

THE MYTH OF AGE,
SYMBOL OF WISDOM IN
AFRICAN SOCIETY AND LITERATURE

Two ideas have been linked in human thought for millenia: age and wisdom. Until now, no one has questioned their close relationship. A myth common to all humanity is that of the wisdom of the elder, which certainly answers a human need for security. It is also an intellectual response to observation based on experience. So why does one call this “myth”? One means here by myth a concept or idea which, having been given value by a group, a society, or indeed, humanity, guides their attitudes and behaviour. It appears that old age is a condition attached to the notion of wisdom by human agreement. This determines the attitude of the individual toward himself and his environment—his conduct, motivation and life-style. At first glance, wisdom would seem to be compounded from a lifetime’s observation and experience. Thus the biological factor of longevity is the basis of wisdom. Other psychological, intellectual and moral

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phenomena are balanced on this physical structure. It remains to be seen if today the myth of age as symbol of wisdom can maintain its integrity in the midst of socioeconomic and political transformations, in a world of expanding scientific knowledge and in an age of mass communication. What are the consequences in a changing world for values based on longevity and experience?

Throughout the history of civilisations, written and oral literatures both attest to this privileged position of old age. Ancient societies tended to confer the governing of their cities either directly or indirectly upon the elders.¹ The judicial system, above all, was administered by the old men.

“The Athenian constitution,” writes Glotz, “which permitted all citizens to participate in the popular assembly when they were mature, only opened the council and judicial assembly to them at 30 years of age, and did not allow a man to arbitrate justice until he had reached 60.”²

Thus all decisions which had repercussions for the society's life should have been made by men to whom sufficient age had given wise opinions. In other words, Greeks separated young men of keen passions and action from those who had a serene outlook and tempered passions. Hermes, often represented with a full beard, is the typical characterisation of intellect in Greek myth. Dressed on winged sandals, the messenger of Zeus symbolises the force of elevation. The elder thus came to represent spirituality; because of his thinness he was not so weighted down by his body and could devote himself to lofty matters of the spirit.³ This myth has been transmitted through civilisations across the ages. Powerful gerontocracies are fairly prominent in medieval and contemporary Europe, and literature, having become a reflection of society, is full of examples.

The moralistic writers, who wanted to portray man as the possessor of an eternal yet practical wisdom, conveyed this through the character of an old man.⁴ Writers and philosophers from

¹ Nearly all forms of government had councils: aristocracies and democratic cities always included a council made up mostly of aged men. See Glotz, *La cité grecque*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1928, pages 54-58, 83-84.

² Glotz, *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

³ Diel, P., *Symbolisme dans la littérature grecque*, Paris, Payot, 1966; pp. 46-47.

⁴ For example see La Fontaine, *Les Fables*; The Old Man and the Ass (VI, 8); The Old Man and the Three Youths (XI, 8); The Old Man and his Sons

the age of enlightenment used the elder as a convenient means of expressing their ideals, particularly the concept of building a city to the measure of man.⁵

In oral cultures, the words and examples of the old men guaranteed the continuity of tradition and social stability. As one who had assimilated the words of patriarchs before him, he could transmit to succeeding generations the benefits of his group's heritage. He should have also lived in a way deemed appropriate to bringing moral edification to the group. In such societies, where life was regulated by word and example, who could serve better than the elder who could cite personal examples for specific problems or who could draw precedents from previous generations? Consequently, when he faced death, the main concern of each head of family was to designate the one who would continue to protect succeeding generations morally and intellectually. In order to be a fitting symbol of wisdom, such a man should not only have proved his physical abilities in youth and middle age, but also had to be gifted with the sort of persuasive language that could command the respect of the young.

Therefore, if civilisations with a so-called written culture required the presence and example of advanced age, wasn't there even more reason for societies without writing to favour their old men and make them protectors of social institutions and moral stability? In brief the elders' role was to inspire, to judge, to act as religious leader and poet to a group where the notion of rapid change was scarcely a characteristic phenomenon. And sometimes his minions have endowed him with supernatural powers. It is an anthropological observation that:

“For the Bantu, old age is a symbol of wisdom. The old people hold on to tribal traditions and are responsible for their continuity. Those who are very old are classed as ancestors.”⁶

(IV, 18); The Hag and the Two Slaves (V, 6); The Old Cat and the Young Mouse (XII, 5).

⁵ Old men often recur in flights of imagination made by Voltaire's characters. They represent wisdom: the Hermit in *Zadig*, Gordon the Jesuit in *L'Ingenu*, Martin in *Candide*.

⁶ Rouméguère-Eberhart, J., *Pensée et société africaines*, Mouton, Paris and the Hague 1963, p. 31.

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According to common belief, the elder can interpret dreams and omens correctly because he communicates with the spirits of the dead. The elders preside over ritual ceremonies to survey their correct form. Their role exceeds the solving of daily problems and the regulation of daily activities. The elder is the repository of culture. He is duty bound to explain to the young the meaning of riddles and esoterica, the symbolism in stories and fable and the content of proverbs. As spiritual leader he explains myth and its idealisation; he extracts the essence from epic poetry. From this body of responsibilities he derives an aura that attracts respect and obedience. While lacking physical strength, he wields a formidable weapon—the power of the word. His curses are to be dreaded because his powers are ever reinforced by his communication with the spirit world.

But times seem to have changed. Is present day African society still able to bring the same veneration to its old? Has not the relatively rapid acquisition of new knowledge toppled the elder from his pedestal? The current situation created by the phenomena of writing and the book has dealt a serious blow to the image of the wise old sage, pillar of society. Education has, in effect, tended to reduce the great separation that once existed between youth and age. One wonders if the elders themselves haven't confused morality with conceptual and reflexive understanding. Can one reconcile the words of Pascal who said: "All humanity resembles a single man who exists and thinks" with la Bruyere's cautious scepticism: "Everything has been said, and we are more than seven thousand years of human thought too late." We will reply to these questions concerning the social stature and the epistemology of the elder by investigating the written African literature. This in effect will present us with a portrait gallery displaying the faces of old age in the black world.

An interesting phenomenon in some African groups is that the men like to age themselves. They present themselves as being far older than they really are in order to add more weight to their personage. For example, when Essomba Mendouga speaks of his age in the novel, *Le roi miraculé*, his calculation is based on a method peculiar to the Pahouin tribe—counting seasons rather than years. The mission priest explains the concept:

“When you ask people their age in these parts, the old add a few years for the fun of it. In contrast the young knock quite a bit off. He says he’s nearly six score seasons, as he puts it. Then you have to add those he can’t remember because he was too young. That gives you a round figure of, let us say, a hundred and thirty seasons.”⁷

And the missionary continues explaining that a season is “the period between sowing and harvest. There are two seasons every year, since they sow and reap twice within twelve months.” Essomba Mendouga is thus around sixty-five years old, though he passes for over a hundred. The time factor is considered so important for both structural and practical reasons. Jomo Kenyatta has written that:

“A man cannot participate in tribal government before his children have become adults. Experience will have given him by then the maturity which qualifies him to administer his community’s interests with wisdom, intelligence and fairness.”⁸

These are the characteristics of the elder: experience which gives wisdom, intelligence and fairness; a certain self-denial and a great deal of self control. In other words, the elder must have slow reactions and weigh his words because their consequences on his group are incalculable. The portrait of old Oundjo in Ake Loba’s *Kocoumbo* sums up the body of ideas that traditional society has formed about the elder: he is tribune and protector; moderator and upholder of good examples; he is the guardian of customs and the incarnation of the science of death. He owes his longevity to the fact that he has lived without hatred and excess in order to guide succeeding generations.

“The patriarch only intervenes to cut short a difficult debate that involves the general interest of his tribe. In such a case, his decisions are infallible; his words cannot be doubted. Whatever he says will be the matured product of years of experience and judicious observation.”⁹

⁷ Mongo Beti, *Le roi miraculé*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1958 p. 46. Trans. *King Lazarus*, Heinemann Educational Books, 1970, pp. 35-36.

⁸ Kenyatta, Jomo, *Au pied du Mont Kenya* (Facing Mount Kenya), Paris, Maspero, 1960.

⁹ Ake Loba, *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir*, Paris, Flammarion, 1960, p. 25-26.

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However, the criterion of age itself wasn't enough to guarantee the continued protection and authority of the tribe. African society had at its disposal a system of 'natural' election which evaluated a youth behind his back. The elders observed his keenness of spirit, his reactions to family problems, his energy in managing his own affairs. And they put him to the test, assigning him tasks of growing importance such as taking provisions or animals to friendly neighbors or accompanying an elder on a voyage. He was expected to attend the public gatherings where the group deliberated any fairly serious matter. This way he would learn the art of speaking in parables and how debate was conducted. But rarely did he participate in the actual decision making.¹⁰ In this way the succeeding generation was slowly molded. And each head of family could reveal which one of his male children was capable of replacing him. This wasn't necessarily the eldest, but rather the one who had passed the tests of physical endurance, judgement and self-sacrifice, and who, after a long period of gestation and maturation, would pledge himself to the guiding of his own generation. Being formed this way, the council of elders then chose the one most gifted in the art of speaking. It was this man who spoke in the name of the village or group on problems involving their common interest.

One can easily conceive why the myth of advanced age is so anchored in the African collective consciousness. But one must look further and inspect this phenomenon in the context of a direct spontaneous tribal democracy comparable to that of ancient Athens. There is the elder in his milieu. There is no disrespect for his physical decline. What matters at this stage is that he benefits the group of his words, wisdom and experience,¹¹ and that he attends all the palavers and must there deliver his author-

¹⁰ Each time a decision was to be made, the elders withdrew from the palaver hut to a hut at the rear. There they made a communal decision which the eldest among them would explain to the gathered audience.

¹¹ Mongo Beti, *Le roi miraculé*; trans. *King Lazarus*, p. 26: "Their most loquacious orator was certainly Ondoua who regarded himself as the *doyon* of the dan... Age had robbed him of very little of his natural energy. It had augmented the flowery profusion of his language. As each speaker fell silent, Ondoua picked up from where he had left off. Perhaps he aimed at illuminating what had been said with the rare light of his genius. Perhaps his concern was to embellish every facet of discussion with precious detail forgotten by everyone bar himself."

ative opinions on matters of group interest. We can see the elders' influence in the novel, *Mission terminée*, where old Bikokolo compels the student, Medza, to search for his cousin Niam's wife:

"...Niam had thought everything out beforehand. He knew perfectly well I would refuse and had taken the precaution of getting Bikokolo's support in the matter. The old man had virtually powers of life and death over everyone in our village."¹²

The old man's coercive power derives not from physical constraint but from the unforeseeable consequences of his utterances. The patriarch can discredit any recalcitrant. He can utter curses that bring upon his victim an indelible psychological and moral stain that can lead to isolation, to real physical decay, and even, eventually to death. It must be added that the elder only rarely comes to this extreme. He prefers persuasion and will modify his language to the circumstances. He uses the time-tested technique of posing problems. Medza is dumbfounded by Bikokalo's persuasive tactics:

"Bikokolo then proceeded to tell me a longish story based on one of our national myths. He garnished his narrative with endless digressions, dialogue that ran to monologue and the kind of declamation that got him a great name at tribal palavers. He had a curious trick of confusing fact with legend, and treating the wisdom drawn from personal experience on exactly the same terms as those gnomonic saws he inherited from our most ancient traditions."¹³

Symbols, images and proverbs characterise the language an elder would use when taking the floor in a public meeting or in passing a judgement. So much so, in fact, that an elder from one tribe can integrate into a foreign group if he displays a practical knowledge of the group's tongue. Oyono gives us an example of this when Toundi, upon reaching the native quarter, finds a group discussing the day's events:

¹² Mongo Beti, *Mission Terminée*, Corrêa, Buchet-Chastel, Paris, 1957, p. 26. Trans. by P. Green, *Mission to Kala*, Frederick Muller, London, 1958, p. 18.

¹³ Mongo Beti, *Ibid*, p. 30. Trans. *Ibid*, p. 22.

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“When I came in the small group of elders was listening to Ali, the Hausa man. He is the only travelling merchant in the location. His goatee beard is white and he is so wise he has been given a place among the elders of Dangan.”¹⁴

Oyono’s elders, “as crafty as the legendary tortoise,” frequently quote aphorisms and proverbs.¹⁵ It can be generally stated that when an African Writer portrays an elder, he tries to reconstruct his traditional language dotted with proverbs, sayings and images.

Another element of the elder’s power derives from his knowledge of the natural world—visible and invisible.¹⁶ He isn’t always a medicine man, but he is supposed to have extensive knowledge of plant and animal life. Consequently his group abides by any prohibitions he deems vital for their health. The elder himself is above such prohibitions. Not only has his body hardened, but more importantly, the elder stands outside of certain tribal strictures. Rightly or wrongly, he enjoys an ambiguous position. In traditional African mythology there is no dividing line between life and death and between animate and inanimate objects. He has the power to decipher dreams and omens which may affect the tribe’s equilibrium. He explains and dictates to the living the intentions of the Dead, with whom he is in constant communication. An elder of the Pahouin tribe is rarely surprised by death. Not only is he capable of appointing the time of his own funeral, he also knows exactly which minute will be his last on this earth. When he feels his end is near, he will gather his family or village and issue his last instructions. For such a one, death is but a departure to other realms.¹⁷

¹⁴ Oyono, F., *Une vie de boy*, Presses Pocket, 1970, p. 89. Trans. by John Reed, *Houseboy*, Heinemann, London, 1966, p. 67.

¹⁵ Oyono, *Ibid.* cf. Mengueme: “Life is like a chameleon changing colour all the time.” p. 57, Trans. p. 42. Mekongo: “Truth lies beyond the mountains. You must travel to find it.” p. 90. trans. p. 67. Also see *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*.

¹⁶ In the Fan tribe (South Cameroon), the childless old woman is the scourge of the community; she nearly always plays an odious role in tribal tales. On the other hand, we noted in our research on the Bulu, that old men are forbidden only two things—the green snake and the genet, whereas the elders impose an abusive number of prohibitions on women and children.

¹⁷ An example from the Sudan: the death of the father of the Chief as related by Maitre Thierno in *L’Aventure Ambiguë* by Sheik Hamidou Kane, July,

The old woman enjoys a similar situation. African opinion accords unique privileges to the woman who has begot and thus in a sense, 'breathed new life into the ancestors.' She has the right to oversee village affairs and to deliver authoritative opinions on important problems. And she, too, is supposed to be in contact with the spirit world. It was observed that in the Lemba tribe "after menopause a woman is often admitted to the inner circle; as she is thus free of the numerous feminine taboos, she can play a role in tribal affairs alongside the men. She often sits at the right of the tribal hut, this side normally being forbidden to women of childbearing age and reserved for the men."¹⁸

What has become of this ancient world in modern society where new economic, political and cultural structures are, in their turn, restructuring mentalities? Can such respect and veneration for the elders survive after the upheavals brought by contact with western civilisation? In fact, even in ancient literature, we can see the other side of the coin—for example, the anecdote in which during the Trojan war, the libidinous elders rush from the council chambers and onto the city's ramparts in order to watch the beautiful Helen pass. And antique wisdom transmitted through fables presents some elders who like to delay their decisions, such as the story of Abstemius, retold by La Fontaine in "Death and the Dying Man."¹⁹

The coming of the Industrial Revolution brought improved communications, but also created new, economic problems for the old. For one thing "the graph of aging demonstrates an increase in the average life span. Thus a man born in 1950 could hope to live 63 years, one born today will live 68 years, and a person born in the year 2000 will live to the age of 73."²⁰ In industrialised countries the old are considered "useless mouths to

1961, pp. 40-42. In Dahomey, up until the present, veneration of the elders was elevated to the level of a cult. One can imagine the baneful consequences in the modern world.

¹⁸ Rouméguère-Eberhardt, *op. cit.*, p. 73; also see Birago Diop, *Les Nouveaux Contes d'Amadou Koumba*, Présence Africaine, 1958, pp. 109-122, 177-188.

¹⁹ La Fontaine, *Fables*, VIII, 1: "Old Man, you murmur! Have you seen the young?... He who's most like the dead most shrinks from death."

²⁰ 'Aging—economic and social problems in France,' in *Humanisme*, no. 81-82, July-October 1970, p. 51. For more precision, see *Documents*, Economy and Statistics, no. 8, Jan. 1970.

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feed” and poorly adapted to modern society. Because they are an unproductive group, it is commonly assumed that they are an economic waste and thus brakes on progress. We go on feeding children—they’re a long term investment! But an old man!... From whence has come this sad state of affairs?

“The current undervaluing of the old is a result of the materialistic orientation of our society today.”²¹

The underlying rationale is simple: if the old man cannot be of any material use, why heed his words? One has the impression that each generation must solve its own problems simply because new scientific and technological discoveries continually overtake older knowledge. A real rift separates modern life and values from those of yesteryear. And how opportunists smugly judge the past! From where have the spontaneous “revolutions” sprung? And who has coined such simplistic slogans as “Make way for youth”?

Black Africa knows these jolts. Formerly the elders were venerated for their knowledge. Then came writing and book-learning. The elders themselves were the first to give way before this new phenomenon. The youth who knew how to read, write, and speak the “white tongue” was considered to be far dearer to the gods. This is why old Bikokolo in *Mission terminée* charges the student, Medza, with the task of finding Niam’s wife. Bikokolo minces no words in stating his reasons:

“You speak with the voice of thunder and have never suspected your own powers. Shall I tell you what your special thunder is? Your certificates, your learning, your knowledge of white men’s secrets. Have you any idea what these up-country bushmen will quite seriously believe about you? You only have to write a letter in French to the nearest District Officer to have anyone you like imprisoned, or get any personal favour you want.”²²

Even the bringing of manufactured goods from the towns is reason for a youth to be praised. This confusion between

²¹ *Humanisme, Ibid*, p. 53.

²² Mongo Beti, *Mission Terminée*. Trans. *Mission to Kala*, p. 23.

“science” and “conscience” has helped to eliminate the notion of wisdom. In the past, the old progressively distilled knowledge of the world and of themselves in circumstances determined by custom, i.e., travel, the palavers, ritual ceremonies... These constituted different phases of their education; and the elders in turn, put their priority on instruction. From where has come the depreciation of ancient values to the advantage of new values closely tied to book-learning and material problems? The new schools have profoundly changed the attitudes of pupils to their illiterate parents. The invasion of second-rate films, of comics and bad novels drives the young to non-conformist attitudes, culminating in their refusal to live in villages or even to speak their mother tongue.

The young people fall into new social structures based essentially on economic factors. They thus limit the traditionally large family; the party dictates courses of action; imported religion responds more or less to a profound need of the human heart to commit itself to a supreme being; the state takes charge of education. All those functions which were formerly the prerogative of the elders are today controlled by the rather abstract notions of the State, the Economy...²³ In brief, new hierarchies are established with new symbols based on social prestige. Nearly everywhere, the democratic ideal of social equality haunts imaginations; but individual liberty is a function of one's income earned at work. Seeing as how natural resources now replace magic, science eliminates the rite and finally, how the new religion has wiped out traditional religious practice, the modern African can thus dispense with the elder and his wisdom, take up the individualism of the new masters and display arrogance to his own origins.

This latent gerontocracy of past times has given way to a seniority based largely on a brother's economic contribution. African literature frequently expresses conflict between father and son. Because the sons have attended the white man's schools, they flaunt what they consider to be a superiority over their parents. This is a characteristic subject of Mongo Beti's works. The father symbolises the past, thus is decadent and can scarcely arise to a situation. In scenes where youth stand in judgement

²³ As discussed at the conference on religion, Abidjan, April 1961.

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of the older generation, the elders especially suffer from a grotesque characterisation. For example, this portrayal of an aged dignity in *Le Roi Miraculé*:

“His bare torso was preceded by a monumental belly, its skin stretched drum-tight and gleaming like oiled silk. A huge ceremonial loin cloth was secured round the plateau of his buttocks by a huge knot... The assembly gaped awesomely. When he deigned to uncover his head it was completely bald. Like most of the Essazam he had enormous feet, wider than they were long. An additional peculiarity was that the horny skin round his toes was scored with innumerable deep cracks and lines. He was known as ‘Ndibidi’—a well-deserved nickname meaning glutton.”²⁴

It is always young Kris in *Le Roi Miraculé* who sums up the opinion of the young towards the elders. To the question, “You despise them, don’t you?”, he replies:

“Who, the old shags? No! I’ve never despised anyone in my life. That doesn’t stop me thinking sometimes they’re lazy, greedy, senile morons, nattering away aimlessly.”²⁵

In our opinion, the basic reason for this antagonistic attitude stems from the traditional economy in which all the goods were held by the old men and were distributed at their discretion. The young people had to await the elders’ good will in order to branch out. Mongo Beti writes again in *Mission terminée*:

“In general, a man’s fortune—this word must be understood in its widest sense—was, in Kala, conditioned by his age. An old man was in a better position than a young one to give away a few head of cattle, thanks to a system which in the spheres of economy, law and tradition alike was designed by old men, to benefit old men.”²⁶

On one hand, the young feel that they can throw off the yoke of tradition through the white man’s schools. But on the other

²⁴ Mongo Beti, *Le roi miraculé*, pp. 65-66; trans. King Lazarus pp. 49-50. The old aren’t spared. cf. *ibid.* p. 53-54 and *Mission Terminée* p. 183. Oyono’s attitude is similar. One often finds it in West African novels. The conflict between generations also comes to blows. See the end of *Ville cruelle* and *Mission Terminée*. Also: Sembene, Ousmane, *L’Harmattan*, Présence Africaine, 1964, p. 274-275.

²⁵ Mongo Beti, *Le roi miraculé*, p. 131. Trans, p. 97.

²⁶ Mongo Beti, *Mission Terminée*, p. 141, Trans. p. 116.

hand, the elders themselves see a new force in these schools. This is why Bikokolo uses the student in *Mission Terminée*.

Despite mutual recognition of this power, young and old pursue their conflicts with the resulting devaluation of the ancient economic structure which the patriarchs still believe in. But, unhappily the new possibilities are not yet within the elders' grasp, so they are disabled and faced with a more or less anarchic situation. The missionaries, administrators and businessmen, all whites, provoke and unconsciously stir up this tension, because they release only sparingly the floodgates from whence the new riches flow—wealth that might be able to solve the problem. Two generations thus stand at arms with each other. Consequently, dialogue between them has become difficult and the interpenetration of consciences has disappeared. Youth stands for the nullification of ancestral values which have already been undermined by the new sociological situation. And following from this, the wisdom so vaunted by the elders is shrugged off like a piece of old lace, embroidered with obsolete and cabalistic formulae. Once a man's life was a coherent structure. Mongo Beti captures this feeling as Medza observes the enormous gulf separating him from the rest of his cousin Zambo's village in the novel *Mission Terminée*.

“There was a good deal of common sense in Zambo's remarks; he was more level-headed about the whole thing than I was. Already he viewed life as his ancestors had done, without a trace either of illusion or ambition... For Zambo, as for all his countrymen, this was no discovery to be made in late middle age, but a living reality in which they were steeped from the cradle to the grave. This unshakeable stoicism in the face of all life's accidents and vicissitudes is probably the townsman's greatest loss, when he abandons village, tribe and local culture. We who choose the city have lost this ancient wisdom; irritable, ambitious, hot-headed, fed on illusion, we have become the world's eternal dupes.”²⁷

In other words, the tension between youth and old age is a function of social transformations that simultaneously impose coexistence on them. This tension would be less pathological if

²⁷ *Ibid.* Trans. p. 166.

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people lived within a system which had proved itself. Each system accords to its elderly qualities that reflect back on the system itself. Traditional Africa sees them as intelligent, just, level-headed and moderate, and gives the elder a special position in tribal life. Another similarity with ancient Greece: an example from the epic Ulysses where the old grey beard, Nestor, holds the impulsive movements of Achilles and the warriors in check at the siege of Troy by his wise counsel.

One can investigate areas which have been industrialised for decades to see if relations have remained constant between young and old. In modern society it seems that two fundamental notions condition attitudes: the money economy and political power. Europe teems with historical example where information put out by the mass media has generated disrespect for the words of the older generation, who have come to be regarded as "old bores" and "gossips" in their story telling. An old man consumes little, but he's unproductive and in industrialised societies is expensive for his family or the state to keep. Then again, how can a businessman, caught up in a whirlwind of conferences, papers to sign and stocks and shares, find time to listen to the twaddle of a useless old man? Wisdom?—it's production that betters one's condition! Or a student thinking of his exams, obsessed by their results and his future position. What time has he to hallow an elder? The only relevance an elder could have for him would be functional—to help him attain material success. All the more so when the youth is an heir and possessor of property. The voice of conscience that the elder used to be has made him obsolete, especially if he spoke of moderation in the use and display of wealth. This same prudence exasperates the dynamic young man who cultivates a taste for gamboling and risk because, in economic production, 'he who doesn't advance, retreats.' But having succeeded by a certain age, shouldn't that man fear seeing his work upset by new factors? In Africa, where economic power is a recent phenomenon, it is intimately linked to politics.

Those men who are most secure financially are usually the same men who hold the reins of political power. There is an underlying conflict in this aberrant situation. The young are technicians or technocrats, thus are necessary intellectually and technically for the solving of national problems. It is under-

standable that these two groups should clash in their views and methods of reorganising for a modern society. Decision-making power is in the hands of old men who often aren't trained intellectually and thus aren't fully aware of the tremendous changes they are causing in their society. These powerful men prefer to live lives of easy gain and official honour. What can these old men and their machinations symbolise for youth? Can a pupil extract wisdom from a teacher he thinks is 'out of the running'? Politics itself is a soothing balm that prevents the old men from seeing themselves as old. For an old politician can rejuvenate himself by falsifying his birth certificate, then grab all the comforts of life with both hands and crush any obstacle in his path, despite testimony that his mental faculties are failing.²⁸

Where can a youth get advice on modern problems? The elder can offer his personal experience, but this is from another era and out of place in modern society. The other generation has long teeth. Its technical training has nourished in it a crowd of illusions about men and things. The youth who grew up in the colonial epoch thought that his training and diplomas would suffice to bring him material wealth and honour. This man is impulsive and wants to move quickly, forgetting that his work needs a slow maturation. He ignores the example of the mountain climber who scales the peak most competently without rushing, but not too slowly. So he progresses but just when he gets sight of the summit, he hurls himself into a heap of compromises and into a baseness of which he would never have originally conceived. Profitability falls and particular interests take priority over those for the general good. Taken into the circle of the old men whom he has admired for so long, he begins to act like them, miming their actions and ways of thinking. The myth of wisdom has nearly vanished if one considers this collection of modern realities.

Will it reappear tomorrow? All depends on when today's societies will re-establish their equilibrium. If the foundations are solidly fixed, if the established structures function normally

²⁸ Europe has given us several sad examples these last years. In the case of Churchill, one didn't see an historical leader giving up his position of his own free will because of age to his successors. Adenauer at 80 was forced to step down by his own party members. The same thing is becoming characteristic in black and white Africa today.

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after adjustments and jolts en route, perhaps then we will rediscover those eternal characteristics analysed by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (II, 12). To know that young people are violent, moody, quick-tempered, good, confident, full of hope, because:

“hope characterises the future as memory does the past; or, for youth the future is long and the past is short; at the beginning, memory is nothing whereas hope is everything.”

The young are gullible, brave, sensitive about honour. They have lofty souls.

“They prefer the good to the useful; because they guide themselves more by instinct than by calculation. They have more taste for friendship and comradeship than any other age. They think they know everything and act so positive; all the more reason for them constantly to exceed all bounds.”

Their misconduct comes from passion more than malice. In the long run, they love to laugh and are amicable companions, and this friendliness is what disciplines them. The character of the old is entirely opposite: they are wary, malicious, stingy, attached to wealth, lovers of the past, gossips, calculating; they are inclined to offer sympathy, but more for self-interest than as a generous impulse. True wisdom, says Aristotle, is that of middle age. Placed equally between the two extremes, it combines their advantages and avoids their pitfalls.

It is in this category that today we will rediscover those experienced men who will affirm to their last breath the permanence of man and who will leave a “scar” on the human map in the eternal waltz of changes from which societies are constantly being reborn.

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