Chapter Nine

Anthropology and Philosophy in Africa

About six decades ago Evans-Pritchard wrote the following on witchcraft among the Azande:

They do not profess to understand witchcraft entirely. They know that it exists and works evil, but they have to guess at the manner in which it works. Indeed, I have frequently been struck when discussing witchcraft with Azande by the doubt they express about the subject (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 82).

In other words, the interest of Azande in witchcraft is more practical than speculative. I witnessed the same pragmatic attitude towards witchcraft among Hebga’s patients: they take its existence for granted and are more interested in how to deal with it than in how it works. In fact, in the context of Southern Cameroon, people are rather reluctant to speculate on the mechanisms of witchcraft for the general understanding is that only a witch really knows how it works. In other words, if you know how it works then you must be a witch. That is one of the reasons why Hebga is not only admired but also feared by some of his clients: his power to bless and to cure is also seen as the potential power to curse. As we saw earlier in chapter five, Hebga reinforces this perception of himself in the way he threatens to strike those accused of witchcraft practices or misconduct in Ephphata.

Hebga, on his part, does not only believe in the existence of witchcraft; he has developed a theoretical interest in the issue which seeks to legitimate his practice. In other words, besides being a religious practitioner he is also a scholar with academic credentials which includes, as mentioned in the first chapter, a doctorate in philosophy from Université de Paris-Sorbonne. This chapter focuses on his attempt to use Western philosophical tools to argue for the plausibility of witchcraft beliefs. Hebga’s discourse is one of protest against what he perceives as the ethnocentric arrogance of Western rationality against African beliefs and practices. I locate this discourse within the framework of what Mario Sáenz (1999: 312) has called ‘post-Cartesian testimonials’, meaning anti-colonial discourses of resistance. He writes:
I choose to call such discourses of resistance post-Cartesian testimonials, for several important reasons: first, they arise out of the conditions of colonization imposed by so-called modernization; second, they plant themselves on the reality of colonization and neocolonization to be fought and overcome, and do not try to revive a lost “pre-Cartesian” world; and third, they challenge the Cartesian dualism, individualism, and universalism that have conquered and colonized otherness, while offering an alternative vision of rational life.

Hebga’s own critique of ‘Western’ dualisms is part of an argument which holds that the intelligibility of witchcraft beliefs is plausible if considered in the light of a pluralist understanding of the human person shared by many African cultures, instead of taking ‘Western’ dualisms as the universal benchmark of rationality. On this issue, anthropology intersects with philosophy not only in Hebga’s argument but also in anthropological literature interested in the limits of Cartesian dualism from a cross-cultural perspective.

Although I am sympathetic to the idea that representations of personhood are context-bound, and for this reason incommensurable, I argue that Hebga’s essentialist bent tends to exaggerate the contrast between the West and Africa and fails to take into account the ongoing reconfiguration of African beliefs following the colonial encounter. I further discuss current relationships between philosophy and anthropology in postcolonial Africa in the light of the following observations of Lambek (1998: 106):

It is all the more critical today that we contribute to the task of widening the horizons of academic philosophy, providing diverse cultural material to think about and to think with. At the same time, philosophy can help reduce anthropologists’ naiveté and both refine and expand the questions we ask of our material. Together we ought to be able to move beyond both ethnographic particularism and academic philosophy’s arguably ethnocentric embeddedness in Western concepts. Despite the long-standing existence of Asian philosophies and the recent emergence of a vigorous professional African philosophy (…), the questions—can there be a transcultural or pluralist philosophy (not to speak of a global one) and, if so, what would it look like?—have hardly begun to be addressed.

This chapter comprises three main sections: the first is an overview of the Cartesian dualism; the second briefly outlines Hebga’s critique of ‘Western’ dualisms; the last section is an assessment of Hebga’s position.