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# THE LITERARY AND ARTISTIC SOCIOLOGY OF BLACK AFRICA

## I. TRADITIONAL AND ORAL LITERATURE

Any serious study of the literary and artistic forms of expression found in the continent of Africa south of the Sahara must open with a look at the traditional forms of expression. It is these forms of which the various intellectual movements in Africa are becoming increasingly aware, a trend exemplified by the Festival of Negro Arts organised a few years back at Dakar.

But well before this Festival we ourselves had felt the need to refer to traditional forms of expression in order to make a study of the literary and artistic activities of present-day Africa. In 1960, therefore, we spent eight months consecutively in different villages, recording on tape the most original versions possible of this tradition, straight from the lips of its guardians; these versions were those considered by the Africans themselves to be the most admissible and the most representative. Of course, anthropologists and ethnologists have already studied and

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collected various aspects of this oral literature; but they have often presented them as simple ethnographic documents which offer an approximate description or pre-conception of certain social structures. In *Sociologie des sociétés orales d'Afrique Noire* we reacted against this tendency and, for the first time, tried to use a completely sociological approach to this subject.

Before we look at the content of traditional literary and artistic expression in Africa, we must make one or two distinctions and give a broad and approximative classification of the different types of expression. To some extent the quality, value and beauty of certain African sculptures have, almost unconsciously, led us to identify the concept of Negro art with that of Negro sculpture. Negro art, however, in the strict sense of the word, is far more varied than great sculpture, and at every level offers a no less interesting range of qualities. A study of the traditional artistic forms does not just pose a problem of genre differences in relation to new African literature: above all the problem is one of definition. We can classify the various types of literary and artistic expression in two large groups. The first concerns visual art, using the sign, the trait and the form, regardless of the material used. The second concerns the word, the voice and the gesture.

### *a) Visual art (signs, traits and forms)*

Sculpture has a quite special place here. It is not surprising that most works—the most pertinent as well as the most skilled—involve the art of statuary. In fact, no matter what the materials used are, this art embraces all forms of expression at the various social levels—from the religious to the more or less profane statuette. It is this art which brings us into contact with the Sao studied by Leboeuf in the Chad region, or the amazing bronze work of the Ifé, which has justly earned a worldwide name for itself; here alone we have a series of factors which are quite able to illustrate the importance and the variety of the forms of expression of traditional African art.

The less well-known and more modest activities, such as basket-work, weaving and pottery, likewise offer evidence of a deep artistic sense. One is well aware that these different handicrafts, as well as drawing, are very important in African

societies. Whether they translate a purely decorative need or whether they respond to the artist's deliberate wish to make a thing of beauty, these activities are constantly linked with a whole system of symbolism.

We can reach a clearer idea of this system of symbols in painting. Since Lhote's discoveries in the Sahara, one tends to neglect less remarkable paintings, but it must be emphasised that works of a similar nature, as well as numerous engravings and inscriptions on rock, are in existence in western Africa, as is testified to by R. Mauny's study published in 1954 at the IFAN.<sup>1</sup> We can observe a whole succession of differing elements, at once realist and mythical, from the simple sign to highly complicated compositions. Only a sociological study of these paintings could show us how to grasp their real message, the import of which certainly exceeds the simple perception which one normally has of a picture. Was it not Merleau-Ponty who said that it is the very fact of such perception that gives the picture its whole signification? It is at this point that two questions are raised: that of the original message with which these paintings were imbued, and that of the perception which we have of them today. Marcel Griaule rightly spoke of the phenomenon of Negro art being removed from its natural sphere when it is exhibited behind museum glass. This type of alienation is not only a present-day reality in the West and for what is Western; it also exists for the African who perceives these objects in Africa; the reason being that if the context and the geographical decorative character are maintained, then the psychological climate, and the communion or complicity, which should exist between the person who perceives the work of art and the work of art itself, do so no longer.

Similarly, where painting is concerned, we observe another type of traditional artistic expression: signs. These have played an important rôle right through African history. In most cases they are at once inscriptions and magical or literal writings. They are always the expression of a language. Whether they appear in rock paintings, like ideographs before the letter, or whether they be those graphic Sudanese signs studied by Griaule and

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Mauny, *Gravures, peintures et inscriptions rupestres de l'Ouest Africain*, Dakar, IFAN (Institut Français d'Afrique Noire), 1954.

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Dieterlen, they always represent one of the most vivid, profound and significant sources of artistic expressions in Africa. These signs have autonomous precise and personal values, and the combinations they create engender new forms which are as significant as the signs themselves. This is the origin of the course—one might almost say: “school”—of African symbolism, without which it is virtually impossible to understand traditional African works of art and traditional African forms of artistic expression. Some scholars—among them the late Mr. Abel—have tried to decipher these signs. This task should be followed up and extended to other spheres where the signs are not as apparent as they are in the drawings or, more exactly, in the pictorial figurations.

Usual objects also constitute a sphere in which art likewise finds an outlet for self-expression. In saying this we are putting our finger on one of the great secrets, one of the cardinal laws of traditional artistic expression: the union of art and life. As we said in *Afrique Africaine* artistic expression in Black Africa is not made manifest and cannot be perceived in grandiloquent or exceptional realities. Domestic objects constitute one of the most relevant and striking illustrations of artistic expression because they translate the rhythm of daily life, and because they maintain a permanent balance between the cosmic and the real, between the exceptional and the banal. We have at our disposal a whole scale of signs and geometric figures—from commonplace objects, such as a chair, to delicate scales for weighing gold—which, apart from their scriptural value, represent a geometric and architectural pursuit which is solely linked with artistic preoccupations. The loss of the secret to these (apparently modest) sources of expression would mean one’s deliberate estrangement from the great traditional schools of artistic apprenticeship.

Costumes and jewellery are part of a more fluctuating and more fragile sphere. Like most people, the traditional African, for as far back as one cares to remember, has striven to transform his body by supplementing what is natural with artificial devices. His sometimes utterly fantastic costumes, jewels and head-dresses delimit the vast field of an art which is at once ephemeral and varied.

One finds another example of this tendency in decoration, properly so called. It is illustrated by paintings such as one finds

in dwelling-places with symbolic animal designs and drawings. This form of decoration is an attempt to represent a certain world either mythically or symbolically. J. P. Leboeuf's study of the Fali settlement gives concrete examples of this. Let us take note in passing that the decoration and arrangement of the habitat are not the only evidence of the persistence and importance of this theme in the artistic African tradition. Temporary figurations, such as the arrangement of the various participants in a dance set, also amount to decorative designs of an occasional nature which are always imbued with a symbolic artistic value.

The African artist also has the advantage of an added form of expression in the variety of fabrics and cloths, with their different designs and motifs. The pictorial themes of the dresses and robes are directly linked with the great mythology. In this sense decoration is no longer the search for a more or less harmonious arrangement of lines and forms: it also becomes a way of representing the relationship between the various elements and of retracing, by means of warp and weft, the links which exist between them, which in turn leads to the discovery of universal concatenation.

The animal drawings show one or other of the species of animals and are a way of affirming the hierarchy of and punctuating the relations between a man and an animal—those of the real world and those of the mystical world. At the level of the sign, the trait and the form, these artistic forms (as we showed in our work *Sociologies des sociétés orales d'Afrique Noire*) make up a coherent system of signs; they constitute a proper method of writing, a "language".

Dance-masks and costumes are also evidence of the importance and persistence of this language. As art objects, masks are at once sacred and profane. From behind the grimacing, painted, wooden effigy in the throes of the dance, anything might appear: a god, a demon, or an ancestor. The steps of the dance are, in reality, forms, an authentic method of writing: gestured poetry.

#### b) *The art of the word, the voice and the gesture*

Traditional African literature is a vast complex of elements; an immense encyclopedia in which one can find more or less anything and everything, from fundamental essays defining the

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structures of society, to the various appendages and re-interpretations, not forgetting, too, the apocryphal elements. This oral tradition is a rich one. Naturally it contains its own contradictions, but it does keep to one constant direction: it is always the translation of a particular way of expressing the social reality.

The primary element in oral literature is the name. In traditional African societies the name is not simply a number given to an individual, as tends to be the case in modern societies. The name has precise social functions: it is a way of marking an event, of evoking a connexion with our divine origin, of dating a birth, or of expressing a philosophical maxim. It extols the world in a form which is either mythical or profane. Like names, proverbs are more or less partial elements of condensed wisdom: they are different, and apply to the exceptional and the banal alike. When a proverb is used to illustrate a passage or punctuate a thought, it has become a real and frequently employed quotation.

In traditional African societies proverbs were used to bolster a discourse with primary truths and to base it on the learning and knowledge of one's forefathers. This literature, therefore, is not the banal expression that some claim it to be, for these "some" are those who see no more in proverbs than a desiccated form used to express the past. It is enough to restore proverbs to their original context and purpose for them to assume their functional value.

Songs and music hold the privileged position in the artistic tradition of Africa. It has been said of Africa that it was the continent of rhythms, and that African peoples were above all peoples of dancers. Music is not just an art which aims at the ear, it is an art which strikes at life, which penetrates the various moments of existence and expresses them in rhythms. Musical art is extremely varied and extends to the most widely different spheres. When associated with religious or profane events, music and song are styles which can be easily adapted to any set of circumstances. Thus it is that in addition to traditional musical productions, present-day events give rise to new musical interpretations and transpositions. Anyone who was travelling in Africa in the sixties will have heard the praises of all the leaders being sung. This style of music is becoming increasingly important

and the development of the record has in fact assisted and not atrophied it.

Story-telling is another sphere of the oral literature of Africa in which art, word and voice find a no less characteristic expression. Such tales form a genre which is at once profane and mythical: profane because the actors—animal, human, vegetable or mineral—use the notions of everyday life; mythical because, beyond the expressions of reality, the story manipulates symbolic systems which relate to essential mythology—the story re-enacts the drama of the world. Thanks to story-telling, the traditional African art of word, voice and gesture has reached a peak which is the integration of the mythical in the real and which represents the participation of the audience and the actor in this reality. It is by way of the story and the story alone that one of the basic intentions of artistic African expression can be realised—expression, as we said above, at the level of sculpture, signs and decoration.

The traditional theatre employs all the resources laid out above, be it the name, the proverb, the song, or visual art again: signs, traits and forms. By integrating all the forms of artistic expression, such as sculpture, weaving, painting, day-to-day objects, jewellery and various sorts of decoration, the theatre retraces the fundamental unity of the world in its own special manner of inscribing or translating social and mythical reality. The primary preoccupation of this art is not with the aesthetic, nor does it aim to set up a school of authors eager to sign their works; rather it is concerned with creating an atmosphere of participation—a communal and collective reality in which each individual can take part.

The roots of this art are deeply embedded in the great mythology and in its cosmic interferences with the world; it tries to integrate the individual in social and cosmic reality rather than dissociate him. The new literature is keen to replace this theatre, using as a pretext the situation of the various societies and people in present-day Africa.

## II. CONTEMPORARY WRITTEN LITERATURE

Let us now have a quick look at a souvenir photo snapped at the Sorbonne, in the quadrangle, in 1956, during the first congress

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of black writers and artists. The gathering includes people of very different origins: Richard Wright, the voluntary exile, author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, stands next to Léopold Sédar Senghor and Stéfán Alexis, a Haitian writer, later assassinated; further on one can see Price-Mars, one of the great forces behind the cultural revival of the black world, and J. Rabemananjara, the poet from Madagascar; at the back, R. Depestre, who has since chosen to live in Cuba; full of smiles in a corner Hampaté Ba, traditional sage of Africa; at center, Alioune Diop, mastermind of the journal *Présence Africaine*; and many others whom we have not the space to mention. These men, whom destiny has since separated, were gathered on that particular day in the Sorbonne, as if by a miracle.

When one talks of African literature, one inevitably evokes these writers: their passions, their sufferings, their commitments, their impatience to discover Africa and their thirst to introduce something new. But through such men, dedicated to the new continent of Africa and still haunted by traditional Africa, the whole complex of African peoples strives towards self-expression by the interpretation of foreign and still unmastered languages.

As for the distribution of the two quite clearly defined linguistic spheres created by the Anglophone and the Francophone countries, the literary harvest is equally as abundant on both sides (B. Dadié's *Assémien Déhylé*, *Les villes*, *Afrique debout*, *Légendes Africaines*, *Le Pagne noir*, *La ronde des jours*, *Un nègre à Paris*; from the Cameroons, F. Oyono's *Une vie de boy*, *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, *Chemin d'Europe*; B. Diop's *Les contes d'Ahmadou Koumba*, *Les nouveaux contes d'Ahmadou Koumba*; M. Beti's *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, *Mission terminée*, *Le roi Miraculé*; Bhély-Quenum's *Liaison d'un été*, *Aventures Africaines*, *Le chant du lac*, *Forces Obscures*; Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir*; Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë*; Léopold Sédar Senghor's *Chants d'ombre*, *Hosties Noires*, *Chants pour Naëtt*, *Ethiopiennes*, *Nocturnes*, and so on, and likewise: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; Cyprian Ekwenski's *Burning Grass*; Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*; Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*; H. I. E. Dhlomo's *Valley of a Thousand Hills*; Christopher Okigbo's *Heavensgate*; Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, etc...).

We should like to underline the major features of these differ-



ent expressions. The first point on which to focus involves the difference which resides between the writer or artist of today and the writer or artist of traditional Africa. It is no longer just the genre represented by the oral tradition which is being brought to question: it is the very means of expression, the manner in which the language of the artist or writer is transmitted to the public. Here the problem of the content of the message is involved, and, consequently, the problem of the public to which it is addressed. Recent literature and modern African art, cradled in drama, are full of ambiguities.

In traditional Africa, literary and artistic expression depended on the various manifestations of collective life at every level. Today, on the contrary, this expression aims at a concise, written form, stabilised and signed by the author. It claims to be a definitive work which becomes unalterable as from the act of printing the work. Does not this change of dimension and criterion imply a profound reform of the message transmitted by tradition? This is one of the questions we shall be posing throughout this study.

The very fact that literary works issue from particular historical circumstances, which we have qualified as "dramatic," explains why the accent of privilege which dominates poetry and the novel is, for all that, streaked with sadness of a kind. Aimé Césaire's most wellknown poem is not titled: *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*<sup>2</sup>... by chance. We are in fact dealing with a literature which has been conceived and begotten far from home. Both figuratively and otherwise this is a literature of exile, for all expatriate Africans and those descended from slaves: Cubans, Black Americans, West Indians etc. But the nature of such literature can just as well characterise the work of writers born and still living in Africa. For these, literature is the result of an encounter which has given rise to complex consequences: reactions to a new state of things, on the one hand by a society which has undergone a shock, on the other by individuals or collectives in the full swing of evolution, who are aware of the malaise and at the same time want to find their way again, discover themselves and work out new models for the future. Because of this the ambiguous nature of the literature is further accentuated.

From the outset artistic expression is stamped with the seal

<sup>2</sup> Published by Présence Africaine.

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of exile and the sadness of exile; it is marked by a will to return to the fold, and to recover an ephemeral personality to which one wants to re-belong as intensely as possible. Hence emerge the themes of blackness, of the cultural African personality, of the commitment to and desire for a reconciliation with the people, and the desire to guide the masses; and hence the will to give this new literature and this new African art a Messianic rôle.

Mention must also be made of another theme: tension and lack of balance. Unlike traditional Africa, artistic and literary expression is no longer based on processes of repetition and re-transmission. Exactly the opposite is the case: this expression issues from a shifting surge of uncertainties and unsteady realities. It starts to function in the form of unbalancing tensions, and tries to re-establish a provisional harmony. This new literary art is orientated towards a commendable search: the search for self inasfar as it is necessary to uncover the old personality, which will act as a foundation for the blossoming and expansion of the new one; a search, likewise, for genres and styles, because the new language has not been totally mastered. As a vehicle of literary expression, first and foremost, language here is no more than a borrowed tool of imitation. A black poet can express himself in alexandrines with no less eloquence than Racine, but it is for certain that the classical author sticks more rigidly to the structure of the alexandrine than does the African poet, fresh from his village, who has watered prematurely at the western sources of culture. This is where the problem of the transition from one personality to another lies, the transition from one type of literary expression to another.

Is there an equivalence between the artistic and literary forms of expression of present-day Africa, and those of yesterday? Every literary or artistic era gives birth to a certain number of favoured genres, not only in terms of the collective artistic consciousness of the group, but also in terms of the individual temperaments of the artists and writers. It is not by chance that, in Africa, certain genres have predominated. In the book: *Les écrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature*,<sup>3</sup> Lilyan Kesteloot gives a picture of these genres which, in her eyes,

<sup>3</sup> Published by the Institut de Sociologie de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles.

progress from poetry to the theatre, by way of essays, novels, short stories and history (p. 308).

Today literary expression is restricted above all to poetry, prose and drama. Is this fortuitous, or can one find some sociological explanation for the predominance of these three genres?

The masterminds behind the creation of the theory of blackness, the contemporary poets of the Black World, first of all preferred poetry to prose and the theatre. To begin with, Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor lived happily and even flirted noisily with surrealism. Poetry, on the one hand, and the surrealist movement on the other were extremely effective instruments for these two writers. Through them they were able to give some shape to what they were trying to express. By taking up the most personal form of their private feelings, the poetic genre affords a greater fluidity of inspiration on the one hand, and, on the other, the expression of the most secret areas of the inner being. In as much as it is a dialogue with symbols, and rejected classical forms, surrealism found itself taking a revolutionary stand which could only be regarded with pleasure by the contenders who were enabled to prove themselves by their opposition. African literature is thus at once a revolution and a continuity. If the art of the word is preserved, is the revolution safeguarded? The strongest vibrations at the present time issue from this literature.

Prose has been less fortunate than poetry. Of course prose does also participate in the expression of the word, it is well integrated in the African manner of saying, but, under the heading of the novel, it has imposed certain burdens on African expression. As a way of conducting the literary discourse, prose does not properly adapt to the poetry and traditional styles of delivery in Africa, nor even does it adapt to the sung recitals of the griot. Certain affinities would not be enough to conceal an essential difference, whence the writer's attempts to "africanise" prose or create a new genre of prose, not unlike the one with which we are at present acquainted in Africa.

We believe that the theatre will make a considerable contribution to the new literature and to the new art of Africa. All the elements usually grouped together in the traditional story—which is a continuous way of interpreting and acting out life—are brought together here. It is therefore of little surprise that

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the theatre—even in African languages—is at the moment in the process of winning over a public of which one had never conceived. With plays such as B. Dadié's *Togoguini* or *Beento*, a social satire put on in *ewé* in Ghana and Togo, the theatre today appears as the favourite instrument of a reconciliation among modern and traditional forms of expression. Starting from this strong position, the artist has an ever greater number of observation posts and inspirational topics at his disposal. If to date it has been the new and, in the eyes of the masses, over-westernized élites who have been on stage, the theatre is applying itself to new topics, as is shown by Aimé Césaire's *Roi Christophe*. Apart from the particular features such as the brand of exile, and the preponderance—which can only be an unconscious re-emergence—of certain traditional genres, African literary and artistic expression is also hallmarked by the sociological origin of the writers. Several factors come under consideration: geographical territory and the system of colonization. There can be no doubt that an extensive study of the reasons for the appearance of this or that theme, for the frequency with which this or that expression is used, for the dominance of such and such an element in terms of the characteristics of the local literature—such a study would greatly contribute to a greater appreciation of the works themselves.

Modern African literary production avails itself with equal ease of English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, or one of many traditional African tongues, but it cannot hide the fact that the systems of colonization have left their impression on the writers, and, consequently, on their manner of expression and on their method of singling out such and such a theme. If we find the same dramatic tones in black American writers such as Richard Wright in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, Aimé Césaire in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, in the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor, and in the different expression of Jomo Kenyatta and Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, they assume, nevertheless, different characters in terms of the geographical origins of the various authors. The geographical context plays one rôle in the insistence and stress laid on these same themes, but so does the system of colonization and domination. This rôle is all the more evident when one observes the different systems of colonization, from the least constricting (in as far as any system of coloniz-

ation can be non-constricting) to the totally dominating, to the systems of total subjection and suppression, as is the case with apartheid. Whether one takes the case where the dominated individual is still allowed to remain where he is and express his dissatisfaction, or whether we take case in which the individual is obliged to flee, as in South Africa, the sociological and geographical conditions will end up by imprinting the inner nature of the artist who reacts in his turn in a fundamental way to the work of art and its content.

Any extensive study of artistic and literary expression in modern Africa should lead to a kind of differential phenomenology of the importance of the part played by internal sociological conditions with regard to creativity and artistic or literary content. But the sociological approach to modern forms of literary and artistic expression introduces another important element: the attitude adopted by the writer and artist with regard to traditional culture. This is a subject of concern not only to poets, novelists, storytellers, playwrights but also to African men of learning who are, on the one hand, anxious to reveal the laws behind the discontent in traditional African societies and, on the other, are concerned with finding the remedies to such crises. The writer can write for himself, but in fact he writes above all to be heard, to divulge a message. One is therefore always justified in talking of the writer's attitude with regard to society, even if his art has to turn its back on this society if it is to be truly original and authentic. For Africans, in any event, this seems to go without saying: poets, novelists, essayists, all of them question themselves as to the attitude they are to adopt with regard to traditional culture.

The importance of this latter concern is such that the first Congress of Black Artists and Writers held in Paris in 1956 had, as its avowed aim, the rediscovery of ancient African society. In an authoritative address, Léopold Sédar Senghor, from the very beginning of the colloquy, had precisely tried to present what he called the laws of Negro-African culture. The theme of the second such Congress, held in Rome in 1959, was the responsibility of the educated (cultured) man (in the various forms) in relation to traditional African society as it exists today. This is a clear illustration that all African writers, whoever they may be and wherever their allegiances may lie, consider that the

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concept of their inner responsibility towards traditional society is the very condition of the practice of their profession. The problem consists in knowing how (and being able) to determine how contacts with traditional society are established, and whether, in relation to it, their attitude is one of criticism or, conversely, acceptance. At all events, they all subscribe to the more or less declared intention to discover and impregnate themselves with traditional culture. It is worth noting that all the writers questioned by Lilyan Kesteloot, in her already mentioned book: *Les écrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature* (p. 308), insist on the importance of the theme: "contact with the masses." In fact, whether they are literally exiles or just exiles on the spot, these writers see themselves as extracts of the masses and of traditional society. They have a conscience about belonging to another culture which makes them feel removed from their illiterate brothers still living in the villages: for the writer, then, this mass becomes the symbol of traditional society, and it is this reaction which provokes the acute and poignant tone with which writers describe their contacts with the masses. Other sources suggest that it is not just those who call themselves writers who have this preoccupation: it involves politicians, and all those who, in their day-to-day actions, are not in direct contact with the masses. Their preoccupation appears as a justification of the work, and, in addition, as a way of self-justification and liberation from this obsessive conscience, this notion of responsibility which resides in every artist and writer in Africa today.

With regard to criticism, this appears in disguise, not openly. And here again we are tempted to see the persistence of traditional models, such as those which occur in stories, or various social satires for example, like the "halo" we described in our book: *Sociologie des sociétés orales d'Afrique noire*, and which can certainly be considered the most perfect type of tension-reducing technique. But it is not enough just to reduce tension: models must be proposed, and in the case of many writers the choice of theme is combined with a mission to be fulfilled. Whatever the style or form of expression used, it is extremely important to define the goals assumed by the writer or artist in present-day literary and artistic activity.

The genre determines the style. If the type of poetry which

was very akin to surrealism found itself from the outset on a level with the traditional forms of literary and artistic expression, it would seem vitally necessary to revive or invent new styles for the genuinely new genres, or those genres which open up new experiences. One example of this is Birago Diop. He has reached a position in which he matches the art of traditional storytellers, but he achieved this by remaining the attentive pupil of the great masters of the past: in other words the pupil of the oral tradition. He has not, therefore, invented a new genre.

How, where and when will these new styles make their appearance? There is one overriding problem: time. Contemporary works have been conceived and have come into being in a dramatic conjuncture in which the preoccupation with, and weight of, time were fundamental. We are in the throes of a present which is seen as an affliction, to the extent of being intolerable, which gives rise to the revolt within the individual, and the writer, in a certain sense, is simply the subject reacting to this intolerable aspect of the present, and disputing the realities produced by this sad moment of time. Following this, one has to find either some reason for consolation or for self-justification, or, simply, a convenient prop which enables one to continue in a forward direction with a simultaneous assurance of balance in the present. It is at this point that the past is evoked not only for its powers of appeasement, but also—and this might seem at once contradictory and astonishing—as a reservoir of values to be discovered and a source of hope. Hope in the future, but in the past as well... I shall always recall the emotion with which I discovered that the Blacks in Harlem in 1959 were thirsting to know about Africa's past: as a mythical cult, Africa would meet all their expectations and fill any gaps or void. Even if the intensity might vary, I believe that the problem also exists for the African who enjoys more lenient living conditions. This pursuit of the past as a means of consolidating the inner equilibrium is a kind of basic need which we find not only in writers, but, generally speaking, in all African people.

Side by side with the shooting pains of the present and the fascination of the past, there is still the irresistible and obsessive call of the future. As the present is seen in terms of affliction, we want to escape from it, whence issues the theme of struggling

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for a more just future. Whether we are dealing with writers, sculptors, great tenors, revolutionary creators of models, or philosophers inventing new values with which to instruct peoples, all these men must use their talent to serve this future. Here, time assumes a messianic dimension: a liberator in the present, inventor of the past and builder of the future—unusual for a writer.

The problem of languages has had a fundamental effect on the destiny of the literary and artistic forms of expression in modern Africa. Its literary production uses a great variety of ways of expression; this variety extends to the basic languages which are its vehicle. But a language is not a neutral medium, nor is it a simple tool which enables the non-expressed message to be expressed: a language is a cultural medium, made up of words and expressions which have meanings and, still more, connotations.

To what degree can an African, expressing himself in French or English, broadcast his essential emotion in a foreign language? On one occasion I felt this problem particularly directly and profoundly when I heard Negro spirituals being sung by Blacks in the Big Bethel Church in Atlanta. If I was a gifted writer or reporter, I might be able to describe the emotion communicated to me by these men and women and children, a whole crowd chanting and swaying; if I was a poet I might be able to describe their "soul;" and yet if I had such talents, there is one thing which I could not translate in an accurate way: the emotion itself. If it is as difficult as this for the direct witness of an event to transmit the precise emotion being felt, should one not reckon that certain types of message are to some extent deformed, and only partly transmitted? This is certainly the case with certain African writers—among them grammarians themselves—who admit that they are incapable of translating into a borrowed language the emotions for which words exist in their vernacular tongue. One can say without exaggeration that Africans are sometimes impeded in the expression of their thought by the very working material which they use; one can also say that the fortunate ones who definitively cross the Rubicon of language are very rare. In fact it is one thing to manipulate a language in its logical syntax, and quite another thing to make of this a means of expression which is perfectly attuned to the inner



emotion and becomes the vehicle of progressive thought. This, it seems, is of great importance: it represents the problem with which black artists and writers are in collision. With regard to those works written directly in traditional African languages, which do not have a wide audience, the number of translations which have to be undergone is still greater and they are consequently open to deformation to the same measure as are those works written in the tongues of the so-called "civilized" countries.

Can one conceive of a day when African literature will be able to draw upon a *lingua franca* especially created for it? This question calls for a provisional answer. It is hard to imagine the steps whereby this *lingua franca* could be perfected. Today the difficulty of communication exists not only at the level of literary and artistic works; it exists within actual African societies, sometimes on the village scale. Considerable ambiguity exists in the transmission of messages from one African society to another, and in their reception. A sociological study of these ambiguities is in progress. In the immediate future the aim is not so much to create a *lingua franca* to be used in literature as to enlarge and standardize a reciprocal understanding between the various ways of expression. Traditional Africa enjoys a unique advantage which modern Africa does not have: the language of symbols. Despite the variety of mythical and religious symbols, the result of a kind of general consensus with regard to them has been the establishment of certain communications from the mentalities of one territory to those of another. Thus the time-culture has woven into the apparent differences a web of tenuous complicity and participation which is in a position to play the part of a real *lingua franca*, based on signs and symbols. Once again it is by returning to the sources of the authentic tradition that Africans are able to understand one another, despite the obstacle posed by the alien language in which expression is made.

It is not a question of a short-term period replacing the long-term, and even replacing the traditional period of myths and gods. A new rhythm is taking over from the traditional rhythm. At the level of formal expression a new language adapted from working-class jargon is gradually replacing the cadences of traditional poetic language. The concept of rhythm in modern literary and artistic expression is no longer the same. Added to this, incidentally, is the question of filiation. African literature and art divide

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up along certain main lines, such as, for example, the themes of blackness or anti-blackness. In the time-lapse separating the First Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Paris in 1956 from the Festival Culturel Panafricain in Algiers in 1969, one has gradually sensed a sort of internal debate about the theory of blackness; this assumed the aspect of a theory, and almost of an ideology, with Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* of 1956.

What is the relationship between art and life? In traditional Africa art and life were intimately linked, just as ways of speaking, talking, conversing, and narrating were at once part of the arts and part of human life. The story, for example, could be at once profane and mythical. The religious, the sacred and the profane co-existed and inter-penetrated in the entanglement of this world. In order to study the relationship between art and life today—and keeping in mind the points which we have underlined with regard to the socio-historical environment in which the artist develops—we should single out three decisive moments: the colonial phase, the phase of independence, and the post-colonial phase.

In the course of the colonial phase, the artist or writer in the colonized country passes by progression from a state of semi-silence to a more or less conscious imitation of the colonizer, and finally reaches a phase of revendication during which the new literature will set itself up. From this moment on one can already perceive the aspiration to achieve independence; this will be the major theme of the works of the subsequent phase.

In the phase of independence, submission to the objectives to be attained is accentuated: literature gives voice to political aspirations, whence the importance of liberation themes, of independence and the new community to be created. Even those not involved by the commitment have nonetheless taken part in the same folklore dances and chanted the same songs as the African peoples.

The great problem, however, is still that of the new orientations, the tendencies which should come to the fore after this phase of independence. It is still not possible to foresee (and still less possible to catalogue) the tendencies which will manifest themselves in the post-colonial period. If the colonial period appeared to be one of untenable oppression from which an escape

had to be made, and if the phase of independence vibrated above all with a feeling of exaltation provoked by the sensation that independence was near, and then by the act of newly acquired independence, the post-colonial period has turned into a period of indetermination and new tests and trials: in a word a period of questioning. But this will also be a period of maturity, when new means of literary and artistic expression are consolidated. Sociological studies will then make it possible to single out the authentic tendencies and allow observation of how those essential themes, which saw the light of day during the colonial phase, will be decanted. It is up to the new generations to determine whether a tendency has represented an individual commitment or a particular filiation.

To establish this one must distinguish between artists of the word, such as poets and novelists, and artists of the gesture, such as painters and sculptors (namely G. Sokoto, originally from South Africa, who today gives an example of this which is as striking as it is interesting). Writers and poets in particular—novelists have been less gratified—were quick and almost instinctive in the way they resumed the great tradition of Negro-African expression, from the first phase onwards. They renewed the tradition of the word, the *logos*. A few sculptors have tried to recreate the link with the great African sculptural tradition, but in their case one finds a certain decadence in the old forms. The contemporary artist finds it hard to adapt his art to “old Africa.” Although one or two painters put their names down for various traditions, they are as impelled as writers are by the realities and imperatives of modern Africa: by apparently obeying inner motives more and more, they do not manage to extract themselves from external influences.

It is precisely here that we shall see the affirmation not only of this commitment in the real sense, but also of the particular filiations. We should take note of the different levels in this commitment. There is the commitment to everyday life by the very acceptance of the writer's condition and the artist's condition today. Then there is the personal, political commitment. In this order of ideas we are putting side by side men who by their origin and by their destiny are extremely different: think of Frantz Fanon who voluntarily made himself the protagonist and hero of the Algerian revolution; Stéfán Alexis, killed during the

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in-fighting in Haiti; Christopher Okigbo, the Nigerian poet, assassinated during the Nigerian war, Wole Soyinka who was, once more, recently imprisoned in the same war, Léopold Sédar Senghor, the poet-president who is ever mindful of his political commitments when he tries to reconcile his theory of blackness with his country's imperatives of economic development; Mario De Andrade, head of a revolutionary party engaged in the struggle for the liberation of Angola against the colonial Portuguese regime; Jomo Kenyatta, a prisoner under the colonial regime, only too acquainted with the vicissitudes of an independence dearly won, etc. etc....

But apart from such personal commitments which sometimes incur the supreme sacrifice, there is the problem of the content of this new literature. Blackness appears to be the favourite theme of a critical study. It is a fact that Africa has progressed from a literature made up of symbol-systems or of symbolism to a literature of connotations. It is a fact that in the new poetry and the new novels the expression no longer belongs to the Africa of yore. It is not just a new language or new languages which are being used: there are new styles and new ways of saying new things. Born in a state of ambiguity, African literature creates its own conditions to produce other things than the dispersed and occasional elements which it exploits. Its intention lies in individualism. But is it not rather a collective activity in which works signed individually by their authors represent essential statements of the imperatives of the old community foundation inherited from the past? In this respect it would seem less directly threatened than traditional oral literature by the evil influences of intellectualism, complacent modernism, ideological and unconscious declamation; the influences of a certain cerebral or academic aestheticism of isolation or etiolation, and the influence of socio-community deprivation, with lastly the influence of the lack of popular re-oxygenisation.

Another important theme which has often troubled writers is the feeling of doubt which they nurture with regard to the portent of their message, not because of its content but because of its admissibility. African literature is the daughter of exile and its vicissitudes. In a certain sense it has been created for a non-African audience—and the poets are well aware of this, particularly those who have been hallowed by western coteries,

even when their members and admirers had names like André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre or François Mauriac. This new African literature asks itself the question: is it only of significance in Paris, London or Washington? It deplores being completely overlooked in Africa itself. Can the artist really consider that he has achieved his goal when the people at whom the work is directed are not even aware of his existence?

African artists and writers are floundering in another problem too: that of their own status. In traditional society in fact literature and writer, story and storyteller, poem and poet were an integrating part of the community and collective reality which it constituted. Today, on the contrary, the artist who adds his name to the work he has just finished commits the initial Promethean gesture. He tears himself away from the community by this affirmation, but in this act of banishment he claims his identity as artist, is perceived as an artist, even if in the end he will return to this community. One must admit that modern Africa has not yet brought about the revolution which would consist in conceiving the artist purely as a sort of favoured citizen, shut up in his laboratory and in his inspiration, and, as a consequence, and with the help of his imagination, finding it his duty to render to society the riches which have ripened within him. The African artist has still got to struggle for this status. His task is all the more difficult because modern and so-called consumer society grants less value to the spiritual than it does to the concrete, in such a way that he no longer has the natural protection that he used to find in his immediate integration in society. He is also considerably deprived on the level of a new social competition in relation to the other categories of workers. This is a problem and a danger with which the artist and the artist's work are threatened.

The tension between the writer and society and between the writer and his work brings us back to the question of blackness. Like new Negro-African literature itself, this theory has been conceived by intellectuals in exile: Aimé Césaire, Gontran Damas, Léopold Sédar Senghor—all these were either sons and daughters of exiles living in Paris, or students far from their native countries. Consequently the theory of blackness in its primary form of revindicating an authentic ego and a call to liberty is likewise the translation of a particular situation: the state of

domination in which a large sector of the black world was then living. In giving itself this title, did blackness intend becoming a theory of black literature? No. Let us recall the interesting debate in about 1950 which brought Gabriel d'Arboussier into opposition with Jean-Paul Sartre, the former, at the time, being secretary general of the RDA allied to the Communist party of the National Assembly of the 4th Republic; the latter author of *Orphée Noir*. For Sartre the theory of blackness, in a Marxist perspective, was a sort of anti-racist racism, intended to enable the Black to recover his integrity so as to make his comeback to the community, while for the champion of the blackness theory, this was simply the revendication of Black authenticity.

Since that time, Blacks and non-Blacks have constantly been asking themselves about the historical value of blackness, and we have even witnessed the appearance of a kind of anti-blackness. Many admit that if the theory of blackness has been useful in the phase of African awareness, the phase of the birth and emergence of new Negro-African literature, today, conversely, it seems outmoded—this idea however is not shared by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire. But whatever position one takes in respect of the theory of blackness (which is for all that somewhat ambiguous), one has to recognise that in the period during which the colonial order was being contested, it gave many Blacks a *raison d'être*, if not a reason for living.

In times to come, however, black writers and artists will still be no less bound to elaborate, in concrete works, a new conception of the complex of African civilisations—a realist conception, not an abstract one. The essence of the problem lies in this perspective; although one cannot deny that it is by making Blacks aware of their own identity that blackness has enabled them to rediscover the great traditional values of African societies.

At the same time as it is striving towards innovation, the new theory will have to rely on the basic values of traditional Africa. This, quite definitely, is how we see the defiance which should be shown by all those African societies who, with the aid of the different means of literary and artistic expression available to them, are striving to give the new Africa her new face.