



Mature Conversation with Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault on Enlightenment

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Broadly speaking we are in the middle of a race between human skill as a means, and human folly as an end.

-Bertrand Russell

ABSTRACT

This contribution highlights how Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault, both critics of Western Enlightenment, notably avoided confronting the Lumières' slogan *aude sapere* by neglecting to examine its darker, enslaving aspects. They failed to address the Enlightenment question "what is happening right now, in the present" from the perspective of the enslaved men and women of their era. By disregarding these struggles for freedom and autonomy, both thinkers lacked the philosophical courage (*parrhêsia*) to denounce the European slave industry as a profound contradiction within the Enlightenment project. Their silence and lack of extended empathy underscore how the *Aufklärung* fell short of fostering true maturity. I therefore contend that the *nyamodo* ontology of the Beti people of Central Africa, with its emphasis on humaneness, offers a powerful antidote to ideologies that enable barbaric immaturity, such as those underpinning the darker side of the Western Enlightenment.

KEYWORDS: *Aufklärung*, *aude sapere*, 'we,' reasonableness, *nyamodo* ontology

Introduction

Some thirty years ago, Michel Foucault, reflecting on Immanuel Kant's text "*Was ist Aufklärung?*" ("*What is Enlightenment?*"),¹ issued two hundred years earlier, wrote skeptically:

I do not know whether we will ever reach mature adulthood. Many things in our experience convince us that the historical event of the Enlightenment did not make us mature adults, and we have not reached that stage yet.²

"Mature adulthood," in Foucault's thinking, was designed to be the finish line of the Enlightenment marathon. The successful runners of the said race were apparently to grant themselves the trophy of adulthood, while singing the coda of maturity.

But Foucault points out the permanent dismissal of the Enlightenment internal *telos* (teleology). The goal or the inner purpose of the Enlightenment event is purely and simply sacked and annulled by "many things in our experience," argues Foucault. In other words, neither maturity nor adulthood is yet within the horizon of our reach.

Maturity and adulthood still hide themselves behind the enigma of the unknown, indefinitely postponing, dismissing, and pushing themselves beyond any crossable boundary. When will the *Lumières* (Enlightenment) be our *ethos*? When will the rays of the *Aufklärung* invade our existential habitat, such that our being and actions dwell in its warming scope?

I will attempt to answer these questions by paying close attention to the Foucauldian interpretation of Kant's text. I will consider in the first place the philosophical significance of the Enlightenment event in Foucault. I shall do this by briefly knitting together the "we" function, the notion of "mature adulthood," and the *Aude sapere* (dare to know) coda in Foucault's exposure of the Western Enlightenment. This will help us have a fair grasp of Foucault's philosophical project and the importance of his ethics of selfhood.

In a second moment, I will take seriously the autonomy project of the Enlightenment and explore the latter as a master key to deciphering the meaning of adulthood and maturity in my epistemic-cultural location. But beforehand, I hope to unveil how Kant and Foucault, both critics of the Western Enlightenment, surprisingly dodged the *Lumières'* *mot d'ordre* (slogan) by not daring to know its darker side.

They failed to address the Enlightenment question "what is happening right now, in the present," from below, that is, from the perspective of the struggling enslaved of the time. They carelessly silenced and turned a blind eye to the struggles³ for freedom and autonomy of enslaved men and women during the "*Lumières*."

By so doing, they lacked the philosophical audacity of truth (*parrhêsia*) to denounce the European enslaving industry as the contradiction of the Western Enlightenment. Their complicit silence and lack of extended empathy nullified the lived experiences⁴ of the Africans of the time, and that is doubtless one of the "things in our experience" showing how the *Aufklärung* failed to make us "mature adults."

¹ See Kant's text: https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/What_is_Enlightenment.pdf, April 23, 2014.

² Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" (*Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?*), in Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, 32-50. Foucault expounds his reflection on the Enlightenment in two of his lectures given at the Collège de France on January 5, 1983. See Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1-40.

³ It is recorded for example that during the time of slavery, the Beti people and their Bene (Beninese) cousins of present day Benin preferred to commit suicide than to live in servitude. See Jacques Fulbert Owono, *Pauvreté ou paupérisation en Afrique. Une étude exégético-éthique de la pauvreté chez les Beti-Fang du Cameroun* (Bamberg, University of Bamberg Press, 2011), 73. Similarly, fighting slavery and colonialism afterwards, heroes like Toussaint Louverture and Harriet Tubman, and then Patrice Lumumba, Félix Moumié, Steve Biko, Um Nyobé, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Sankara, etc. all heralded the refrain of freedom and self-determination throughout their lives.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, Masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952), 88-114.



Western Enlightenment: an event

It is striking that Foucault understands the Enlightenment in Kant's text as an "event... that has determined, at least in part, what we are, what we think, and what we do today."⁵ I want to focus briefly on this notion of event. Though Foucault is not very clear about what he means by event, the preceding quote, nevertheless, shows that the word "event" modifies Western Enlightenment. The latter is not only a novel process, but more interestingly, an ongoing process,⁶ whose effects are seen in the Western conceptualizations of ontology, thought processes, and actions. The specificity of the *Lumières* phenomenon is rooted in its novelty, its newness: it injects or looks for a *différance* (otherness) in the human community, as Jacques Derrida would say.⁷

The question put across by the *Aufklärung* is that of something "other" (*quelque chose d'autre*) within the present. Is the rhythm of difference regulating the *hic et nunc* (here and now)? Is yesterday (the medieval era/the European Renaissance) still the prevailing point of reference in people's thinking? The event we are dealing with here seems to announce itself as a fluid mark or a fugitive trace endowed with a zigzagging potential: its action is retrospective to the extent that one can look back and see its anterior effects on concrete human beings. In Foucault's words, the Enlightenment event "has determined" what is effectuated in the present. It has assumed an agential posture and inflicted a certain consciousness on the present. Henceforth, the latter is pregnant with the promises of something beyond chronic time: the "present" is already always embedded with its own prospection and expectation (*attente*). Novelty and newness in ontologies, thoughts, and practices are glued to the present by the contagious lubricant, the Enlightenment, which has become part of the fleeting moment.

The present has become an unplanned surprise; a gift unexpectedly offering itself as refreshment, a novel donation to rejuvenate contemporary socio-political situations and ways of carving oneself. So, Foucault draws our attention to the movement, the dynamism inherent to the Enlightenment as he comments: the *Lumières* "is neither a world era to which one belongs, nor an event whose signs are perceived, nor the dawning of an accomplishment."⁸ What is it then? It is, according to Kant's insight, "an *Ausgang*, an 'exit,' a 'way out.'"⁹

With the action of parting, of leaving behind, possibly declaring the obsolescence of the previous temporal, ontological, political, and epistemic, etc. locations, the event projects itself as the unknown tomorrow whose coming guarantees the survival of today and corrects it. The event strides over (*enjambe*) itself, always on the way, marching toward itself, and opened to its own folding (*doublure*).¹⁰ Thus, the event is a presence to the present, self-present and at once exercising hospitality vis-à-vis itself, that is, receiving the outside of itself as a surprising gift. We find this idea of arrival and emergence with various nuances, not only in Derrida¹¹ and Deleuze,¹² but also in Jacques Rancière¹³ and Giorgio Agamben.¹⁴ This being said, let us now consider what could be the epistemic relevance of the recurring "we" found in Foucault's text on the Western Enlightenment.

The "we" function in Foucault

I have tried so far to decipher the notion of event in Foucault's critique of the Western Enlightenment. One of the results of this exploration is the realization that the concepts of 'event' and the 'present' with which it is concerned are very complex. Foucault himself underscores this complexity in grasping the present before Kant's era. The present was then posited either as belonging to a certain epoch of the world, distinct from others through some inherent characteristics, or separated from them by some dramatic event, as something discernible within "the heralding signs of a forthcoming event," or "as a point of transition toward the dawning of a new world."¹⁵ But as I said earlier, Immanuel Kant dismisses these interpretations and detects the *Aufklärung* rather in an "exit."

To be sure, this exit is not anonymous. It is the action of a certain "we," a community conscious of its exodus. Kant puts the said community under the umbrella of the enigmatic "*Menschheit*" (humankind), which makes its way out of childhood. Foucault wonders whether mankind in Kant's language entails the entire human race or just refers to "a change affecting what constitutes the humanity of human beings."¹⁶ These questions are left hanging, without any definite answer. Nevertheless, one thing Foucault is unambiguous about is his dissatisfaction with Kant's text.

Foucault writes:

*I do not by any means propose to consider it as capable of constituting an adequate description of the Enlightenment, and no historian, I think, could be satisfied with it for an analysis of the social, political, and cultural transformations that occurred at the end of the eighteenth century.*¹⁷

On a personal note, considering Kant's anthropology, which I will touch on later, I doubt whether the notion of humanity is equally applied to all humans around the world. For, if Western Enlightenment is a philosophical moment, that is, a particular epistemic sphere from which the West attempts to tackle the question "what is modern philosophy,"¹⁸ and if Foucault is right in connecting Kant's interrogation on the *Aufklärung* with his three Critiques,¹⁹ then it becomes difficult to see how Kant's obscure²⁰ ontology of the subject and his insistence on the universality of taste²¹ satisfy the exigencies of "border thinking,"²² geographies, and culturality.

⁵ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues. Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 94-123. The idea of the *doublure* in this context is the elaboration of a transitory ontology that makes the event capable of folding and unfolding itself. This creates a tension within the event, which is eventually ceaselessly digesting its future.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, op. cit., 71-94. See also Jacques Derrida, "A Certain Impossibility of Saying the Event" in *The Late Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 223-243.

¹² See Leonard Lawlor, "Phenomenology and metaphysics, and chaos. On the fragility of the event in Deleuze," in Daniel W. Smith & Henry-Hall, *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹³ Jacques Rancière, "Should Democracy Come? Ethics and Politics in Derrida", in *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Ed. by Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 274-288.

¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The coming community* (Trans. by Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press), 1990.

¹⁵ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., 33-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁹ Kant's three Critiques are the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and the *Critique of the power of Judgment*.

²⁰ Kant's causal theory of perception is not very precise. The transcendental unity of apperception (the subject), does not know itself. The "itself" is always a *noumenon* and as such, remains impenetrable. See: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 257-260.

²¹ I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96-104.

²² Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).



But Foucault is not fond of totalizing ontologies with universal values. For him, “the historical ontology of individuals must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical.”²³ Instead, Foucault is a cultural thinker who contends adamantly that the Western Enlightenment is historically situated within a particular society. Genealogy has the unique feature of being contingent, not formal, and transcendental, just as Foucault’s archeological method is historical in essence. He writes in that vein:

*We must never forget that the Enlightenment is an event, or a set of events and complex historical processes, that is located at a certain point in the development of European societies. As such, it includes elements of social transformation, types of political institutions, forms of knowledge, projects of rationalization of knowledge and practices, and technological mutations that are very difficult to sum up in a word, even if many of these phenomena remain important today.*²⁴

It is clear to Foucault that European societies are the loci where the murmuring “we” of the Enlightenment drains the various communities toward shared histories and designs. The “we” has a public and plural character, opening a communal space of ownership and authorship in terms of being, thinking, and acting. The “we” echoes the polyphonic voice of a collective ensemble in which singularities (individuals) are immersed in a specific worldview.

It insinuates that the Western thinker is no observer of this movement. She is a militant in the “we” and posits the same “we” as the embodiment of this thinking. For Foucault, “this ‘we’ has to become, or is in the process of becoming, the object of the philosopher’s own reflection. By the same token, it becomes impossible for the philosopher to dispense with an interrogation of her singular membership in this ‘we.’”²⁵

Foucault rightly introduces his own militancy into the debate on Modernity. He rebukes the “spectator’s posture.” He is reluctant to identify with the “*flâneur*, the idle, strolling” bystander who is characterized by his/her passivity.²⁶ Let us say that, perhaps, the “we” invites the reader to jump with Foucault into the combat field to see what is at stake there. If such is the case, therefore, I will not be an onlooker, but wrestle with Foucault in the troubled conceptual waters of the *Lumières*’ call; become an adult.

The courage to become an adult: *Aude sapere!*

What could it possibly mean for Foucault, after Kant, to become adult as the distinctive feature of the Western Enlightenment? The response consists of enrolling oneself in a movement of autonomy. That is the kernel of Kant’s *Ausgang* (exit). One has to disencumber oneself of the voluntary yoke of obedience. The Enlightenment consists in dropping, discharging, and ejecting that load of “*attentisme*” (passivity) from one’s life. The argument of passiveness goes as follows: it seems more secure to submit oneself to the authority of the “book,” the “spiritual director,” or the “doctor.”²⁷ But this is pure babyishness and self-pampering. It is complacency in institutional gurus, which goes with the fake feeling of being breastfed by surrogates and patronizing mothers. It is sheer dullness of the will to conduct itself, and a graduation in immaturity.

But if society is to function efficiently, it must count on people who can make private and public use of their reason. In Kant’s understanding, a private use of reason consists in playing a specific role in society (lecturer, military, physician, etc.), while the public use of reason consists “in reasoning as a member of a reasonable humanity.”²⁸ Since I have presented earlier the ambiguity of what Kant means by humanity, a similar difficulty surfaces here. What is “reasonable humanity,” where is it found, and where does it lead us? It is quite clear in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that Kant is suspicious of reason (which can lead us astray) and favors the understanding in cognizing reality.²⁹

We may then turn to John Rawls, who offers a more positive account of reasonableness. Reason for him goes hand in hand with certain practices handed over from one generation to the next. These practices concern the exercise of the principles of freedom, equality, and cooperation among citizens in a constitutional ‘democracy.’ He argues:

*Citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of cooperation according to what they consider the most reasonable conception of political justice; and when they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interest in particular situations, provided that other citizens also accept those terms. The criterion of reciprocity requires that when those terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation, those proposing them must also think it at least reasonable for others to accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not as dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position.*³⁰

In this quote, John Rawls, thinking within the framework of nation-states, connects reasonableness to equality, reciprocity, and cooperation among citizens. He is careful not to silence factors that could handicap his theory of justice as fairness. The notion of justice as fairness “is the view that social institutions should not confer morally arbitrary long-term advantages on some persons at the expense of others.”³¹ Ideally, it means that citizens, at the domestic level, must be understood not only as free, but also as equal and reasonable.

John Rawls is certainly aware of a panoply of imbalances in his society, the American society, related to appearances (skin color) instead of being/character, social classes, genders, etc., and challenges of all sorts (linguistic, religious, political, historical, and more) that the American “democratic” experiment is faced with. For him, nonetheless, equality, freedom, and reciprocity remain theoretically possible through the hypothetical initial and fair conditions under which all are placed, namely the veil of ignorance.³²

Coming back to Foucault, after John Rawls’ clarification of the notion of reasonableness, he sees a pressing injunction addressed to those living under the *Lumières*. That galvanizing *mot d’ordre* (slogan) is: *Aude sapere!* In other terms, Awaken! The day is far gone, get ready

²³ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., 46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁵ M. Foucault, *The Government of Self...*, op. cit., 13.

²⁶ In his treatment of the problematic of pederasty among the Greeks, Foucault argues that the boys’ passivity as men’s objects of pleasure was a social concern. It was rather the boys’ honor to learn to play a leading role by learning to love truly. Instead of remaining the loved object, the boys were to become active, noble, manly, lovers of their masters’ truth. M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. The History of sexuality. Vol. 2* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 237-42.

²⁷ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., p. 34. See also M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 239.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

²⁹ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, op. cit., 260-274.

³⁰ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with ‘the Idea of Public Reason Revisited’* (Cambridge: Massachusetts, London, Harvard University Press, 2002), 136-7.

³¹ See Andrew Bailey et al., “John Rawls” in *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought, Vol. 2. The Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Toronto, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008), 265.

³² J. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, op. cit., 30-35.



for action, your head is not a hollow decoration, *räsonieren!*, make use of your reason, take care of yourselves, become your own guides, your personal physicians, and your ultimate end!

We are given here a political prescription to cure immaturity. The person who knows how to critique his own immaturity in the academy, for example, is healed. The whole problem is how one can govern oneself without necessarily submitting to the power-knowledge discourses at play in society. How to escape the prison of other people's opinions, how to shake off the diktats of cultural, ethical, and political heteronomy?

Foucault turns to Baudelaire's litotes, "You have no right to despise your present."³³ The present is the horizon of authentic life, and one must respect it, even if it means raping and violating its prevailing knowledges and practices. Just like the Cynic Diogenes Laertius, the enlightened person must have no shame leading a "*kunikos*" (dog) life, a "depraved animal"³⁴ life. A doglike life is productive inasmuch as it speaks, fights, barks at enemies, and "knows how to distinguish the good from the bad, the true from the false, and masters from enemies."³⁵

This is the real life for Foucault, because it is a life of truth that responds to the Modern call of self-invention. Accordingly, living as a Modern man/woman embraces the asceticism of the dandy, and the "doctrine of elegance" of the self. At this juncture, since the paper lays a particular emphasis on the concept of adulthood, I will now interact with Foucault from a different epistemic location, at once Afrosopian and Afrika-centric.

Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault: betrayers of the Western Enlightenment

Adulthood for Kant consists in exiting tutelage. For him, the adult who is clear about the command *Aude sapere* (dare to know) cannot continue to submit to epistemic authorities, whose privileged metaphor is the book. Likewise, the adult must bracket societal figures such as the priest and the physician, who assure guidance in confession and diet. To know is to take charge of one's life, use one's personal reason, and become an actor in society.

What is produced by the Kantian Enlightenment is, supposedly, a society of competing egos, that is, an aggregate of people concerned first and foremost with their personal freedom and autonomy. In that perspective, the individual is the refrain, the message to be preached, and the unique tenable discourse for the 'self.' The "I," the self, unknowable in Kant and fleeting in Foucault, remains, surprisingly, the pinnacle of knowledge and ethics in the Königsbergian scholar.

What about the "Other" then? Does the injunction to have the courage to know concern alterity too? Can a person traversed by the Western Enlightenment command posit his/her ignorance of the Other, and from there, take the risk to learn what that Other has to say about themselves? Can otherness be as agential as the so-called Copernican revolution,³⁶ that is, the view that the individual owns and constructs her/his lived world and knowledge?

These questions are relevant, especially when we recall that Kant conceived anthropology as the culmination of critical philosophy. His question, "What is man?," following the three *Critiques* clearly de-emphasizes the transcendental subject in favor of the existential subject. But the disturbing question still concerns the nature of subjectivity in: Who is a human subject in Kant? Is it any human being or just Westerners? The answer is forthcoming.

Kant, who never left Königsberg, so much valued constructivist anthropology that he made it the primary focus of his intellectual work. He taught more courses on "anthropology" and "physical geography" (72 times) than he did in logic (54 times), metaphysics (49 times), moral philosophy (28 times), and theoretical physics (20 times).³⁷ He was more puzzled by the starry heavens above (physical nature under causal law) and the moral law within (freedom),³⁸ than he was about Africans, whom he calls "Negroes." The latter were so transparent to his sight that he could hastily write:

*The race of the Negroes, one could say, is completely the opposite of the Americans; they are full of affect and passion, very lively, talkative, and vain. They can be educated but only as servants (slaves), that is they allow themselves to be trained. They have many motivating forces, are also sensitive, are afraid of blows, and do much of a sense of honor.*³⁹

This caricature of "Negroes" follows a previous division by Kant of the human species into four races: the Americans (who cannot be educated and are lazy, among other features), the Negroes, the Hindus (passive, educable in the arts, stagnant in the way they are), and the Europeans (to whom he ascribes all talents and the perfection of humanity).⁴⁰ It follows that the African person does not qualify as "human" for Kant, who supports the practice of enslavement.

I doubt whether Foucault would have a contradictory view to Kant's on the Western enslavement of Africans. At any rate, Foucault's text on the Western Enlightenment, just like Kant's, remains silent on the darker side of Western Modernity. They refuse to know or to investigate the counter-*Lumières* practices of their culture. What was the gloomiest nightmare of Africans was celebrated as an enlightening exodus in European history. It is therefore imperative to define maturity; otherwise, if we are concerned about building a better world, lived experiences and redefinitions of concepts matter.

It is my view that European enslavement and racism must become philosophical loci. By studying the horrors of Western 'humanism,' the humane world will be better tooled to reinvent itself on the basis of everyone's intimate relatedness to Africa, the Mother Land, where the human diaspora sprang.⁴¹ Delaying this process cannot silence the call for humans to quickly mature cognitively and ethically. It proves Malcolm X right when he writes about the African presence in the United States of America:

³³ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, (*The Government of Self and Others II*), Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 243.

³⁶ Tom Rockmore, *Art and Truth after Plato* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 271.

³⁷ See Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology" in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge/Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 104.

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, op. cit., 1.

³⁹ Immanuel Kant, quoted by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, op. cit., 116.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 116-8.

⁴¹ See Christopher Stringer & Robin McKie, *African Exodus: The Origins of Modern Humanity* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997); Dominique Grimaud-Hervé et al., *Le Deuxième Homme en Afrique*, (Paris: Errance, 2002), 123; Carole Boyce Davies, *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture* (Denver: ABC-CLIO, 2008), xxx; Frederick M. Smith, "The Paleolithic Turn: Michael Witzel's Theory of Laurasian Mythology" in *Religious Studies Review* (Vol. 39, No. 3, September 2013), 133. See also Cheikh Anta Diop, "Early History of Humanity: Evolution of the Black World" in *The African Origin of Civilization. Myth or Reality* (Edited and translated by Mercer Cook, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974), 260-275.



Our history and our culture were completely destroyed when we were forcibly brought to America in chains. And now it is important for us to know that our history did not begin with slavery's scars. We come from Africa, a great continent and a proud and varied people, a land which is the new world and was the cradle of civilization. Our culture and our history are as old as man himself, and yet we know almost nothing of them. We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people... Armed with the knowledge of the past, we can with confidence charter a cause for our future. Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past.⁴²

The real challenge of a true enlightenment is certainly to “unbrainwash” oneself, and only an adult can achieve that noble and demanding task. I will now attempt hermeneutics of the adult based on my Beti language, not only because language is the house of Being according to Martin Heidegger,⁴³ but more importantly because, as Molefi Kete Asante reminds us, “all language is epistemic.”⁴⁴

Nyamodo, the adult: a cultural subject

In trying to follow the *Aude sapere* command, I will first endeavor to clarify what the Beti people of Central Africa mean by human being before addressing their understanding of adulthood. As their dictum goes, “*owog na akuma: ve bod*”⁴⁵ (when you hear “wealth,” understand human beings). It means that humans are the ultimate value in the Beti culture. In the latter, the human being is an open field of rebirths. Here, being is generation, and to be is to generate.⁴⁶

There is an ongoing renaissance process accompanying the individual's earthly existence from birth to death. One is human only insofar as she creatively appropriates and regenerates her culture, depicted as *etam enyin* (fountain of life) or *etam mvoe* (fountain of wellbeing). Culture embraces all fields of human existence; it is the master key of self-presence, self-awareness, and self-determination⁴⁷ in the world. The necessity of cultural innovation is accounted for by the variability of historical contexts. Generation after generation, culture recycles itself through heterogeneous events. The gradual appropriation and production of culture is the initiation of the individual into adulthood.

Thus, to be an adult is to be initiated into the reception and donation of life. The initiation path leads the candidate into a hard-long training, with the aim of comprehending and mastering the basic law, the unifying factor behind phenomena and meta-phenomenal realities. One is thus fashioned through knowledge and practices and leads into adulthood, into Enlightenment, into the understanding of oneself as a birther of humanity.

The Beti word for adult is *nyamodo*, combining two terms: *nya* (mother) and *mod(o)*, which means human being. So, the adult is the mother of humanity; that is her vocation. The Enlightenment in this context implies the becoming *nyamodo*, that is, the constant embodiment of life-giving values within the self, and their donation around oneself.

To be cultural, for the Beti individual, is to cherish, value, and protect her life and that of others. Culture is life with others; it is the breath without which society itself chokes. When we are enshrined in that “most revolutionary stage of awareness,”⁴⁸ we become real creators in all aspects.

What else could define the Nyamodo among the Beti? It is perhaps Paul Gaston-Effa who gives a significant answer to that question. He points out that in the Beti society, “*la parole d'un homme engage l'humanité*”⁴⁹ (“the word of a human being captures humanity.”) Humanity is concerned by the adult's word in the sense that the word (*ibug*) is a revelation, it is what ought to be said for life to blossom. The *parole* (*nkobo*) is revealed to the growing child through initiation, socialization, and familiarization with its environment.

In the family, a child learns and appropriates the art of contextual speaking: the word must adjust to specific settings and circumstances and be used in the *Mie*⁵⁰ spirit of the founders of the community. Thus, the word is binding; it links the speaker to other humans, visible and invisible (the ancestors), and to the universe at large, which is the mediate recipient of what has been metaphorically vomited (*yo*), that is, uttered, thrown out. In that sense, the word is genealogy and blessing, never restricted to the individual, but embracing the ensemble of the community's history (past, present, and future).

A typical illustration of the genealogical dimension of the word is a person's identity. *Mod* is always relational, connected to his/her parents, and to the entire community. This I-We dialectics deeply impressed the French anthropologist Laburthe-Tolra, who rightly reported that in the Beti nation, a series of questions must be answered about one's kindred to define an individual. A few of them are: *Esoa/nyo ane dzoe ya?* (What are your father's/mother's and then grandparents' names?), *One man dze?* (What is your genealogical affiliation?), *One ayon afe?* (Which nation are you from?), etc.⁵¹ The Beti education system highly cherishes the exact knowledge of one's origins, so as to know how to relate with individuals, alive or dead. On that score, the missionary priest Trilles observes:

À peine sorti de la première enfance, le jeune fang, dès l'âge de 7 ou 8 ans, apprend son mebara, premier enseignement, c'est-à-dire les noms des aïeux dont il est issu et c'est là en même temps la marque de sa filiation et de la noblesse de son origine. Interrogez n'importe quel bambin et vous le verrez répondre: je suis fils d'un tel, fils d'un tel, jusqu'au premier ancêtre de la tribu; où il s'arrête pour dire: Et celui-là était fils de Nzame, c'est-à-dire de Dieu, et avant, je n'y étais pas, ni personne!⁵²

⁴² *The Black Scholar*, November 1969, 26.

⁴³ Martin Heidegger, *Questions III et IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 67.

⁴⁴ Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 42.

⁴⁵ Jacques Fulbert Owono, *Pauvreté ou paupérisation en Afrique. Une étude exégétique-éthique de la pauvreté chez les Beti-Fang du Cameroun* (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2011), 81.

⁴⁶ Robert Ndebi Biya, *Être, pouvoir et génération. Le système Mbok chez les Basa du Sud Cameroun*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1987.

⁴⁷ Sékou Touré, “A dialectical approach to culture” in *The Black Scholar*, *op. cit.*, 11-26.

⁴⁸ Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 64.

⁴⁹ J. F. Owono, *op. cit.*, 74.

⁵⁰ The Beti divine concept *Mie* is the equivalent of the Kemetic *Maat*. See Théophile Obenga, “Egypt: Ancient History of African Philosophy” in Kwasi Wiredu, *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 48. Both terms convey the ideas of cosmic order, harmony, justice, perfection, spiritual strength, perfection, etc. The *Nmi-mie*, the just person, is an embodiment of these divine attributes.

⁵¹ J. F. Owono, *op. cit.*, 63.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 71. In the following translation, the pronoun “he” can fittingly be replaced by “she”: “Once out of his early infancy, the young fang, from the age of 7 to 8 years, learns his mebara, first teaching, that is, the names of ancestors from whom he descends and that is at the same time the sign of his filiation and of the nobility of his origin. Question any kid and you will see him answer: I am the son of so and so, up till the first ancestor of the tribe; where he stops to say: And that one was the son of Nzame, that is, of God, and beyond, I was not there, neither me, nor anyone!”



Thrilles is right to underline the genealogical tree as constitutive of the Beti basic education. For the Beti indeed, genealogy is a matter of being in communion, living in a cosmic circle, a community of interdependent relationships. The Beti ontology is like a rope with various nodes: the living individual, the ancestors, and Tara, Eyo, the Supreme Being Themselves. Here, the authentic and true humane being (*mfan mod*) is one who understands and enacts this trinity in their daily practices. To “genealogize” in this sense is to immerse oneself (*dou*) in the living waters (*etam enyin*) from which the ancestors departed at the dawn of time.⁵³ This briefly described what adulthood entails among the Beti. The I-We link is never broken.

To conclude, I have attempted, in this reflection, to engage in a friendly dialogue with Kant and Foucault, to share contradictory views with them on the topic of the Enlightenment. Both thinkers draw inspiration from the *Aude sapere* prescription, emphasizing the exodus from the immaturity of passivity, even if they function with different ontologies.

While Kant’s framework is ‘universal,’ global, and more radical, Foucault prefers local and partial inquiries.⁵⁴ The two authors’ focus on the Western Enlightenment is certainly motivated by its stakes in Western culture. The *Aude Sapere* motto has fostered a certain type of individualistic ‘freedom’ and autonomy, thus consolidating the monoculturalistic nature of Eurocentrism. This probably accounts for the failure in both Kant and Foucault to show some courageous maturity by critiquing the horrors of European worldwide holocausts contemporaneous with its ‘Enlightenment.’

I therefore maintain that the *nyamodo* ontology of the Beti stressing the I-We unity, the ethics of necessary solidarity between the individual and the community, the inescapable connection between autonomy and heteronomy, and the basic oneness of all humans could be a powerful remedy to current and future geopolitical hegemonies and clashes, signs of barbaric complacency in immaturity as was the darker side of Western Enlightenment.

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⁵³ Marc Ropivia, “Les Fang dans les grands Lacs et la vallée du Nil” in *Présence Africaine*, (No 120, 1981, 46-47); cited by J. F. Owono, *Ibid.*, 39. The genealogy of the Beti-Fang is preserved and transmitted through the Mvett, which is synonymous to their culture. The Mvett is at once a musical instrument, a guitar, an institution (the guardian of the Mvett, that is, the guitarist, the depository of the Beti history), and that history itself. That is the trilogy of the Mvett. See: Tsira Ndong, *Le Mvett* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1970).

⁵⁴ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., 46-47.



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