concept of ethnophilosophy, not only *after* but also *following* “others.”

From the above, it is child's play to identify the authors covered by this all-encompassing term "others" when we recall the specific and decisive role that the term *ethnophilosophy* plays in contrast with "others," namely that of establishing something like a "rigid designation," as Kripke<sup>34</sup> has put it. In other words, the term *ethnophilosophy* here mimics the function of a rigid designator because it refers in proper—that is, as a matter of necessity—to specific real people whose *proper names* are too well known to be mistaken, among them Marcien Towa. As with Kripke and the term "rigid designator," Eboussi Boulaga's use of the expression 'ethnophilosophy' is not about reinventing the wheel but blending in with a tradition.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the rigidity of the term 'ethnophilosophy' contrasts with the flaccidity of the expressions 'secret' and 'secret of the secret,' as the latter do not refer *by necessity* to Marcien Towa (or anyone else for that matter). In the first case—which establishes a filiation—the question of the reference is solved; in the second—which relates to a criticism—there is a further need for exegesis.

### Concluding Remarks

As stated, this article's goal was relatively modest as it only wished to set the stage for further discussion. Before someone raises this point, let me clarify that I readily acknowledge that some key points have been left untouched. For example, although I have claimed that Eboussi Boulaga follows Hountondji and Towa, I did not specify the extent to which this claim is valid. In other words, I did not discuss the details of this filiation. The reason for this limitation is simple: such an enterprise necessitates that we venture further into the book, particularly in its second and third parts. However, to ignite the reader's imagination, here are a few clues that will help clarify this matter. First, I must reinforce that substantial agreement does not preclude minimal disagreement. This is because—this is the second clue—there are several layers or orders of agreement, some being more fundamental than others. Finally, concerning the critique-and-criticism of ethnophilosophy, whether by Hountondji, Towa, or Eboussi Boulaga, there is a need to distinguish between diagnosis and prescription. The term ethnophilosophy points to a diagnosis, whereas (Eboussi Boulaga's remarks on) the fetishism of philosophy relate(s), in this case, to a fundamental aspect of a particular prescription with respect to this diagnosis. And as diagnosis and prescription do not collapse into one another, one can agree here and disagree there. With these reservations in mind, I can summarize the preliminary findings of this brief investigation in the preface to *Muntu in Crisis*.

I hope to have succeeded in providing a solid refutation of the common agreement that Eboussi Boulaga criticizes Towa in *Muntu in Crisis* by showing that although they might direct the reader's attention to Marcien Towa, the alleged "talking points" Eboussi Boulaga uses are not conclusive to establish a criticism of the latter because their context does not correspond to that of Towa. On the contrary, evidence from the preface establishes that Eboussi Boulaga situates himself in Towa's (and Hountondji's) footsteps regarding the critical diagnosis of a particular way of practicing philosophy in dominated societies of Africa when he explicitly claims filiation with him. Moreover, the context of his criticisms of ethnophilosophy and the fetishism of philosophy aligns with Marcien Towa's argument, which, as I have shown, does not recommend the adoption of (European) philosophy "without suspicion nor doubt." In his preface, Eboussi Boulaga thus already seems to make it clear that he does not oppose and does not intend to fundamentally oppose Marcien Towa, if, at all, this preface is written following the Hegelian model, as one might be entitled to suspect.

Hence a result, albeit preliminary, since it must be confronted with the book itself: either Eboussi Boulaga does not criticize Marcien Towa because he does not target him (in which case ignoring Towa is a feature of the book justifiable in itself), or Eboussi Boulaga does not criticize Marcien Towa because he misses him miserably (in which case this so-called criticism is a serious flaw). In the first case, this article can and should be read as a defense of Eboussi

Boulaga against his detractors; in the second, it is a defense of Towa against Eboussi Boulaga. In both cases, however, my analysis serves the truth that Eboussi Boulaga's argument has nothing to do with Towa. I surmise, nevertheless, that this is only the beginning of a debate, as we have just opened a case, and that no one will admit to having been knocked out. At least, with the approach endeavored here, my contenders will now also have to substantiate their claim. If they dare to do so, that will undoubtedly be another victory for the truth.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All translations of this text are mine. See also Ajari (*La dignité ou la mort* 215). It should be noted that the term "voluntarism" appears in *La crise du Muntu* on page 99 but is absent from *Muntu in Crisis*, where it would normally have appeared on page 96.
- <sup>2</sup> These views display several rather obvious shortcomings. First, as far as Marcien Towa is concerned, it is incorrect to say that he "adopts" Western philosophy, particularly Hegel's philosophy, as if his "adoption" was uncritical and dogmatic. As we shall see, Towa is a fierce critic of Western philosophical practices, including that of Hegel. Secondly, and in the same vein, Towa does not consider that Western philosophy and African philosophy should be opposed to the extent that African emancipation could learn nothing from Western philosophy and should, therefore, ignore it as something irrelevant to the realization of its goals. Thirdly, with regard to Eboussi Boulaga, it is unclear whether Akoa Bassong is interpreting or expounding the Master of Yorro's thoughts. For the reader unfamiliar with *Muntu in Crisis* may think, from the above lines, that Eboussi Boulaga explicitly mentions the name of Towa in his book and links his theory to institutionalized philosophy. However, since Eboussi Boulaga never mentions Towa in his book, Akoa Bassong's opinions must be presented for what they are, namely, Akoa Bassong's opinions, to avoid any confusion with Eboussi Boulaga's own opinions. Fourthly, it is easy to see that Akoa's views need further elaboration.
- <sup>3</sup> This is how Norman Ajari ("Née du désastre" 122), for example, understands Fabien Eboussi Boulaga's book: as a "criticism of the criticism" against ethnophilosophy.
- <sup>4</sup> This is, for example, what Charles Romain Mbele claims in his book, *Système et liberté dans la philosophie négro-africaine moderne*. He writes that "[a]lthough he does not specifically name [him]" (45. My translation), Eboussi Boulaga nevertheless "attacks... Marcien Towa's theses" (44).
- <sup>5</sup> See also Ajari (*La dignité ou la mort* 215).
- <sup>6</sup> Let me clarify that the absence of *substantial* disagreement is by no means the absence of *all* disagreement. However, this paper is not concerned with this second statement.
- <sup>7</sup> My analysis in this article is limited to those three pages due to considerations mainly related to the imperative of space. In fact, this study is an abbreviated extract from a much larger work, whose results it foreshadows.
- <sup>8</sup> I am sorry I have to disagree with this 'English version' of *La crise du Muntu*, and my disappointment with this book begins with its title. As a result, in this paper, I mostly depart from this book by translating myself directly from the French original. However, since this *Muntu in Crisis* is the (only) official English 'translation' of *La crise du Muntu* currently available, I thus use it as the official English title of the book while nevertheless referring implicitly, and in some cases explicitly to the original French text. In the event of an explicit reference, the English counterpart will be indicated immediately afterward, for formality reasons only. The reasons for my disapproval of this 'English version' will hopefully appear elsewhere. There, I will make the claim that *Muntu in Crisis* should be distinguished from *La crise*

*du Muntu*. The reader should remember this caveat when reading this article, starting with its subtitle. Additionally, because I implicitly or explicitly refer to *La crise du Muntu*, when I speak of the ‘Preface’ to *Muntu in Crisis*, I do not have in mind the actual preface to *Muntu in Crisis* written by Kasereka Kavwahirehi. Instead, I allude to the original French preface to *La crise du Muntu*, which is transformed, without explanation, into an ‘Introduction’ in *Muntu in Crisis*.

<sup>9</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Essai*. Furthermore, unless otherwise stated, I am responsible for all the translated excerpts from this book.

<sup>10</sup> Some would want to dispute the presence of the concept of *fetishism* in *Muntu in Crisis*. Kasereka Kavwahirehi (166 ff.) has penetratingly demonstrated the naïveté of this point of view.

<sup>11</sup> This sentence represents one of the many cases in *Muntu in Crisis* where the translator struggles to render the letter and spirit of the original. Eboussi Boulaga’s original sentence, “Elle [La philosophie] est pensée de la différence dominatrice,” conveys the idea that philosophy is the form that takes the system of Western domination based on science, industry, and technology. Philosophy brings together all these practices as their spirit, as part of a ‘culture’ by which the West appears different from those it dominates. Philosophy is therefore the ultimate justification for this domination and this state of affairs. The following sentences explain the ideological nature of this connection and its relation to fetishism. *Muntu in Crisis* prefers not to wrestle with this delicate situation and opts for the curious—but somewhat comforting—solution of rewriting the original, which, in this case, is not helpful at all.

<sup>12</sup> Numerous studies have been devoted to the central aspects of Marcien Towa’s philosophy. On Marcien Towa’s dialectic of the self in relation to Europe, the interested reader should take note of one of Charles Romain Mbele’s most lucid pieces (Mbele, “Marcien Towa : L’idée de l’Europe et nous”). Recent works on Marcien Towa—unfortunately all in French—include volumes by Mbede (*Marcien Towa, théoricien de la révolution africaine*), Mintoumè (*Marcien Towa: progrès scientifiques et émancipation des peuples*), and Ayissi (*La philosophie de la libération et de l’émancipation de Marcien Towa*). As I do not intend to be exhaustive on this point, I do not mention less important contributions.

<sup>13</sup> On Hegel’s dialectics and its characterization as ‘positive,’ see Adorno (*Hegel: Three Studies; Negative Dialectics*).

<sup>14</sup> This is the central assertion of all positive dialectics, whether between subject and object or universal and particular.

<sup>15</sup> On what Marcien Towa means by culture, see Towa (*Identité et transcendance* 202 ff.).

<sup>16</sup> In 1968, for example, Towa argued—mainly against Senghor—that “industrial civilization” is not synonymous with European culture. This particular position, which he maintained throughout his life, invalidates the criticism that he approached science and technology as fundamentally European practices, intimately related to the European being, probably outside history, since ontology or biology are the only places—I can think of—where such a connection can be firmly established and sustained. Now, Towa explicitly refutes the hypothesis of a biological origin of culture (Towa, “Civilisation industrielle et négritude” 33), which leaves him only with historical justifications for making sense of the origin, but especially the plurality, and diversity of cultures. This is precisely the path he follows in this text and several others, notably *Identité et transcendance*.

<sup>17</sup> See Towa (“Principes de l’éducation coloniale” 29; *Essai* 24).

<sup>18</sup> The same analytical lucidity indeed prevails—at least intentionally—in Eboussi Boulaga’s *Muntu in Crisis*. The author, indeed, contends that, whether concerning philosophy or science and technology, the mastery demonstrated by the master is “acquired by doing, through history, and not as a gift from nature” (Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu* 8/Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis* 2).

<sup>19</sup> Towa (*Essai* 23) precisely asks: “If it is true that the thesis of the Western exclusivity of philosophy leads to the legitimization of Western imperialism, is it not normal that the negation of imperialism also leads to the negation of this thesis?”.

<sup>20</sup> Towa agrees with Gusdorf to such an extent that he radicalizes his views. The result is a funny situation: in many respects, what seemingly starts as an agreement ends up as an outright opposition.

<sup>21</sup> See what was said above about my use of this concept.

<sup>22</sup> This theme is developed in the first chapter of the second part of *Muntu in Crisis* (Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu* 87 ff./Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis* 83 ff.). Eboussi Boulaga’s approach can be compared to that of Marcien Towa (see Towa, “Principes de l’éducation coloniale”). This article is to be read as and in the continuation of a previous reflection (see Towa, “La fonction normale de l’éducation dans la Nation”). Thus, it may be worth taking note of Charles Romain Mbele’s critical remarks about

this concept of ‘School,’ as used in *Muntu in Crisis* (see Mbele, “Métaphysique du marché universel : une critique historique, politique et culturelle” 70, 73). One will then compare this understanding with that of Joseph Teguezem and Ramsès Nzenti Kopa (109 ff.) and Eddy Mazembo Mavumbu (67, 76), who uses this concept to criticize in return Eboussi Boulaga.

<sup>23</sup> *Muntu in Crisis* does not conform to the original but offers a rendition that is nevertheless interesting for its striking clarity and simplicity. Indeed, this second book reads: “In the second part, as we find out, the end of our predicament does not lie in the *uncritical embrace* of philosophy as it is taught at schools in the West” (emphasis added), which is more an interpretation than a proper translation of the original French text. This occurs throughout the text—with mixed results—offering the reader familiar with the original French several instances of *lapsus transferendum*.

<sup>24</sup> A crucial clarification must be made here. The proponents of this position—namely, the criticism of ethnophilosophy—might not belong to the conceptual territory that covers this category in Eboussi Boulaga’s discourse. In any case, with Eboussi Boulaga, someone does not need to be a Muntu for maintaining and exhibiting a fetishized relationship with philosophy.

<sup>25</sup> However, the reader cannot know that before entering the book, as the preface says nothing about the orientation of the analysis.

<sup>26</sup> It should be remembered that in this article we are only interested in the preface to Eboussi Boulaga’s book. Because of this, I consciously resist the urge to go further into the book to see and show how this criticism is carried out in its second part. However, I can already reveal that Eboussi Boulaga’s criticism seems to follow more closely—albeit under the constant and convenient veil of anonymity—the work of authors different from Marcien Towa.

<sup>27</sup> This only remark reveals how useless the question of the authors targeted by Eboussi Boulaga is if it does not relate to a more important issue.

<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that Eboussi Boulaga couldn’t have had someone or something in mind as a reference or target. But since I am not a mind reader, I cannot go down that road.

<sup>29</sup> In contrast to this, Negritude, for example, is explicitly mentioned at least twice in Eboussi Boulaga’s book as a position the author repudiates (see Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu* 47, 178/Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis* 44, 179). A close examination of the references to this movement, the accompanying terminology, and the context in which they are used reveals that Eboussi Boulaga criticizes precisely the Senghorian variant of this doctrine. No one—hopefully—would object that this stance situates him, as I will be arguing below, in the continuity of Marcien Towa. As this is beyond the scope of this article, I can only direct the interested reader, in addition to the pages mentioned above, to the section titled “Rhetoric as Philosophy” (33 ff./28 ff.). They will then compare these views with what Marcien Towa says about Senghorian Negritude, whether in his *Essai* (24 ff.) or other works (Towa, *Léopold Sédar Senghor : Négritude Ou Servitude ?; Poésie de La Négritude*).

<sup>30</sup> For comparison, they are several instances in *Muntu in Crisis* where Eboussi Boulaga refers to Socrates, for example. However, the evocation of this name is a strategy by which Eboussi Boulaga reflects either on (European) philosophy, his relationship to this discipline, or his own philosophical practice. Yet, this is more a way of mediating his discourse than clearly claiming filiation with him. As such, even if it could appear to some commentators that Eboussi Boulaga practices philosophy according to the Socratic model—others evoke the Hegelian scheme—he, himself, never writes that his practice of this discipline *follows* that of Socrates—or Hegel. Thus, establishing a filiation between Socrates and Eboussi Boulaga is, at best, the result of exegesis and not a personal statement by the second author. This, of course, does not by any means undermine the relevance of such an exercise beforehand.

<sup>31</sup> While this might be relevant to some extent and in several respects, the thrust of the present study does not require us to postulate any bad faith on Eboussi Boulaga’s part. I reserve the right to pursue this line of explanation elsewhere where it would be more meaningful and beneficial.

<sup>32</sup> See Bidima (212) for the criticism.

<sup>33</sup> This seems more like a misprint than a clear typographic choice because it is, so to speak, ‘corrected’ by *Muntu in Crisis*.

<sup>34</sup> See Kripke (*Naming and Necessity*).

<sup>35</sup> As to what it means, in Eboussi Boulaga’s words, to inhabit a tradition, I direct the reader to the second Chapter of the third part of *Muntu in Crisis*. They will discover—or, hopefully, only recall—that it never entails the crude acceptance of what is.

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