

# Palabre

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## Definition

*What is palabre?*<sup>1</sup> Not only an exchange of words, but also a social drama, a procedure, and set of human interactions. Palabre is therefore a putting into scene, a putting into order, and a putting into words

It represents the originality of combining – most often with good humor – the law and the network. Using the one while remaining the other, palabre defines itself as a fleeting genre. The product of the Spanish *palabra* – the word – palabre is a politics of words because the word is political. How does the word affect the process of signifying the history of a subject or a social group? How do we understand the word as an other, and the words of the other?

Palabre is an utterance “given to” or “addressed to.” This donation demands of its donor an address, a putting into form that is also a putting into sense. Palabre is therefore the location *par excellence* of politics. Through palabre, the society interrogates its references, steps back, and can enter into an uninterrupted dialogue with itself and its other. In Africa, one meets with palabre at all levels of civil society. Any occasion is ripe for the arrival of meaning through words. There exist therefore several types of palabre. We will divide them into two groups: “irenic palabre,”<sup>2</sup> which is held independently of conflict (on the occasion of a marriage or a sale ...), and “agonistic” palabre that is the result of a difference. In this article we will only treat the latter, defined as “the reduction of a conflict by language, violence taken in a humane fashion into discussion.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense, palabre is suspended between the rigidity of rules and the rebellion against it, between flattering hypocrisy and satirical aggression. It is a “conversation” in the political and juridical sense of the word: if there is no law besides that which is discussed, what grounds it?

## Palabre as Tolerance

*Palabre implies the idea of tolerance. A tolerance that often goes from "why not?" to "laissez faire" does not fundamentally undermine each party's regime of truth when two parties come face to face. It is this idea of tolerance that prevails today in the process of occidentalization of Africa. After independence, the African traditions were tolerated – something that is apparent in all domains – on the condition that the different realms of truth on which the Occident rested would not be called into question. Passive tolerance, which is the issue in the relationship between Europe and its other, employs "laissez faire" by keeping each person's intolerance intact. This form of tolerance is not a meeting, but separate parallel soliloquies: speak your truth, I will speak mine, and may we not disturb each other! In such a case how can one conceive of a meeting with the other? Passive tolerance is an evasion of the risk of a face to face.*

*Quite to the contrary, palabre puts the possibility of active tolerance in sight. It implies that man's being, before being substance, is relations. In these relations, each person lives "a little death" of the self. In palabre, I appear suddenly, I exist by means of the tears in my self (coming from my economic, political, ideological, etc. anchors). I do not enter into a relationship but by means of "loss." To accept the loss of oneself implies active tolerance. The intolerant – like the passively tolerant – preserves itself. It economizes, it lives of itself and with itself: it is a little merchant that capitalizes on the great product which is itself. It is a being of the "penitentiary administration,"<sup>4</sup> a prison bailiff whose prisoner is his very self: ipse!" In active tolerance, I accept the tearing of self so that the other can see himself in my wounds. "Human beings are never united between themselves but by tears or wounds."<sup>5</sup> Active tolerance is perilous, for it is the passing from one mode of being to another: it is "the departure from the self." Tolerance does not leave our self intact, it feels – and is felt – through relations.*

*The active tolerance permitted by the spirit of palabre opens onto a learned ignorance. Questioning the validity and truth in conflicting dialogue necessitates the revision of the notion of comprehension and, by means of that, of the status of understanding. Since the relationship to the other ends in a loss, I must first "lose understanding" with all of its sufficiency and assurance in order to accept ignorance. Such a position is not comfortable in that it is strained toward the discovery of the not yet. The situation of real communication is in itself generative of conflicts to*

*the extent that where we take up speech is limited by our era and our prejudices. And as the other stands in front of us with similar handicaps, conflict is inevitable. A palabre will not be possible if we do not recognize our fallibility and our limitation in space and time.*

## Palabre and Democracy

*This consideration of palabre is not meant to impose a mode of thought originating from tribal society upon the organization of the State. Nor does it concern the making of palabre into a panacea which will resolve all of the problems brought up by the actual organization of African societies. Palabre permits the initiation of a reflection on history. It doesn't offer to occidental societies, often overcome by exoticism, a means of access to the primitive forces of human evolution, but rather a confrontation between types of becoming."<sup>6</sup>*

*The ruin of contractualist theories and the reduction of politics to domination was followed by an equal flattening of both the idea of politics and thought about politics. Palabre enables the transcendence of this degeneration. In palabre, politics is no longer spoken of in terms of the state, laws, and legislature, but of action. This last point underlines the permanence of conflict in the socio-political space: conflicts (and ties) between action and ethics, conflicts (and mutual penetration) between the sphere of law and that of politics, conflicts between the just as good and the just as a ruling. Conflict, whether expressed as brute violence or as competition, indicates first that there is mobility and therefore an unstable equilibrium<sup>7</sup> at the heart of every society. The problem is therefore to redefine the forms of coexistence.*

*The public sphere of speech that palabre clears a place for is constituted by what Ricœur calls "conflicting consensus." This notion – such as it is formulated by Ricœur based upon the experiences of occidental democracies – introduces ethics and morality as constitutive dimensions to any thought on politics. How does one define the goal of democracy at the moment when violence and lies are tending to tarnish it? How does one reconcile "the reign of ends" (Kant) – in which everyone is at once citizen and sovereign – and the permanence of conflict in democracies?*

*Democracy necessitates two tools: proceedings and straight opinion. Palabre is the location par excellence of proceedings. There, everything is*

the object of negotiation, of confabulation, of a consultation of the other. One single *palabre* can be made of up to seven or eight other mini-*palabres* and each stage is equivalent to a proceeding. Proceedings are a modern mediation which permit distance, the detour of the symbolic. The straight opinion is also taken in charge by *palabre*, implying that it is urgent for democracy to always be initiating an archaeology of law so as to surprise the mythical and ethical prejudices on which it feeds. Both proceedings and the straight opinion, essential dimensions of *palabre*, presuppose citizens.

The anthropology of the acting which *palabre* necessitates makes the notion of "recounting" suddenly appear as a constituent element of democracies. Democracy – like *palabre* – is told, it is a narrative and a putting into narrative, a knot of intrigue and an "intrication of histories."<sup>8</sup> An intrication of stories about what is just, desirable, preferable, democratic, and for the common good cannot make up a public sphere unless it tells the histories of its anchor points. And public sphere is the arena where an individual telling her story is also in some part telling the tragic history of everyone.

Translated from the French by Beatrice McGeoch

## Notes

1. Extracts pulled together by the author from: *La Palabre, une juridiction de la parole* (Paris, 1997), pp. 9, 10, 11, 40, 41, 42, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123.
2. We are using F. Jacques's classification concerning "agon" and "irénè" in *Espace logique de l'interlocution* (Paris, 1985).
3. B. Atangana, "Actualité de la palabre," *Etudes* 324 (Paris, 1966), p. 461.
4. G. Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure* (Paris, 1954), p. 62.
5. *Idem*, in *Ecrits posthumes; Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. II (Paris, 1970), p. 370.
6. Claude Lefort, *Les formes de l'histoire, Essais d'anthropologie politique* (Paris, 1978), p. 32.
7. Throughout Book V of *Politics*, Aristotle analyses conflicts and notes that societies live in an unstable equilibrium (stasis). He predicts prudence (*phronésis*) as a political virtue par excellence.
8. Ricœur uses this idea which he takes from W. Schapp; see *Ethique et Responsabilité*, p. 20.