

ISSN 0791-4938

ASCALF BULLETIN

**ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF
CARIBBEAN AND AFRICAN LITERATURE IN
FRENCH**



**Bulletin 12
Spring/Summer 1996**

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The *ASCALF Bulletin* was edited at University College Dublin and copied at the University of Southampton.

ASCALF gratefully acknowledges the generous financial support granted by Dublin City University and by St Patrick's College Dublin to the *ASCALF Bulletin*.

ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF CARIBBEAN AND AFRICAN LITERATURE IN FRENCH

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Mary Gallagher
Editor, *ASCALF Bulletin*
Department of French
University College Dublin
Belfield
Dublin 4, Ireland

Tel. (353-1) 7068445
Fax. (353-1) 7061175

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Work, Racism and Writing in 1950s France: a comparison of Driss Chraïbi's *Les Boucs* and Sembène Ousmane's *Le Docker noir*.

Introduction

Writing for the left-wing weekly newspaper *France-Observateur* in 1953 the French literary critic Roland Barthes produced the results of a questionnaire in which he had asked a number of French intellectuals to define, if it existed at all, «left-wing» literature. He concluded:

On peut dire que la littérature de gauche affermit et développe en elle tout ce qui n'est pas littérature, qu'elle vise ce degré ultime où la littérature ne serait que la forme rituelle de sa propre mise en question et passage direct du domaine de l'expression dans le monde de l'Histoire. Si ce moment vient jamais, il est possible que la littérature meure. Mais c'est parce qu'elle se sera transformée en histoire. (*Oeuvres complètes* t.1, Paris: Seuil, 1993, p.194).

Barthes's description of left-wing literature has three elements. Firstly, he was claiming that left-wing literature, in its expression and description of the world, contained everything which was not literary, be it sociology, politics, social psychology and pathology: in short, left-wing literature's content was social critique. Secondly, and perhaps in contradiction to the first point, left-wing literature aimed to leave this non-literary content behind, to be part of a world where social critique was no longer needed. Thirdly, Barthes seemed to be suggesting that in trying to represent both aspects of reality - expressing contemporary alienation as well as positing a transformed reality (showing the latter as transformable) - left-wing literature is forced into a self-consciousness, an awareness of literature as institution, operating as it is in a class- and imperialist-dominated society.

To examine this description of left-wing literature I have chosen to compare two novels from Barthes's time of writing. On the one hand, it is possible to identify the profound similarities of Driss Chraïbi's *Les Boucs* and Sembène

Ousmane's *Le Docker noir*. The two novels were published within a year of each other (1955 and 1956 respectively) by African writers who had come to France to work - Chraïbi was training to become a chemical engineer, Sembène was himself a docker. Both titles indicate the lowly social position of Africans in the decade after the Liberation, dealing with exploitation, unemployment and discrimination at work and in housing; both central characters, Yalann Waldik and Diaw Falla, live in poor, breadline conditions; both experience the sharp end of European racism, and figure colonial oppression as a central theme. Both characters have a number of relationships with white French women, which often have violent elements. But the aspect which alerted me to this comparison was the fact that both novels are centrally concerned with writing; be it the act and subject of writing, the social function and status of writing and the writer amongst compatriots and fellow sufferers of racism and exclusion, or, central to both novels, the problem of getting work published.

On the other hand, one could not imagine two more different novels in form and style. *Les Boucs*, Chraïbi's second novel, using a derogatory term to describe North Africans, seems to be about many Africans, yet, in many ways, seems concerned only with one pathological case. Moving between first person and third person narratives, *Les Boucs* presents in a complex time sequence the life of a young Berber from Bône in Algeria who leaves behind his job as shoe-shiner to find his fortune in France, tries to escape his oppressed and colonised identity, tries to get a novel published, and seemingly extracts himself from the concerns of his fellow compatriots; only to return to be among his fellow «boucs», in a seemingly triumphant fashion, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, in a powerful evocation of a Spring-time Ramadan feast. However, the novel is constructed in such a way (backwards, almost) that we learn of his motivation and aim at an early age to escape colonial oppression only in the very last section of the novel: his triumphant return to his status as «bouc» in the Ramadan feast is finally his failure to achieve this.

By contrast, Sembène's *Le Docker noir*, his first novel, is ostensibly about one docker, but is then, through solidarity

and collective struggle, seemingly applicable to all black dockers. This generalising of a message is, of course, a technique of socialist realism, in which a character is made to typify workers in a section or a workplace, in order to provide a model for political action. However I aim to show that, far from being a simplistic socialist realist tale, *Le Docker noir* is able to treat both the reality and alienation of black workers in Marseilles, as well as that of being a black writer; this is in a manner which is highly self-conscious of Sembène's own role in a capitalist and racist literary institution.

We can show how these two novels fit into Barthes's definition of «littérature de gauche», by looking first at how they both provide a critique of 1950s France.

1. Social conditions for Africans: a critique

Les Boucs is the angry and violent account of an Algerian living in a squalid area in the outskirts of Paris, which describes the psychiatric disorder and pathology of Yalann Waldik (in Arabic his name means «May his father be cursed»). Waldik, we soon learn, has himself written a novel about these conditions, itself called *Les Boucs*. We will come back to this «novel within a novel» presently. Living in Villejuif (a typical «bidonville» in 1950s France), Yalann Waldik lives in a tiny «pavillon» with his French girlfriend Simone and Raus, an Algerian friend. Much of the description in the first section consists of dreamy and pointless arguments between the narrator (Waldik) and Simone, both fearful for their son who has meningitis; of sad descriptions of the winter weather, of what to put on the fire to keep warm, and of the coldness of local French people and their suspicion towards North Africans; told with a paradoxically lyrical banality, Waldik's description of Raus chopping wood outside is effective:

Les vitres sont devenues une sorte de loupe, gigantesque et déformante. Mais elles ont gardé leur grisaille morne. Ou, plutôt est-ce moi qui ne me suis pas encore réveillé? L'image qu'elles me donnent du monde extérieur est une figure de ballet. Ciel de plomb, arbres sonores - décor. Où se meut, chienne de vie et vie de Bicot! Je jurerais une marionnette en folie. Les

jambes en sont démesurées, les gestes saccadés. Parfois, au terme d'un saut, elles rejoignent les branches d'arbres à l'horizon. Et je me surprends à admettre qu'il ne s'agit là somme toute que de quelques branches plus frénétiques que les autres. Raus, dehors, qui casse la porte à coups de pied. Il n'a que ses godillots pour la réduire en petit bois. Jusqu'à Bicêtre, pas un Chrétien qui consente à nous prêter une hache, une scie (*Les Boucs*, Paris: Denoël, 1955, pp.14-15).

The first section of *Les Boucs* contains also Waldik's descriptions of his own fingers tightening around the neck of his girlfriend or of the cat; sometimes we do not know whether he is dreaming, and often Simone replaces the cat in this bitter monologue.

The second chapter of the first section, cleverly prefaced by a passage from David Rousset's account of the Nazi Concentration camps, describes a group of twenty-two Algerians (the eponymous heroes, «les boucs») on their way to find work on a building site. The group is told by the racist building-site owner that there is no work left for «terrassiers», and that even if there was work he would not give it to North Africans, and that it was not he who had voted in 1946 in favour of granting Algerians French citizens' rights. The revenge is told in a chilling (wishful-thinking ?) tone:

La nuit et la brume s'associèrent et cela donna une espèce de grisaille froide et moite. Un à un, *Les Boucs* se confondirent avec les tas sur lesquels ils étaient assis - et une bise se leva, noya l'altercation dans la baraque de bois. Ce ne fut que tard dans la nuit que deux agents, au cours de leur ronde, pénétrèrent dans le chantier à la recherche de vagabonds - et découvrirent le corps de l'entrepreneur troué de vingt-deux coups de couteau (*Les Boucs*, pp. 33-34).

It emerges that Waldik has been in prison several times for violent assault, theft and petty crime. During this time he has written a novel called *Les Boucs*, which Simone has shown to a French novelist and literary agent, who in *film noir* fashion is called Mac O'Mac. Her attempts to get Waldik's novel published have led her to have an affair with Mac.

It is precisely the theme of theft in relation to writing that is a central thread in Sembène's *Le Docker noir*. We learn at the beginning from his mother in Senegal that Diaw Falla, a lowly black docker, has killed a famous French woman novelist in revenge for her stealing and publishing in her own name the novel he had written about the voyage of the last slave ship; Gisette Tontisane has become a literary star with Falla's novel. The rest of the novel consists of his court-room appearance amid accusations of premeditated murder and a high level of racist media attention, a flashback to the events leading up to the killing of Tontisane, and ends with Falla's plaintive letter from prison.

However, despite the centrality of the stolen novel to the story, critics writing in the decade or so after publication of *Le Docker noir* have tended to consider the merit of Sembène's first novel to be in its social portrayal. Sunday Anozie considers *Le Docker noir* to be a «témoignage documentaire» about being a docker in 1950s France.¹ Robert Pageard considers that the dockers are well painted and the novel merits our attention «par sa valeur de document social et politique».² Léonard Sainville agrees that Sembène's novel, in treating social and working-class demands, shows an impressive and rare quality, but points out that typical of Sembène's writing, there are «bien des faiblesses» in style and literary form.³ The only critic who denies the sociological descriptive power of *Le Docker noir* is Lamine Diakhaté.⁴ However, this is by default, and does not mean that the form and style in *Le Docker noir* is considered of interest. He suggests that Sembène wanted to write a «livre à thèse» but ended up with a «roman insolite» of a «caractère étrange», somewhere between «série noire» and «suspense»; in

1 S. O. Anozie, *Sociologie du roman africain*, Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1970, p. 191.

2 R. Pageard, *La Littérature négro-africaine*, Paris: Le Livre Africain, 1966.

3 L. Sainville, *Romanciers et conteurs négro-africains*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963, Anthologie 1, pp. 305-308.

4 L. Diakhaté, «Le Docker noir», *Présence Africaine*, 13, April/May 1957, pp. 153-154.

Diakhaté's view the strangeness of *Le Docker noir* is not in the fact that a docker might write a novel, but that the novel fails to deliver its message: for the title had promised to be an insight into the minority of black workers in France, rather than the «histoire filandreuse» that it becomes.

Clearly, *Le Docker noir* does portray the life of a black docker in Marseilles, setting out the alienation and sheer hard work, poor conditions in the immigrant suburbs of the port. Yet, though the strike and unrest in the port are important, they are in no sense the centre of the novel; no mention of being a docker is made until the second part of the novel over a third of the way through; the union action is but the catalyst in Falla's fury upon discovery that his novel about the Sirius slave ship has been published under the name of the very French writer to whom he had entrusted it; the conditions in the port for black dockers, the struggle to win better conditions, the betrayal by the union leadership and Falla's subsequent blacklisting is but an illustration of his desperation to earn his living and get out of the situation he is in by writing. After all, the union episode is less than ten pages in total.

In this sense, Diaw Falla is the writer, blocked socially not only because he is working-class but also because he is black:

Il avait le choix entre deux personnes: le docker, qui n'était qu'un être animal, mais qui vivait et payer son loyer; l'intellectuel qui ne pouvait résister que dans un climat de repos, et de liberté de pensée. La subordination lui était insupportable. Il restait des heures à réfléchir devant son papier, et ce paupérisme mental, né de sa fatigue corporelle, ébranlait son système nerveux (*Le Docker noir*, Paris: Editions Présence Africaine, 1973, p.134).

The irony is that in trying to write a novel about the last slave ship (of course, it is no coincidence that he is a docker), Falla not only fails to leave behind his hard life as a docker, but also ends up in precisely the position of the very people his ticket out of being a docker was describing: slavery, misery

and pointlessness of life.⁵ The central theme of *Le Docker noir* is Falla's acute awareness of the racial and class bias of the literary institution of which he has become a victim: the subject of *Le Docker noir* might be the life of a black docker but its object is the literary institution and its acts of exclusion. Here is the crucial similarity of *Les Boucs* and *Le Docker noir*.

2. Writing and the literary institution

Both novels treat the problem of writing, but also, above all, of publishing novels. The three sections of *Les Boucs* are called «Copyright», «Imprimatur» and «Nihil Obstat», all terms related to publishing. The structure of *Le Docker noir*, though not as directly self-conscious, draws attention to its status as literary artefact. The first section is a series of tableaux which deals with the reactions to the trial by Falla's mother, his girlfriend and mother-to-be Catherine, his friends in the Marseilles community and finally, the prosecution and defence cases of the trial itself. After the jury retires to pass verdict, Falla falls into a dream and the «première partie» ends. Then, in classic flashback fashion (prefiguring Sembène's fascination with cinema), the story is told of how he came to be in court: significantly, this «seconde partie», and the vast majority of the book, is called simply «Le récit». This section ends with a return to the trial and the sentence being passed; followed by the final «partie» of the novel, Falla's letter from prison.

As we have seen, a good number of critics have noted in *Le Docker noir*, and in some cases praised, the portrayal of the conditions for black dockers in Marseilles. Conversely, these same critics seem to see Sembène's first novel as formally weak. We saw how critics either concentrated on the content only (Anozie), or praised the content in contrast to the form (Sainville). The most explicit critic of the form of *Le Docker noir* is Pageard. Calling it «discutable et fort critiqué» (p.24), he describes Sembène's first novel as «proche du mélodrame» (p.72); however, fortunately, notes Pageard,

⁵ See, for example, *Le Docker noir* pp. 213-4.

Sembène's later work «réussira mieux à éviter le mélodrame» (p.24).⁶ Sembène's «défauts» appear in *Le Docker noir* «sans atténuation»: it has «d'assez monstrueuses imperfections de forme», «des raideurs (qui ne disparaîtront jamais tout à fait) et des gaucheries» (p.72). Above all, *Le Docker noir* has a «tendance systématique à l'idéalisation des uns et à l'avisement des autres»; the implicit characterisation of Sembène's novel as Socialist realism is further evident to Pageard in the «tendance excessive au développement moralisant» (p.72). Yet, it is precisely the contradiction between Falla's developing humanism - he has pity for the father of his best friend's (white) girlfriend whose abortion killed her and landed her mother in prison - and his awful crime which is at stake in the novel; hardly indicative of a facile moral code for the characters in the novel.

There is indeed a moral at the end of the novel: Falla's letter shows how unemployment and poverty breed crime and depravity, but also the contrary, that the noble art of literature is corrupt and corrupting. Indeed, Fírinne ní Chréacháin has pointed to a much deeper level of complexity than suggested in Pageard's accusation of «melodrama» in *Le Docker noir*. She writes: «[T]he conflict between the African docker and the Frenchwoman who has stolen the novel he has written and published it in her own name, is no more nor less than the symbolic representation of the imperialist relationship».⁷ In my view, the novel is concerned with the power, or otherwise, of writing: the self-consciousness of the structure and the self-referentiality, though not as blatant as in Chraïbi's *Les Boucs*, is nevertheless present.

The «mise en abîme» in *Les Boucs* can be considered as a constant parody of itself. Waldik wants his novel, *Les*

6 Despite this view, Pageard decides later in his book that Sembène's second novel *O pays mon beau peuple* (1957) is also formally flawed; describing the skill evident in *Voltaire* (1962), Pageard suggests that this collection of short stories contains none of the «vulgarités de certains passages des oeuvres précédentes (*Le Docker noir*, *O pays mon beau peuple*)» (p.92).

7 F. Ní Chréacháin, «Sembène Ousmane incorporated» in P. Hawkins & A. Lavers, *Protée noir. Essais sur la littérature francophone de l'Afrique noire et des Antilles*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992, p. 128.

Boucs, to be published; but, of course, the fact that we are reading a novel by a North African called *Les Boucs* means that it has been published in reality. Waldik agrees at the end of the first section of the novel, «Copyright», to let Mac O' Mac have the rights to his novel in return for a ticket out of France back to Algeria; just as Falla's novel about the historical enslavement of blacks in *Le Docker noir* manages to get published but only in the name of a white French literary figure, so Waldik's novel about treatment of North African workers can only be published by allowing Mac O'Mac to take the credit:

[M]oi qui n'ai plus rien à espérer en France, je suis prêt à lui donner bien autre chose que des dattes en échange du billet d'avion qu'il veut bien me payer. Prêt à lui laisser mon héritage en France: même Simone et même mon fils. Et *Les Boucs* donc! et mes souvenirs et mes petites joies. Expériences. Bâtarde de littérature! il pourra en faire un roman, une maîtresse, un petit cireur, n'importe quoi [...] (*Les Boucs*, pp.101-102).

The novel within a novel is continued in the second section of *Les Boucs*; «Imprimatur» describes two events: Waldik's first arrival in France, his poor treatment at Customs, his visit to the Commissariat to get a work permit, his brutalising job with other Algerians in the mines, living in squalid conditions: this section could be considered part of his novel *Les Boucs* that Mac O'Mac is publishing. Amidst these literary «expériences» of an Algerian living and working in France, we are given (confusingly) an account of Waldik's return to France as the publication of this novel is about to take place. He explains to the group of twenty-two «Boucs» with whom he used to work that he has returned to France «que pour eux» (p.163); he also tries to explain to them why he has set out their «misères» in the form of a novel, at the same time as explaining to them what a novel is.⁸ Thus, the

8 It appears now in the novel that the concentration camp description in Chapter 2 of «Copyright» is part of Waldik's novel; though such a clear division between first and third person narratives does not seem possible throughout the novel.

theme of the writer divorced from his/her people is also common to both novels.

3. Writing and change

All literary works raise the question of audience. In 1955 Barthes was acutely aware of the «cloisonnement» afflicting consumption of literature, that the novels (if any) in 1950s France which were reaching the masses were either Socialist Realism via the Communist Party, or no more than pot-boilers; the thought-provoking, formal innovation, such as the «Nouveau Roman», was left to the middle-classes and academic intellectuals with time and education.⁹

The inability of Sembène to reach African workers via the novel is figured by the epigraph to *Le Docker noir* in which Sembène regrets that his mother will not be able to read his novel, as Jill Taylor has pointed out in her essay on the question of the choice of language for African writers; she writes: «[I]n Sembène's moving dedication [...] it is clear that writing in an indigenous language would not reach his people any more than writing in French».¹⁰ It is clear then that the self-consciousness of Sembène's writing extends out of the novel to the question of consumption. Not only is Falla's novel stolen by a white middle-class writer, the chances are it will be read by middle class whites and Africans: anyone but the «docker noir»; this irony applies equally to Sembène's own novel.

Similarly, in the final section of *Les Boucs*, «Nihil Obstat», Waldik's «malaise» becomes progressively worse, as he drinks more and more; having raped Simone, he is knocked out by Raus and taken to Isabelle's house. Raus has had enough of him, and so, he tells Isabelle, have the «Boucs»: because Waldik still thinks that he is their «prophète», comments Raus (p. 175). Isabelle looks after him, Waldik hits her; she looks on him as a «clochard», he thinks

9 See «Petite sociologie du roman français contemporain», Documents, February 1955, pp. 193-200, (*Oeuvres complètes* vol 1, pp. 465-470).

10 J. Taylor, «The Question of language in African literature», in Hawkins & Lavers, *Protée noir*, p. 176.

he looks like a «saint» (p. 176); and she taunts him that the only reason he left France was because he realised he had travelled so far from the other «boucs» in becoming a drunken writer that he could not «supporter le regard de [s]es frères». Waldik's only solution is to return to being a «bouc»; the final chapter which describes his original aim as a boy in Algeria to leave for France, is modified by the fact that we are told that the little Waldik had convinced his father to sell the family goat (his only «bouc») to pay for the ticket: ceremonially, the 22 «boucs», as we have previously learnt, have become 23, by Waldik's return to the fold (p.191). If Waldik returns to the «Bouc» fold, the audience for Waldik's novel is nevertheless certainly not his compatriots and fellow sufferers «les boucs» (they do not even know what a novel is); and given the complexity and sophistication of Chraïbi's *Les Boucs* nor are Algerian workers likely to be the readership of Chraïbi's own novel.

Conclusion

Writing for Sembène and Chraïbi becomes a liberation for them but a utopia for their central characters; both *Le Docker noir* and *Les Boucs* show, in their different ways, that writing is a utopian solution to oppression, but also that (not necessarily as contradictorily as we might think) it is possible to combine this with a critique of contemporary situations. I mean contemporary in both senses of the word: contemporary to when the two writers were writing, but also contemporary to today. *Les Boucs* and *Le Docker noir* are both novels of «history» in that they show the real experience of Africans confronted by, and confronting, a racist and oppressive society in 1950s France, but they remind us quite clearly that this discrimination exists today. To return to Barthes's quote, these two novels may well be a «history» of 1950s France for Africans coming to work there, they may well be questioning their own form, but they cannot be considered then (or now) part of what Barthes called «Histoire»: literature has not (unfortunately we might conclude) yet died.

Andy Stafford
Lancaster University

V. Y. Mudimbe and the Francophone African Subject: Theories and Practices

The Zairean writer V. Y. Mudimbe has in the last twenty years made a significant contribution to the fields of anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, theology, political and social science, folklore and literature within Francophone Africa. He has emerged as one of the most important voices of his time in the context of recent challenges to Western theoretical discourse about African literature and culture. Mudimbe's critique of the enduring power of Western epistemology in its various guises involves a re-reading of the texts of early ethnology and anthropology, as well as of more recent, apparently «sympathetic» approaches to the study of non-Western cultures. In several ground-breaking studies (*L'Autre Face du royaume* (1973), *L'Odeur du père* (1982), and *The Invention of Africa* (1989)), he has questioned the relevance of Western theoretical knowledge for an African context, and in a gesture of «decolonisation» of academic discourses of Africanism, he has attempted to lay the foundations for a specifically African philosophy, science, and literary practice.

Mudimbe's theories as they develop between the publication of *L'Autre Face du royaume* and *The Invention of Africa* might be said to be driven by one single and fundamental question: What are the conditions and the possibilities of a specifically African discourse? The labour of much of Mudimbe's critical writings takes the form of a patient and extremely thorough excavation of the various discourses which have historically informed Western conceptions of Africa. As he says, for example, reviewing twentieth-century ethnology:

Durkheim's prescriptions on the pathology of civilisations, Lévy-Bruhl's theses on prelogical systems of thought, as well as Frazer's hypothesis on primitive societies, bear witness, from a functional viewpoint, to the same epistemological space in which stories about Others, as well as commentaries on their

difference, are but elements in the history of the Same and its knowledge.¹

Two of his most constant allies in this vast undertaking are Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, both of whom, in different ways, invoke archaeological metaphors for re-thinking the ways in which Western civilisation has conceived of Others and Otherness. For Lévi-Strauss, geology (and archaeology) reveal to us the millions of years of history that are hidden beneath the immediately perceptible evidence of the earth's surface, just as structuralist anthropology claimed to reveal the hidden complexity of social organisations beneath the visible data of traditional ethnographic observation (which, according to Lévi-Strauss, is misread, because read ethnocentrically). Foucault's probing analyses of the "archaeology of knowledge" likewise explore the complicity between formations of power and epistemological orders in Western civilisation. Both theorists radically question the humanist tradition by tracing the emergence of the concept, or construct, of «Man» as a rational thinking subject that is the centre of a world ordered by his own epistemological frames of reference. Mudimbe, in turn, recognizes and exploits the methodological usefulness of Lévi-Strauss's and Foucault's theories for a re-evaluation of discourses of Africanism by showing how Western ethnology and other human and social sciences, as well as travel literature, theology and philosophy are in fact all part of the same discursive order, what he calls the «colonialising structure» of Western discourse about other cultures. As Mudimbe describes it, anthropological and ethnographical exploration was in fact a continuation of the Enlightenment tradition of seeing Africa as backward, primitive, savage, and so on, but with the difference that «the discourse on "savages" is, for the first time, a discourse in which an explicit political power presumes the authority of a scientific knowledge, and vice versa» (*The Invention of Africa*, p.16).

This discourse is articulated in *L'Odeur du père*, again following Foucault, as a Western *ratio* which defines and structures the conditions and possibilities of the values and

1 *The Invention of Africa*, p.28.

codes which it employs in relation to the non-Western object of its gaze. Mudimbe says, for example, that it is the *episteme* of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that *invented* the concept of a static, prehistoric, primitive tradition (*The Invention of Africa*, p.189). This leads him to critique not only *synchronically* conceived projects, such as those of the early «primitivists», or Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy*, with its claim to insight into an authentic and eternal Bantu «soul», but also more recent projects which take a diachronic, dialectical approach to the evolution of African history, such as Peter Rigby's Marxist-informed analyses.² Mudimbe's analytical rigour does not stop there, since it includes - more significantly - a critique of what he sees as African appropriations of Western discursive orders: of *Négritude*, certainly, on now familiar grounds (that it was working within the parameters defined by a Western philosophical tradition), but also of the first generation of African philosophers (Kagamé, Lufulwabo, Mulago, Mbiti, and so on), who more or less accepted Western anthropological methodologies, and of African historians such as Cheikh Anta Diop, Obenga and Ki-Zerbo, whose work was still characterized by what Mudimbe terms a Western «aestheticisation» of African culture.

In this respect, Mudimbe's thinking runs parallel to that of African philosophers such as Paulin Hountondji, Marcien Towa, and Eboussi-Boulaga, in their critique of what Hountondji calls, referring to Tempels and his legacy, «ethnophilosophy», and its ethnocentric bias. The fundamental question, for Mudimbe, then is: how can Africans, over and above considerations of social, political and economic liberation, free themselves from the Western discursive order which still informs much African thinking and writing. In the chapter entitled "Quel ordre du discours africain" in *L'Odeur du père*, Mudimbe spells out the hidden dangers of any claim to break free from the West, in a reformulation of Foucault's doubts about the possibility of Western philosophy escaping from its Hegelian legacy:

2 See Mudimbe's "Anthropology and Marxist Discourse", in *Parables and Fables*, 166-193.

[...] apprécier ce qu'il en coûte de se détacher de l'Occident suppose 1) de savoir jusqu'où l'Occident s'est approché de nous; 2) dans ce qui nous permet de penser contre l'Occident, ce qui est encore occidental; 3) de mesurer en quoi notre recours contre lui est encore peut-être une ruse qu'il nous oppose et au terme de laquelle il nous attend, immobile et ailleurs (p.44).

It is this level of philosophical self-awareness which, to my mind, determines the need for Mudimbe to take up a critical position with respect to both Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, who are, as he says, ultimately part of the very heritage from which an African discourse would wish to free itself:

[...] despite their violence against the rules of the Same and the history of its conquests over all regionalisms, specificities, and differences, Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, as well as a number of African thinkers, belong to the signs of the same power (*The Invention of Africa*, p.43).

In other words, whatever the intellectual benefits to an African philosophy of theories which posit a discontinuity between a subject and the discursive orders, or hidden cultural structures which circumscribe it, and pre-empt the limitations of its experience, such theories are ultimately, as Mudimbe puts it, «engulfed in the history of the Same and its contradictions» (p.43).

Mudimbe argues, therefore, in what at first appears as an overly simplistic counterpoint to the celebrated «disappearance of the subject» of French structuralism and psychoanalysis, or the fragmented subject of postmodernism, for a *restoration* of a fully conscious, intentional subject. Far from being a naïve return to a certain pre-critical conception of human subjectivity, what Mudimbe proposes is a re-affirmation of the African subject as a strategic means of contesting the supposed objectivity, or universalism of the discursive orders which still dominate African science, philosophy, political thinking, aesthetic theories, and so on. This concrete, very deliberately existential subject is also seen as an assertion of the singularity of its place and its time, with its particular voice being «le cri et le témoin de ce lieu singulier» (*L'Odeur du père*, p.13). As he says a little later

on, «nos discours nous justifient comme existences singulières engagées dans une histoire, elle aussi singulière» (p.33). What is required, according to Mudimbe, in order to «nous défaire de "l'odeur" d'un père abusif», is to «nous accomplir, nous mettre en état d'excommunication majeure, prendre la parole et produire *différemment*» (p.35).

Mudimbe at several points quotes Fanon's famous «mot d'ordre» in this regard: «la densité de l'histoire ne détermine aucun de mes actes. Je suis mon propre fondement ("Quel ordre du discours africain?").» So it is posited as an African *cogito*, but one which in its very affirmation would involve both a disarticulation of Western discursive objectification, and a claim to a new form of subjective agency. It would entail, in the practice of scientific disciplines, for example, choosing «l'aventure contre la science, l'incertitude contre la sécurité intellectuelle» (Problèmes théoriques des sciences sociales et humaines, p.57), encouraging inventiveness and creativity, a certain form of a-rationalism. As Mudimbe writes, in discussing the possibility of specifically African educational practices, «comment, aujourd'hui, malgré l'enseignement, libérer pleinement la créativité, retrouver le droit à la différence, assumer la folie?»³ «Madness» is here to be understood not in psychoanalytic terms, but as an act of stepping outside the margins of the Western *ratio*.

Mudimbe's own writings, importantly, to my mind, and this is something which I don't feel has been stressed enough by commentators of Mudimbe's work, themselves participate in the very subjective re-affirmation which he theorises. As well as his poetry and fiction, his theoretical texts are always very firmly grounded in the autobiographical, their status as «écrits de circonstance» clearly marked. I would like to suggest that his novels, rather than simply thematically «illustrating» his theories, which is how they are often read, are themselves affirmations of the disarticulating effects of a writing that attempts to reclaim its own subjectivity, so that it creates a troubled and troubling zone *between* Mudimbe's theory and his fiction, which I would see as the very space of the mode of «invention» he is proposing. As an illustration of

what I mean, I'd like briefly to discuss two of Mudimbe's novels, *L'Ecart* and *Le Bel Immonde*, in this light.

L'Ecart is recounted in the first person in the form of Ahmed Nara's personal diary in the weeks leading up to his death, and is presented to the fictional «editor» of the book by Nara's archivist friend, Salim. Nara was an African student who returned to Africa after spending time in Paris working on a history dissertation on the Kouba people, and whose project had aimed to «décoloniser les connaissances établies» (p.27). His critique of Western anthropological accounts of the Kouba involved precisely the kind of subjective investment in his research that Mudimbe argues for (as Nara says, it is «pour instaurer, en symbole bavard, les échos du moi» (p.116). Nara's relationships with the other characters, both in discussions of his present situation and in flashbacks to his time in Paris, are representative of the different forms of discursive subjugation or subjection from which he struggles to escape: there is first of all the discourse of history - his Marxist friend, Soum, sees his research into the Kouba as an escape from Africa's present-day political realities into a «mythical past»; secondly, the discourse of anthropology - his French girlfriend Isabelle in Paris contrasted her European «rationalism» or her «humanity» with Nara's African animal sensuality (she refers to him as her «totem»); and thirdly, psychoanalysis - Nara's psychiatrist, Dr Sano, diagnoses his deep sense of anxiety as a case of schizophrenia. In other words, he simply labels him as insane. A number of details about Nara's childhood seem to support Dr Sano's diagnosis, but this classically Freudian (largely Oedipal) interpretation, like the other discursive frames which define who Nara is, and how he can know who he is, is shown to be an integral part of the entire Western *ratio* from which Nara is trying to escape. The *écart* of the title thus points not only to the divisions which seem to tear Nara apart (the past and present, Europe and Africa, Isabelle and his African woman lover Aminata, his alleged schizophrenia, and so on), but also names the distance itself which he wants to put between himself and these dichotomies. His «madness» is thus to be read as a powerful enactment of the rejection of the *ratio* of Western scientific models for which Mudimbe argues. The writing itself is an affirmation of a subject outside the margins

3 "Société, enseignement, créativité", in *L'Odeur du père*, p.81.

of Western discourse, but his death bears witness to the admission that this is no easy path towards «liberation». It may seem as if the intensity of the introspection of Nara's diary cuts it off from its socio-historical context. It is, however, precisely through a refocusing of the narrative on a subjective inner space, and on the disintegration of this subjectivity, which is a necessary preliminary step, in Mudimbe's terms, to dislocating and repositioning the writing subject with respect to the discursive systems that have circumscribed and determined it.

Le Bel Immonde is similarly concerned with exploring the subjectivities of its characters. Although it is more firmly rooted in an actual political and historical context (the 1965 rebellion in Kinshasa, when Zaire was still the Congo Republic), with the two main characters - a government minister and his prostitute lover - actively involved in the political drama that is unfolding, the narrative perspective (switching back and forth from third to second to first person) underlines their essential solitude. The story takes place for the most part in the shadowy urban night world of Kinshasa, and traces the prostitute Ya's love affair with the minister, the manipulation of her and of this affair by the rebel forces in order to gain access to plans of the government's actions and movements, and Ya's ultimate betrayal of the minister to the government, who realise that he is now a danger to them, and «arrange» for his «accidental» death. *Le Bel Immonde* can be read at one level as a portrayal of the violence and despair of life in what Mudimbe has termed the «marginal space» of underdevelopment in Africa, by which he means the «intermediate space between the so-called African tradition and the projected modernity of colonialism» (*The Invention of Africa*, p.5). At other levels it again clearly brings into play some of Mudimbe's central theoretical preoccupations, but with an interesting twist. The metaphor of defying and getting rid of «l'odeur du père» can be seen both in Ya's relationship with her own father (a chief of the rebel tribe, who has been murdered by the government forces, but who represents the African past, loyalty to tradition, and so on) and with the minister (who is shown to be part of this same «patriarchal» order when he turns for help to a tribal «maître», who makes him a «fils» and forces him to make a sacrificial killing of

Ya's woman friend, in what Mudimbe admits in a note at the end is a «farce anthropophagique», a joke at the expense of early explorers of Africa!). The methods of the government and of the rebels are equally brutal, and the «immonde» of the title is clearly meant to extend beyond what might appear to be its obvious association with Ya's prostitution and treachery, to include the other characters as well. For it is her father's followers who in fact force Ya to engage in a kind of second-level prostitution. Likewise, the government uses her to get rid of the minister. One wonders what is *left over*, what remains for Ya at the end of the book as she returns to the bar, and what is *left over* after the political and moral determinations of the book - like the «truth» that is finally eked out of Ya by the government police interrogators - have been exhausted. In this respect, the «immonde» might be seen as precisely a rejection of the «monde» to which the competing political ideologies have consigned her, in the same way that Nara's madness is a rejection of the *ratio* which defines him. The *récit* could be read as an assertion of a subjectivity, in this case a woman's subjectivity (it is only towards the end of the book that the first-person narrative by Ya comes to the fore), and as such could be read in conjunction with Mudimbe's most recent novel, *Shaba deux* (1989), of which he said in a recent interview that it was an attempt «to write a novel in which I could speak from an African woman's voice, in which I could describe a woman's subjectivity which is relatively independent from, let's say, male power».⁴

Mudimbe's own fiction, then, could be said to both illustrate and to actualise his theory, insofar as it explores the space of the African subject, once the props of the historical, socio-cultural and psychic determinations to which it is set in opposition have been removed. I would venture to suggest that this fiction is an important realm of creativity, of invention, in that, while it is theoretical through and through, it is not reducible to its theoretical framework, and one might say that the very excess of fiction over theory is the space of subjective reaffirmation. One might contest Mudimbe on the grounds that, despite his insistence on anchoring the subject in

4 «A conversation with V.Y. Mudimbe», Faith Smith, *Callaloo* 14:4 (1991), p.977.

the contingencies of its time and place, his own thought nonetheless continues to remain in a very high intellectual orbit, and might be critiqued for still being part of the «same» discursive tradition from which he seeks to escape. He himself answers such objections by saying that any critique has to start out within the language, and to accept the ground rules of the game it is critiquing. And in any case, this would not do justice to the disarticulating power of Mudimbe's writing. If his theories are marked by the abstraction of the discourses they are challenging, and remain essentially descriptive or programmatic, it is his fiction which provides the space in which these theories are activated and played out. This itself legitimates a possible extension and application of his theories beyond the confines of their own particular frames of reference, for, as Mudimbe insists at the end of *L'Odeur du père*:

On peut arracher à chaque expérience ses propres normes d'intelligibilité sans que n'interviennent nécessairement des instruments ou des catégories privilégiées par une autre expérience (*L'Odeur du père*, p.185).

Michael Syrotinski
University of Aberdeen

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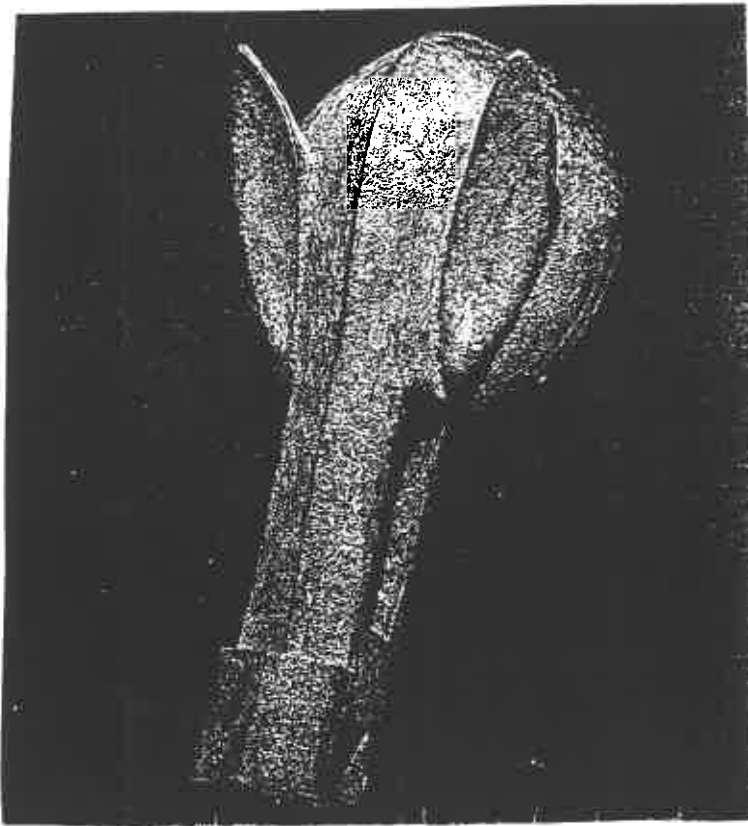
Masques. Exhibition at the Musée Dapper, 50 Avenue Victor-Hugo, Paris (until 30 September 1996)

Masques! O Masques!
 Masque noir masque rouge, vous masques blanc-et-noir
 Masques aux quatre points d'où souffle l'Esprit
 Je vous salue dans le silence!
 Et pas toi le dernier, Ancêtre à tête de lion.
 Vous gardez ce lien forclos à tout rire de femme, à tout sourire qui se fane
 Vous distillez cet air d'éternité où je respire l'air de mes Pères.
 Masques aux visages sans masque, dépouillés de toute fossette comme de tout ride
 Qui avez composé ce portrait, ce visage mien penché sur l'autel de papier blanc
 A votre image, écoutez-moi!

These lines from Senghor's *Chants d'ombre* form the epigraph to the catalogue of this splendid exhibition. The intimacy of the museum itself, hidden behind the Avenue Victor-Hugo across a courtyard planted with bamboo, lends itself exceptionally well to this kind of exhibition. On entering, there is the usual hesitation at seeing these objects transformed into works of art in Western fashion, stripped of their ritual significance because deprived of context. But ultimately what they lack more than context is in fact movement. Motionless behind their glass screens or wall-mounted, they acquire a sense of eternity that is almost Greek in feeling, whereas in use they must have radiated above all the intense, vibrant interaction between the world of the living and the spirit world, between men and the ancestors, between man and the animal world.

The lighting compensates to some extent, reproducing in static form the concentrated half-light in which the masks would have been used, but also accentuating the contours and the relief of the forms, making them stronger, starker. The stark effect is increased, of course, somewhat artificially, by the loss in almost every case of the more perishable parts of the mask, notably the grass and raphia surrounding the face.

What is revealed, however, is an astonishingly rich tradition, ranging from the extreme abstract of the Bambara *kono* mask, reproduced here, and the disk-masks of the Baoulé, to the more naturalistic tradition of the Makonde of Tanzania or the Mangiva of Cameroun, where facial features are conserved more or less intact, although there is no attempt at individualised portraiture. In this latter category also should be mentioned a splendid pair of finely-carved Punu masks from Gabon, where the use of kaolin to produce a white effect and the delicate rendering of the facial features seems to set them apart from many of the other pieces.



The Bambara mask is in fact a good example of both the strengths and the weaknesses of an exhibition such as this: the

kono is an esoteric society, and as such its ritual objects such as the exhibited mask should never be seen by the non-initiated. The breaking of this taboo is paralleled by the loss of an essential element in the ritual, the singing of sacred songs in the manner of the *kono ba*, the sacred bird associated with the society. In its exhibited form, the temptation to regard it first and foremost as a superb piece of abstraction, with a feeling for form and a sureness of line rarely equalled in any tradition, is well-nigh irresistible. But what a loss to a European viewing public had it remained concealed from profane eyes!

It does not, in any case, require too much of an effort of the imagination to take the exhibits out of their museum context. Everywhere there is the fluid passage between the animal and the human, recalling the world of the folk-tale. Human faces have antelope horns, or a bird's beak: hyenas, crocodiles, lions are recalled symbolically or semi-realistically. Eyes are given diverse and always telling treatment, becoming invariably the focal point of the mask, from the slits on the Punu masks or certain Senufo pieces, to the bulging, apparently fixed focus, of the Liberian *kran* masks. The spirit world is real, urgent, concrete.

One might regret the almost universal lack of dating of any of the pieces: if dates of creation are difficult to establish, might it not have been possible to give an idea of the date of collection? Brief information adjoining the exhibits is amply supplemented in the handsome catalogue, with its excellent photographs and informative essays. An additional bonus is the inclusion of the first French translation of the Frobenius essay on masks dating from 1898, and a substantial bibliography of Frobenius.

Altogether this is a richly rewarding and compelling exhibition for anyone interested in the art and culture of black Africa.

J.P. Little
Dublin

Africa 95: Report on Exhibitions

The broadly chronological layout of "Africa, the art of a continent" at the Royal Academy, clockwise round the continent from pre-dynastic Egypt back to Coptic Egypt, is disrupted because the material support of exhibits determines the time-scale. These exhibits include stone axes a million years old, neolithic rock paintings and 12th century bronze castings, while the wooden carvings seldom date beyond the 19th century.



Helmet mask, Makonde, Mozambique/Tanzania, wood and human hair, Bareiss Family Collection (photo George Meister, Munich)

We are soon forced to question our unease at the lack of chronological and even geographical anchorage, as well as our

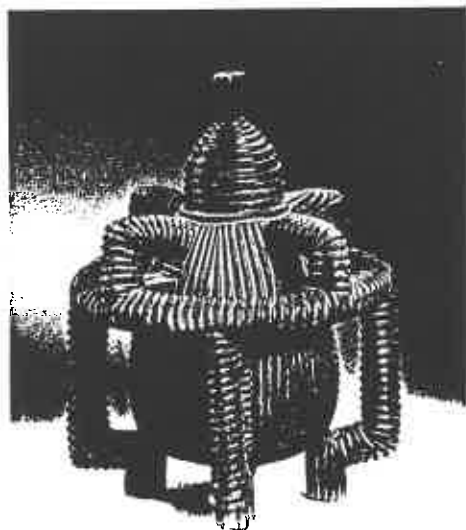
notions of hierarchies. Egyptian art overshadowed everything else in Africa for a long time because, regardless of intrinsic artistic merit, it is geographically concentrated, huge in size and built to last. Also, for Europeans, precious metals and stones command more respect than wood and glass beads, fine arts more than applied arts. These last two categories in particular need re-consideration, as they relate to our equally arbitrary definitions of abstract versus figurative art. Headrests, pots, snuff-boxes and textiles as well as figures or masks cut right through such categories and hierarchies.

Next, we have to accept that the attributions of exhibits do not refer to post-colonial nations but more fluidly correspond to linguistic and/or ethnic entities, and that the terms B.C. and A.D., on a continent functioning jointly on European and Islamic chronologies can be confusing, not to mention the fact that genealogies are more relevant than calendars where the pace of life is linked to seasonal rhythms.

Deprived of our familiar bearings, we are overwhelmed by the sheer cultural variety on offer. We take it for granted that humans derive pleasure from the idealized or realistic reproduction of their own features. Although carved heads may be related to the distinctive features of a particular ethnic group, realistic representation is the exception not the rule, archetypes subsume types and types individuals. This is nowhere more apparent than in some masks, where kinship with a mythical totem ancestor is the effect sought after. We are reminded that, in order to survive, this "bare forked animal" had to share the earth with other species and establish pacts with them. Why else are the coats of arms of our forebears adorned with eagles, lions, etc? The skulls of animals consumed at the founding feast of the leopard society (Ejaghams of Cross River, Nigeria) and tastefully arranged on a shield for display should strike a chord of recognition. To say that African art is «earth-bound and lacking in spirituality» (André Breton) is to restrict the meaning of the word. All African myths about origins link life on earth to cosmic energies and this intuition is felt nowhere more strongly than on that continent. The subtext may have been ignored or kept for initiates, but nothing in African art is created for aesthetic gratification only; everything relates to a collective identity linked to a stylistic hallmark, and continuity, attested

sometimes over centuries, is more conspicuous than evolution. Coincidental similarities raise unanswered questions, i.e. between rock paintings of Transvaal Bushmen and those of the Tassili and Eastern Sain, which they pre-date, or between funerary bead nets on 22d dynasty mummies in Egypt, on masks in Zaire and on ceremonial dress in Benin. Consequently, the «pan-human convergence» (Senghor) which reflects a unifying apprehension of reality, transcending particular cultures, results in an understanding of meaning through formal impact.

One would endorse E. de Roux's claim that the «unifying factor of African visual art is man, the human body, the individual rooted in the earth in an infinite variety of form» (*Le Monde*, 8th October 1995), were it not for the conspicuous absence of the body and under-representation of the visual arts from Senegal and the Maghreb, not to mention Gambia's and Libya's total abstention. Granted, the Royal Academy exhibition, with its emphasis on the visual arts in the shape of artefacts, should be placed in the total context of Africa 95. Dance and theatre, well represented elsewhere in the Festival, make for equally emphatic expression of the human body.



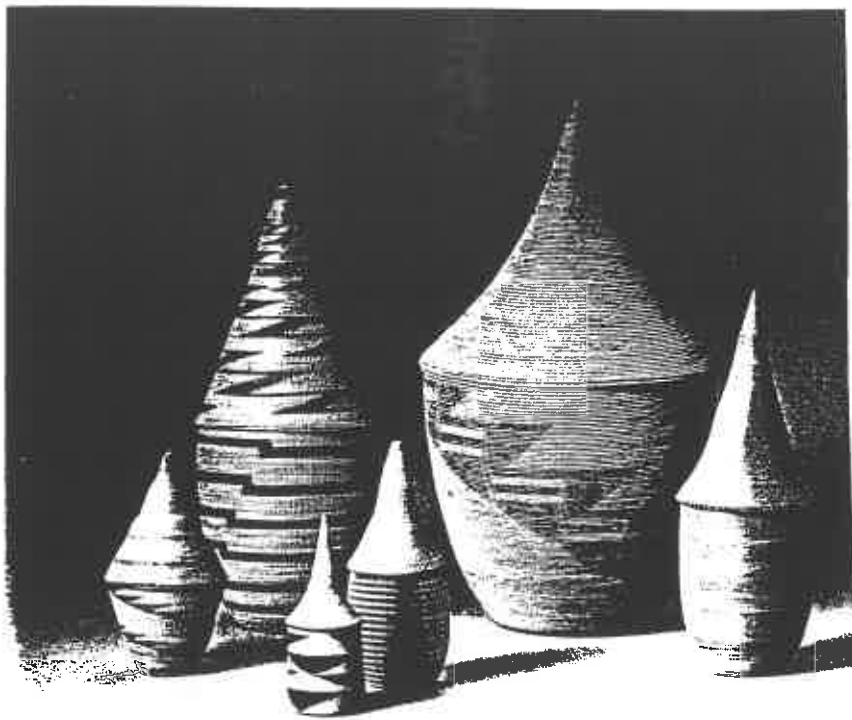
Lidded vessel, Northern Nguni, Swaziland or KwaZulu-Natal, possibly late 19th century, The Trustees of the British Museum, London, 1954.25.570 (photo Heini Schneebeli)

The inevitable gap introduced by Eurocentric categorisation between art forms relating to a single purpose was mitigated by the sculptures of Sokari Douglas Camp at the nearby Museum of Mankind. These were backed by a video of the related Yoruba masquerade which showed clearly the actual interplay of mask, body ornamentation, textile design with music and dance, all contributing to the occasion's religious and social significance.

However, Senghor's definition of Africans as a «black race, cross-bred with Arab-Berber and Khoisan» confronts us with the evidence of two visually antithetic cultures, the Animist and the Islamic. J. Picton's statement (Exhibition catalogue, p.343) that «even in regions dominated by Islam, masked performers entertain during the night feasts of ramadan» seems to indicate that bodily expression is not encouraged in any form within Islamic cultures.

It would be simplistic to oppose Animist and Moslem societies in all their aspects. Among Animists, most masquerades or rituals exclude women either as performers or makers of cult-related objects, but not as participants. In Islam, the exclusion of women from all public social, not just religious, activities and the taboo on the representation of the body have inescapable artistic consequences. Islamic art cannot tell the body, except in the guise of opposition between geometric and curved patterns. Melody and rhythm become conceived as opposite instead of complementary.

On the contrary, Animist art exalts the body, in representations which are both depersonalised and unselfconsciously sexually explicit, repeatedly asserting man's kinship with the other animal species and the sanctity of procreation which ensures continuity between past and future. This kinship between interdependent species is emphatically denied by religions of Semitic origin which declare animal worship to be abominable and claim a privileged relationship between the Godhead and humans; whereas, from the half-man, half-antelope mythic representations of the Neolithic to the pig deity of pre-dynastic Egypt to Hathor and her cow's ears and her counterpart in Chad, through a wealth of zoomorphic masks, the strength and necessity of this bond is reiterated. The dynamics of this fundamental cultural tension has been integrated into European cultures.



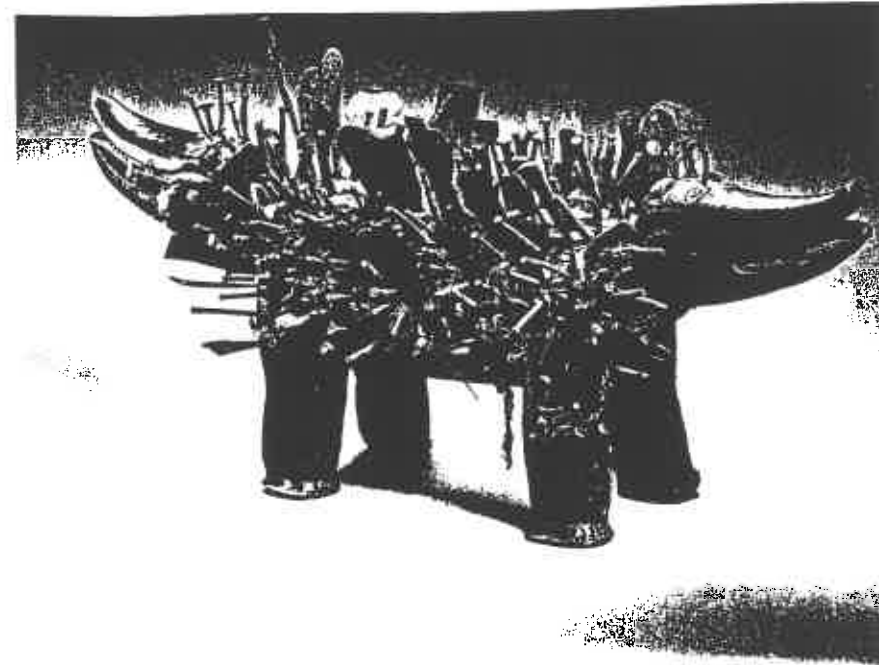
Five miniature baskets, Tutsi, Rwanda and Burundi, first half of the 20th century, grass.
Private Collection (photo Heini Schneebeil)

The Whitechapel and Serpentine Galleries exhibitions addressed another question: namely, how far is it possible for contemporary African artists to retain the spirit of their specific cultures while breaking free from their stylistic constraints? The Whitechapel exhibits ranged from pure abstraction indistinguishable from similar work anywhere, to timid attempts at re-stating traditional forms in different media, with some truly original work in between. South African Sam Nhlengethwa's "It left him cold" on the death of Steve Biko, combined black humour (the title) with collage,

pencil and charcoal, resulting in the directness of a child's view and the impact of graffiti. "The Shrine", by Bruce Onobrakpeya (Nigeria) reflected the uncanny gift of voodoo to invest the flotsam and jetsam of modern consumerism with awesome associations.

However, it is at the Serpentine that works truly free from mannerism, formalism and lip-service to global trendiness were to be found. The installations of George Adeagbo (Nigeria) "It is art that makes the artist, not the artist that makes art", speaking of «history in general or realities of the 20th century», the «folk art» assemblages of small wooden figures such as "Welcome to our peace world" of John Maskego Segofela (South Africa), with an ironic attention to hyper-realistic detail, the murals of Cyprien Tokundagba (Benin), the candid photo-portraits of Seydou Keita (Mali); the futuristic vision of urban Africa "Kimbéville", conjured up by Bodys Isela Kingelez of Zaire gave every reason to look confidently to the future.

Denise Ganderton
London



Nkisi nkondi (koso), Kongo, Gabinda, before 1900, wood, iron, Musée Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, 1021-35 (photo Heini Schneebeil)

BOOK REVIEW

Empsaël et Zoraïde

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Empsaël et Zoraïde ou les Blancs esclaves des noirs à Maroc*, présentation de Roger Little, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, coll. Textes littéraires, XCII, 1994, xxvi+133p.

Curieuse destinée littéraire que celle de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. Tout le monde a lu *Paul et Virginie*, chef d'oeuvre de sensiblerie traduit dans toutes les langues, jamais épuisé en librairie depuis sa parution (douze éditions différentes figurent parmi les *Livres disponibles* en 1996). Les amateurs d'exotisme et de littérature de voyage connaissent également le *Voyage à l'île de France*, et l'on a fait des gorges chaudes (le plus souvent sans les avoir lues) des *Etudes de la nature* et du melon strié par la Providence pour en faciliter au père de famille le découpage et la distribution équitable. Mais, jusqu'à ces dernières années, pratiquement tous les autres écrits de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, recueillis par Aimé Martin en 1818 dans son édition peu fiable des *Oeuvres complètes*, sommeillaient dans les magasins des bibliothèques.

Heureusement, certains textes émergent de l'oubli. Nous disposons depuis 1980 de *L'Arcadie et l'Amazone*, depuis 1993 des *Projets pour la Corse* et désormais, grâce à Roger Little, d'*Empsaël et Zoraïde*, surprenant drame en cinq actes et en prose jamais représenté ni même publié du vivant de l'auteur, connu des spécialistes dans la version tronquée des *Oeuvres complètes*, ou dans l'édition procurée par Maurice Souriau en 1905, plus satisfaisante, mais épuisée depuis longtemps.

Il n'est pas impossible d'espérer que le consciencieux travail de Roger Little, qui est retourné aux manuscrits pour

fournir une édition désormais définitive du texte, va inspirer une réévaluation de l'ensemble de l'oeuvre de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre car, comme il l'écrit avec raison:

Si l'image que nous avons de Bernardin est celle d'une fadeur niaise et d'une analyse psychologique plutôt courte, *Empsaël et Zoraïde* témoigne d'un tempérament autrement vigoureux (p.vi).

L'intrigue d'*Empsaël et Zoraïde* est réduite à sa plus simple expression. L'action se passe au XVIII^e siècle dans l'empire de Maroc. Le Noir Empsaël est originaire de Sénégal, où il passait souvent une partie de ses nuits

à jouer du balafo ou à danser au clair de la lune avec des jeunes filles du voisinage, simples et douces comme des tourterelles (III,2).

Adolescent, Empsaël avait été enlevé avec son frère cadet par des négriers, et vendu à Santo Domingo au cruel Don Pedro Ozorio, «habitant espagnol qui passait sa vie à tourmenter les hommes et à prier Dieu» (III,2). Il s'échappe en se cachant dans un vaisseau hollandais, dont le capitaine le revend à un Anglais de la Jamaïque, qui le revend à son tour. De maître en maître, Empsaël passe au souverain du Maroc, qui n'hésite pas à faire de lui son favori et son ministre, puisque le préjugé de la couleur est inconnu dans son empire (et qu'il est d'ailleurs lui-même de mère africaine). Animé d'une haine compréhensible envers les chrétiens et les Blancs, Empsaël traite ses esclaves européens avec une grande rigueur. Ce qui ne l'empêche pas d'être amoureux fou de son épouse, esclave française à laquelle il a donné le nom de Zoraïde, de somptueux cadeaux et des dames de compagnie originaires de différents pays d'Europe: Rosa Alba la Napolitaine, Margueritte la Hollandaise, Dalton l'Anglaise et Petrowna la Russe. Zoraïde s'efforce de tempérer la sévérité de son seigneur envers ses coreligionnaires. Elle est particulièrement attendrie par les souffrances d'un vieil Espagnol capturé en haute mer par des corsaires marocains, que le jeune noir Almiri, son ancien esclave, refuse d'abandonner, et aide à supporter les rigueurs de sa condition. On a deviné qu'il s'agit

d'Ozorio lequel, s'étant repenti des mauvais traitements jadis infligés à Empsaël, avait traité le jeune Almiri avec humanité. Ce fidèle esclave ne pouvait que se révéler être le frère cadet du grand amiral. Après la scène obligatoire de reconnaissance, Empsaël, encouragé par sa femme, donne la liberté à Zoraïde et aux esclaves européens, qui l'aideront volontairement à faire du Maroc un royaume utopique.

Quelques personnages secondaires, tels le renégat sicilien Achmet, qui a échappé de justesse à la mutilation, ses parents voulant, pour le tirer de la misère, le vendre à un maître de musique napolitain qui allait lui «ôter les moyens d'y en introduire d'autres» (IV,4), le marchand juif Jacob, le pacifiste Bénézet, philosophe quaker, l'ecclésiastique Jeronimo et son confrère musulman Balabou complètent la distribution. Ils ne contribuent qu'incidemment au déroulement de l'intrigue, mais servent de truchement à Bernardin de Saint-Pierre pour exposer son idéologie. L'action dramatique est en fait subordonnée à des discussions intellectuelles entre les divers personnages. Aussi, si *Empsaël et Zoraïde*, dont l'esthétique relève de la comédie larmoyante et du mélodrame, aurait peut-être pu inspirer un livret d'opéra, il serait aujourd'hui vain de songer à mettre la pièce en scène, même au titre de curiosité dramatique.

Illustration tant qu'on voudra d'une sensibilité désuète, le drame n'en reste pas moins étonnamment moderne. Le but de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre était de faire jeter à ses contemporains un regard critique sur leur civilisation, et l'on ne peut que constater que, par delà une rhétorique surannée, sa problématique reste en partie d'actualité. Toute l'argumentation de Bernardin s'articule autour de deux postulats, qui ont dû sembler paradoxaux à l'époque: la condamnation systématique de la civilisation européenne et chrétienne, vue comme la véritable barbarie, inférieure en tous cas à celle de l'Islam et surtout à la religion naturelle et la vie idyllique des Africains noirs adorateurs du Soleil.

A l'intolérance des chrétiens, Empsaël oppose la largeur d'esprit de l'Islam:

Chrétien, tu oses comparer ta religion à celle du Prophète? Nous n'avons pas réduit à l'esclavage les peuples que nous avons domptés. Nous n'en forçons aucun de soumettre leur conscience

à nos armes. Les Grecs, les Juifs, les Arméniens, les Coptes, les Maronites exercent librement parmi nous la religion de leurs pères. Nos prêtres, après avoir répandu la lumière du Croissant dans les trois Arabies et dans les îles de l'Asie, n'en ont point subjugué les habitants (V,6).

Chez l'ennemi héréditaire arabe, la noblesse «est sans recommandation», alors qu'en Europe les nobles n'ont pas besoin d'exercer une profession: «le titre de noble leur tient lieu de tout» (V,4). Les castrats sont inconnus chez eux: «Maroc n'est point barbare comme Naples et comme Rome» (IV,4). Si les Mahométans font la guerre aux chrétiens ce n'est, d'après Achmet, que «pour leur rendre les maux qu'ils en ont reçu en Espagne, en Afrique et aux Indes au nom de la religion» (IV,2); d'ailleurs, comme l'affirme Empsaël: «je laisse aux Européens la cruauté et la corruption envers leurs ennemis. Je ne fais aux miens qu'une guerre loyale» (IV,4). On pratique l'esclavage au Maroc, il est vrai, mais, explique Empsaël:

La plupart des Européens qui sont esclaves ici sont des navigateurs qui vont aux Iles de l'Amérique ou sur la côte d'Afrique faire le malheur des noirs. Vous avez porté le crime de l'esclavage sur les côtes de la Guinée, et Dieu en a mis la vengeance sur celles de Maroc (V,6).

L'esclavage pratiqué par les musulmans est moins inhumain que celui des chrétiens, car:

Les chrétiens ne permettent pas à leurs esclaves noirs de rester dans la religion où ils sont nés, mais les Musulmans, plus équitables, ne captivent que le corps de leurs ennemis: ils laissent leurs âmes libres (IV,3).

et que

Quand les chrétiens baptisent leurs esclaves, c'est pour leur rendre leurs fers sacrés; mais quand les Musulmans circoncent les leurs, c'est pour les en délivrer (III,2).

Empsaël et Zoraïde est avant tout un éloquent plaidoyer contre l'esclavage et la traite. Bernardin n'a pas été le premier à protester contre ce scandale et à décrire les souffrances qui en découlent. Mais pour ce faire, il a eu l'originalité de renverser les rôles et de montrer

par une juste réaction de la vengeance divine, les Européens supporter [...] un esclavage plus cruel que celui des noirs. J'ai fait sur ce sujet un petit drame, dans l'intention de ramener à l'humanité par le sentiment, des hommes que la cupidité empêche d'y revenir par la raison («Suite des Voeux d'un solitaire», *O.C.*, 1818, T.II, p.259-260, cité p.vi).

Bernardin met dans la bouche des Noirs les arguments des esclavagistes blancs: le travail des esclaves blancs est indispensable à la richesse du pays; si on leur donnait la liberté ils en abuseraient; rien n'est aussi trompeur que les Blancs; seuls les Blancs peuvent être réduits en esclavage, puisque les Noirs naissent libres, et «les blancs sont faits pour les servir» (II,5); l'esclavage est d'ailleurs un bienfait pour les pauvres Blancs; comme l'explique le Juif Jacob, qui vient de vendre deux belles Géorgiennes à l'empereur: «Elles ont aujourd'hui l'honneur d'être au service de ses femmes noires, et elles n'avaient pas de pain dans leur pays» (II, 10). Au vertueux Bénézet, «il ne manque, pour être parfait, que d'être noir» (II,4). «La couleur noire est la couleur naturelle de l'homme et de la femme»; «comment peut-on trouver une Blanche jolie, alors que «nos femmes noires sont plus belles, mieux faites, plus gaies, plus vives, plus fortes...»? Bref, un naturel du pays n'arrive pas à croire qu'il puisse y avoir «quelque pays dans le monde où les noirs sont esclaves des blancs» (II,5).

Ce n'est pas par hasard si un Blanc chargé du gouvernement des esclaves, le renégat sicilien Achmet, contre-épreuve du commandeur noir des plantations antillaises, exerce sur eux un sadisme qui évoque pour nous l'univers concentrationnaire:

En tout temps les fers aux pieds, la nuit je les fais descendre dans de profondes matamores fermées de bonnes grilles de fer, où ils respirent à peine. J'en fais appel trois fois par jour. Je leur donne à petite mesure l'eau et la farine d'orge, mais je ne leur épargne pas les coups de bâton (IV,4).

Le renversement des rôles et des préjugés a toujours été un procédé traditionnel de la satire. Mais il a rarement été utilisé pour brocarder les préjugés de race et de couleur. Un siècle et demi après Bernardin, Bertène Juminer l'adoptera dans son amusant (et percutant) roman *La Revanche de Bozambo* (1968), qui se déroule dans une Europe colonisée par les Africains, et plus particulièrement dans la petite ville de Bantouville sur la Sékouane, célèbre pour sa métallique Tour Abdoulaye, et sa basilique baobadiste sur la butte Mozamba qui domine la ville. Des Noirs progressistes y militent contre le racisme de leurs congénères et plaident la cause des Blancs opprimés et exploités, partagés entre la résignation et les aspirations révolutionnaires.

Il n'y a pas que l'institution de l'esclavage et les préjugés racistes qui soient considérés dans *Empsaël et Zoraïde* comme propres à la civilisation européenne, caractérisée par son intolérance religieuse et les méfaits des clergés chrétiens, dogmatiques et superstitieux quelle que soit leur dénomination. La liste est longue des abus et ridicules que Bernardin prend pour cibles: la stratégie de conquête coloniale des Européens, par exemple:

Quand vos vaisseaux marchands ont découvert un pays riche, ils y sollicitent un comptoir [...] vous y envoyez des missionnaires qui pénètrent dans l'intérieur à la faveur du commerce [...] vos prêtres ne tardent pas à s'y faire des prosélytes. [...] Alors vos vaisseaux de guerre arrivent, vos gardes-magasins deviennent des soldats, vos comptoirs des forts, vos chapelles des Cathédrales, et vous finissez par renverser la religion et l'état qui vous ont reçus (V,5).

Bernardin a bien vu comment l'alliance de la politique, l'économie et la religion des Européens fonctionne pour le malheur du reste du monde: il en conclut, par le truchement du vertueux Bénézet: «O Europe, c'est toi qui troubles le genre humain par l'intolérance de tes rois, de tes marchands et de tes prêtres» (II,1). On pourrait également relever les diatribes de Bernardin contre la science occidentale, consacrée à l'invention d'armes redoutables, contre le vin, exporté dans les colonies pour y détruire les populations par l'alcoolisme et, pour finir sur une note moins tragique, son intérêt pour la diététique et sa célébration du végétalisme: Margueritte remarque à propos de Zoraïde: «Comme elle ne vit que de végétaux, son teint est toujours beau, sa taille parfaite, et tous les mouvements de son corps sont doux...» (I, 3). De nombreux lecteurs d'aujourd'hui partageraient la conviction de Bénézet que: «Le régime végétal et l'exercice guérissent de tous les maux» (II,3).

Ecrite avec modération et bon sens, la présentation de Roger Little comporte une historique du texte, une bibliographie et une iconographie très utiles. Les quatre pages qu'il consacre aux qualités littéraires de l'oeuvre, et à ses modèles possibles enrichissent considérablement notre lecture, en particulier lorsqu'il évoque Shakespeare et la dette de Bernardin envers *Othello* et *Le Marchand de Venise*. Enfin les remarques de Roger Little sur «La religion de la nature» et «L'anti-esclavagisme» dans *Empsaël et Zoraïde* sont une contribution importante à la connaissance de ces options idéologiques à la fin du Siècle des Lumières.

Léon-François Hoffmann
Princeton University

ASCALF Conference, November 1995,
at the French Institute, London

I: AFRICAN WRITING

(Versions of two of the papers given under this heading appear in full in the current issue of the *Bulletin*.)

Henri Lopès

On the Friday evening, Henri Lopès opened the Conference with a talk and a reading from his novels. This was also one of the "Hommages aux grands auteurs africains" in the context of the Africa '95 festival. The occasion was memorable for the openness with which M. Lopès discussed his own writing and his relationship with the political structures in the Congo, and for the warmth with which he was received by a large audience. He read, mainly in French, but also in English translation, from *Tribaliques*, *Le Pleurer-rire*, *Le Chercheur d'Afriques* and *Sur l'autre rive*. The discussion of his work brought out a number of factors: his fascination with technique (he writes every day, and asked why he had decided, in *Sur l'autre rive*, to write in the first person from the point of view of a female character, said «Surtout pour savoir si j'étais capable de le faire»); his philosophical and literary debt to Rilke, whom he rereads constantly; and his celebration of all that is positive in cultural hybridity. At the same time, he was at pains to dispel the common myth that his writings, whether on hybridity (*Le Chercheur d'Afriques*) or on political commitment (*Sans Tam-Tam*) were autobiographical; indeed, he said, it was partly to escape from this myth that he had adopted the female voice in *Sur l'autre rive*. It appears that a new novel is with the publishers and expected to appear shortly.

Round Table on African Theatre

The Round Table was chaired by Henri Lopès, with the participation of Gabriel Gbadamosi, dramatist (University of Cambridge), Koulsy Lamko, dramatist, from Tchad/Burkina Faso and Sénouvo Agbota Zinsou (Bayreuth University), playwright and former director of the National Theatre of Togo.

The discussion outlined the difficulty of finding a broad definition of African theatre while avoiding eurocentric norms. One key element, it was agreed, is improvisation, actors having assumed the traditional role of the griot and adapting to an audience whose participation is taken for granted. The Koteba Forum, the Ewé Abdefue Concert Band of Ghana, the South African Market Theatre of Johannesburg and the Togolese Concert Party were quoted as examples of this practice.

Theatre's function of public forum for the discussion of communal issues means that actors are feared and resented by the authorities who see them as "inquiéteurs publics" (trouble-makers). However, performance takes place in a negotiated space, be it between state and citizens, or between sky and earth, in rituals giving access to spiritual forces as in the Yoruba masquerades of Southern Nigeria. The distance between the performers and the audience is controlled by a joker/master of ceremonies.

Finally, it was stated that as acting is not recognised as a full-time profession, performances, often starting with a parade and musical prologue and sometimes ending only when the last spectator has left, do not conform to fixed timescales or necessarily take place in purpose-built spaces.

On the Saturday evening, Sénouvo Zinsou, with a drummer and a single partner, gave a fine demonstration of how to adapt to this year's reduced space at the French Institute, with a performance of three of his playlets, combining narrative, mime, song and dance and ending with enthusiastic audience participation.

Négritude

Katharina Städtler (Bayreuth) in a paper entitled "Political History of Négritude 1940-1945" presented her research on the activities of Black African and Caribbean intellectuals in Paris under the German occupation. Concentrating on the struggle for political decolonisation at the expense of cultural decolonisation, these were divided between assimilationists like René Maran and segregationists like Léon Damas. The Foyer d'étudiants coloniaux, created in 1943 by the Vichy government to protect them from German influence, provided

a focal point for black students and writers, enabling them to move from *L'Étudiant Noir* via journals which were short-lived, to the creation of *Présence africaine* in 1948 and of *Diogenes* and *Les Temps Modernes*. The active patronage of Monod, Sartre, Gide and Leiris contributed to putting decolonisation on the French political agenda in 1945; the inclusion of texts such as Ousmane Socé's *Contes d'Afrique noire* encouraged publishers to welcome "colonial literature".

Chraïbi and Sembène

Andy Stafford's paper (published above) investigates left-wing literature of the mid 1950s, characterised by Barthes in its particular interaction between history and story («Histoire» and «histoire»), through the highly literary examples of an Algerian construction worker in the Paris suburbs and a Senegalese docker in Marseilles. Both Driss Chraïbi's *Les Boucs* and Sembène Ousmane's *Le Docker noir* describe the dire situation for African workers, but both suggest that writing could be a way out of the mire. Indeed both novels have writing as their self-reflexive central metaphor. *Les Boucs* is divided into three sections whose titles refer to the process of publication ("Copyright", "Imprimatur" and "Nihil obstat"), and the central character, Yalann Waldik, is trying, in between looking for work, to get his novel published through a shifty literary agent, Mac O'Mac. Similarly, Diaw Falla, the hero of *Le Docker noir*, has been imprisoned for the murder of a Parisian woman writer to whom Falla entrusts the manuscript of a novel he has written and who has claimed it as her own.

The *mise en abyme* evident in both novels is related to the exploitation of African writers by white literary society: Waldik's novel is itself called "Les Boucs", a crude nickname for North Africans and indicative of their perceived self-worth; and the title of Falla's stolen novel, "Le Dernier Voyage du négrier Sirius", points to the irony of the black docker who tries to write his way out of poverty but ends up imprisoned and enslaved like (and in a sense because of) his ancestors on the slave ship of the novel. Paradoxically, by underlining the literary talents of African manual workers, both novels, as well as criticising racism, offer hope and

instruction to the thousands of African workers coming to France at the time.

Mudimbe

Michael Syrotinski shows V. Y. Mudimbe to be an influential African philosopher whose critique of forms of Western epistemology involves a re-reading of the texts of early anthropology, of Foucault's and Lévi-Strauss's theories, and of the claims of psychoanalysis to universality. He tests the relevance of Western theoretical knowledge for an African context, and in a gesture of "decolonisation" of the academic discourse of Africanism, attempts to lay the foundations for a specifically African philosophy.

The paper (published above) investigates Mudimbe's fictional writing as an important affirmation of a "decolonised" African epistemology. The notion of subjectivity comes to play a central role in Mudimbe's fiction, as it does in his theoretical writings, and Michael Syrotinski looks at two of the novels, *Le Bel Immonde* and *L'Ecart*, in this light. It is further suggested that the frame of reference might usefully be widened by applying Mudimbe's theories of the African subject more broadly to contemporary African Francophone writing.

Lat Joor

Lat Joor's status in literature is ambiguous, alternating between that of Muslim chieftain hostile to progress in A. Cissé Dia's *Les Derniers Jours de Lat Dior* (1936), and that of co-founder of Senegal's relationship with France in line with Senghor's post-independence policy in Thierno Bâ's *Lat Dior: Le Chemin de l'honneur* (1987). Anna Ridehalgh (University of Southampton), in "Lat Joor and the Little Blue Train: Literature and the Nation" set out to demonstrate how this ambiguity was particularly discernible on the occasion of the celebrations for the centenary of the Dakar-St Louis railway in 1985. The construction of the "Little Blue Line", now a suburban railway line vital to the economy of modern Senegal had been fiercely opposed as a threat to Cayorian sovereignty and instrumental in the French taking control.

However, because the railway workers' strikes in 1947-8 led to independence, Lat Joor was reclaimed as a patriot

through slippage from Cayorian to national hero figure. This raises questions as to the creation of national identity in African states. Does Lat Joor represent the whole nation or only its wolof ruling class? In conclusion, Dr Ridehalgh proposed that Ibrahima Niang's *Gaal Dieri (un train de vie)* (1994) offers a literary resolution of this contradiction which political discourse is at pains to justify.

Bâ and N'Diaye

In a paper entitled "The Legacy of Medea: Mariama Bâ, *Un chant écarlate*, and Marie N'diaye, *La Femme changée en bûche*", Pat Little (Saint Patrick's College, Dublin) examined the treatment of Medea's legendary infanticide by two contemporary African women novelists in comparison with Euripides' interpretation of the myth.

Un chant écarlate goes for psychological motivation and social realism. Mireille's ultimate motive is a sense of guilt (which partially exonerates her) at having brought into the world a child, neither black nor white, rejected by both families. But, to justify her action which is totally out of character, Bâ makes her succumb to a fit of madness under the double pressure of her husband's betrayal and her isolation in an alien culture. In *La Femme changée en bûche*, we find none of the moral absolutes of the fairy tale from which the novel takes its title. The protagonist's reason for killing the child is sexual jealousy and revenge. It is suggested to her by the devil with whom she had made a pact to help her husband.

In both cases, we witness the disintegration of a personality. N'Diaye's lack of involvement, in contrast with Bâ's identification with her heroine, is a good example of the alternative post-modern, magical realist technique for portraying descent into madness through a gradually more incoherent narrative. Dr Little argued that both novels, in spite of their different approach, share a common feminist viewpoint; the protagonists are portrayed as self-assertive women, who cannot accept polygamous situations and society's unfairness to women.

Kourouma

The final paper in the section on "Reading Africa in Time" was given by Shona Potts, who analysed Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages et défis* in terms of historical and mythical time. She set the linear, historical narrative of French colonialism against the fictionalised, mythic account of African history, showing the effect on the narrative of imposing a chronological, linear concept of time, characteristic of Europe, on the belief in a simultaneous existence of past, present and future common to African perceptions. Kourouma's use of multiple narrative voices highlights this unsettling presentation of time, and proves to be one of the most noteworthy features of the novel.

Lopès

The second session of Saturday afternoon was devoted to Patrick Corcoran's presentation of "The two manners of Henri Lopès". He demonstrated the way in which, in the early novels and short stories, Lopès uses literature essentially for socio-political purposes, whereby the prerequisite for social justice is clarity of analysis. From *Le Pleurer-Rire* onwards, however, the manicheistic fictional universe and the relatively simple narrative structures give way to far greater stylistic and organisational variety. A multiplicity of narrative points of view and competing discourses give rise to a sense of profusion and uncertainty. The act of reading itself is foregrounded, and the onus is placed on the reader to make sense of the fictional universe.

II: CARIBBEAN WRITING

Césaire

The Saturday afternoon concluded with Denise Ganderton's analysis of Césaire's *Une Tempête*. She showed how Césaire had adapted the Shakespearean material to paint the portrait of colonialism, making of the confrontation between Prospero and Caliban, coloniser and colonised, the central point of the play. In a forceful questioning of the very purpose of colonisation, Caliban denounces the use Prospero has made of

his superior technology, and the will to power of European civilisation. But Césaire uses the confrontation to ask fundamental questions concerning the way forward for black civilisation, notably opening up the debate on language. The confrontation between Ariel and Caliban is shown to be more ambiguous, the two characters, Ariel the "assimilé" and Caliban the "révolté" being shown ultimately to be opposing facets of Césaire's own personality.

Depestre

The papers given on Sunday morning were also devoted to writers from the Caribbean. Edwige Rabreau (Paris IV) opened the session with a lively paper which discussed "Le machisme de René Depestre". This paper looked at the nature of "machismo", its roots in Latino-American culture, and the fact that many men from this culture are conditioned to behave in this way. These assertions could also be attributed to the author. However, far from belittling or exploiting women, the "macho" attitude could be interpreted as a metaphor for political convictions (i.e. rebelling against the social order imposed by colonialism) which are ultimately shared by both men and women.

Chauvet

Anne Marty (Paris) spoke on "Entre «je» et «nous», l'oeuvre de Marie Chauvet est fécondée par la conscience du tragique", with particular focus on the problematic family status of Chauvet's female protagonists, their often subversive desire to find valid personal and socio-political values and the tragic outcome of their lucidity. Most of the novels, both contemporary and historical, deal with fragmented families, but Chauvet explores with particular intensity literal and figurative prostitution in her critique of Haitian society under Duvalier. Different narrative strategies are used, but especially in the "trilogy", *Amour, Colère et Folie*, the conflict between repression and the individual's will for a liberating lucidity achieves tragic status.

Chamoiseau and Confiant

Lise Morel (Aberdeen) gave a very full account of the carnivalesque elements incorporated into the work of Creole writers, in particular Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant. The paper dealt firstly with the carnivalesque characters which appear in the works of these two authors. These could be interpreted as having a limited, stereotypical role, serving as a distraction for the townsfolk. Secondly, Ms Morel described the importance of Carnival as a means through which history is transmitted and experienced, not a definitive version of history, but one which seeks to "debunk" some of the received ideas coming from the West. Finally, the paper raised the issue of language, and the constant interaction between French and Creole. This issue continued to be a point for discussion in the question and answer session, which eventually led back to the debate on the future for Creole writing, whether certain writers could actually be described as "Creole", and the difficulties in defining what actually constitutes Creole for non-Creole speakers, given that it is constantly evolving.

Warner-Vieyra

In her paper, "Mothering into Madness", Wendy Goolcharan (Trinity Hall, Cambridge) discussed Myriam Warner-Vieyra's novel *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit* (1980). The novel offers a specially clear and poignant example of the failure of mother-daughter bonding and the destructive effect on the psyche of the loss of motherland combined with betrayal by the mother. Goolcharan traced how the heroine Zétou is raised in patriarchal rural Guadeloupe to conform to traditional gender roles, but in seeking other values in France is exploited by her alienated mulatto mother and an abusive white stepfather. A number of feminist and psychoanalytic sources were adduced to analyse the maternal failure and its fatally destructive force, shown as symbolic of the assimilationist colonial context. Zétou is committed to an asylum after turning violently on her mother at the close of this «frightening cautionary tale».

III: MAGHREB WRITING

Sebbar

Sponsored by the University of Westminster, the Sunday afternoon session was devoted to writers of Maghrebian origin. Anissa Talahite (Manchester Metropolitan University) gave a useful account of the theme of duality prevalent in the work of Leila Sebbar in "L'écriture du double à travers l'oeuvre de Leila Sebbar". Taking three books (*Shéhérazade*, *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique* and *Le Silence des rives*) she traced the development of this theme in Sebbar's work, in relation to Sebbar's own assertion that she is «ni beur, ni maghrébine ni française» and also in relation to recent debates surrounding «le droit à la différence». She effectively demonstrated how, for Sebbar, symbols always have at least two meanings: Shéhérazade's use of a postcard of an orientalist painting to say her good-byes to her parents; the «banlieue» represented as the scene for a new form of colonialism in *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique* and the restricted view of a veiled woman which becomes a form of camera in *Le Silence des rives*.

Dib

Sunday's proceedings were concluded by an extremely erudite paper given by Beida Chikhi (Paris XIII) on the psychoanalytic elements in the work of Mohammed Dib, and in particular, *Le Sommeil d'Eve*. Ms Chikhi discussed the possible reasons for this, positing the view that Dib, like other Maghrebian writers, endeavours to find new forms of inspiration which are neither French nor Islamic in origin, and that in doing so he illustrates how modern scientific developments are valued in the Arab world. She concluded her paper by saying that it was probably not possible to comprehend Dib's work unless one also had an understanding of psychoanalytic theory.

(The above account of the November 1995 ASCALF Conference is the result of a team effort with contributions from Anna Ridehalgh, Denise Ganderton, Bridget Jones, Pat Little, Roger Little and Sam Neath.)

NOTICES

Members are reminded about the *Masques* exhibition running at the Musée Dapper in Paris until September 30th (see review in this issue of the *Bulletin*) and also about several conferences scheduled for the Summer months:

CIEF (Congrès International des Etudes Francophones) annual conference in Toulouse: June 8th to 16th.

Identités et Politiques Linguistiques en France et dans le Monde Francophone: at the University of Surrey: June 8th and 9th.

Further details from the Department of Linguistic and International Studies, University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 5XH, Tel. 01483 259951

The Call of Remembrance: Reading Caribbean Women Writers, 2nd International Conference: at Goldsmiths College: June 28th to 29th. Further details available from the Caribbean Centre, Goldsmiths College, University of London SE14 6NW

Conference of the Society for Caribbean Studies at UNL, July 3rd to 6th.

Conference of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics in Curaçao, 14th to 17th August.

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Advance Notice

Advance notice is given of the annual **1996 November ASCALF conference** to be held in London (offers of papers to be sent to the President or to the Secretary of the

Association) and also of a **Colloque international sur la Nouvelle Francophone d'Afrique noire.**

The latter is to be held at Cotonou (République du Bénin) over five days in either November or December 1997. Further details from Vincent Engel, Faculté de philosophie et lettres, Place Blaise Pascal, 1, 1348 Louvain-la-neuve, Belgique and from Guy Ossito Midiohouan, Faculté des lettres, arts et sciences humaines, Université nationale du Bénin, BP 526, Cotonou (Bénin) or Jean-Philippe Glennon-Imbert, Dept of French, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4.