

THE THOUGHT AND PRACTICE OF AN EMANCIPATORY POLITICS FOR AFRICA



Ernest
Wamba-dia-Wamba
Bazunini

A dialogue with

Michael
Neocosmos

tricontinental
Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research
JOHANNESBURG

THE THOUGHT AND PRACTICE OF AN EMANCIPATORY POLITICS FOR AFRICA

Ernest
Wamba-dia-Wamba
Bazunini

A dialogue with

Michael
Neocosmos





Introduction

By Michael Neocosmos

Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba Bazunini was a Congolese intellectual and revolutionary whose life was devoted to thinking a popular emancipatory politics in both theory and practice. Born to a peasant family in a Kikongo-speaking part of central Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), respect, love and dignity were fundamental values throughout his upbringing which he carried into his lifelong political and intellectual pursuits. He studied philosophy and economics in the United States and France and was a professor of history at the University of Dar es Salaam for most of his academic life. He was also president of the Council for Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria) from 1992 to 1995.

Imprisoned during 1982–1983 and politically persecuted by the oppressive regime of Mobutu Sese Seko, Wamba spent much of his life in exile. Throughout this time, Wamba was insistent that no emancipatory political project could see the light of day in the absence of a popular democratic movement. With the support of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania in 1998, Wamba was elected to lead an armed rebellion, under the auspices of the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), against Laurent-Désiré Kabila, the then dictator of the DRC. Although reluctantly involved in armed struggle, which for him could only make sense as a people's war, Wamba attempted to encourage a popular democratic movement in Eastern DRC, where he was based, to combat militarism within both state organs and among the opposition. For Wamba, military power was always to be subordinated to popular democratic control. Yet his attempts to build a movement in the context of war were largely stillborn. Following the death of Nyerere in 1999, Mwalimu's support evaporated, and the RCD broke into two factions: an ethnic Tutsi faction based in Goma and a democratic faction led by Wamba which moved to Kisangani. By the end of the civil war in 2003, the armed struggle thus lay fractured and fragmented. In the hopes of continuing to advance the struggle of the people of DRC for emancipation and after a short stint in the Senate, Wamba subsequently immersed himself in thinking and practising emancipatory politics, mainly at grassroots level.

On 15 July 2020 in Kinshasa, DRC, Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba passed on to join the ancestors – a result of Covid-19.

This dialogue is based on interviews I conducted with Wamba in May 2019 in Pretoria and embodies some of the most important ideas he left to us. The dialogue is organised under eight headings: 1) Politics and Society in Ancient Egypt, 2) Nation-Building in Africa, 3) The State and the Public Good, 4) African Spirituality and Popular Struggles, 5) The *Mbongi*, the *Palaver* and Resolving Popular Contradictions, 6) Philosophy and Dialectics, 7) Pan-Africanism, and 8) Africa Today.

Two dominant themes emerged from the conversation. First, the importance for the African state to manage the ‘common good’ rather than service interests tied to colonialism, and historically its complete inability to do so, which has led to its failure to adhere to basic universal democratic norms. Second, the unavoidable centrality of independent popular organisations in any emancipatory political project to a) hold those in the state to account and thus to insist on genuine, popularly founded democracy and to b) provide the basis for popular mass movements to defend those who end up in power and attempt to oppose (neo) colonialism. These two points explain the problems of Africa and, in the absence of confronting them, it was Wamba’s view that Africa will continue to be locked into a neocolonial condition. In addition, of course, any thought of emancipatory politics on the continent would have to be directly informed by popular culture and African traditions. The imposition of the state on the people of Africa beginning with colonialism and then neocolonialism has spelt disaster for the majority. This state of affairs was compounded, he believed, by Africans’ loss of spirituality during the colonial period.

Ancient Egypt was foundational to Wamba’s thought of politics. One important reason for this is because we can detect in that civilisation a concept of the public good embodied in the idea of *Ma’at*.¹ This refers to a universal conception of justice, truth and societal balance which was meant to govern behaviour by all individuals and groups in society. Irrespective of whether this governing concept was always adhered to, and it is quite clear that it was not, its existence suggests that there was within ancient Egypt an idea of the common good which postcolonial states have eschewed, particularly since the 1980s. The dominant class took into account the interests of lower classes so a kind of ‘national unity’, as we would term it today, was created. The lower classes thereby had some kind of commitment to the state. Thus, for Wamba, the study of ancient African practices should inform our understanding of politics today.

It is clear, he suggests, that the notion of ‘nation-building’, the dominant guide for postcolonial state-led development (at least initially) was not able to live up to an idea of the common good for any length of time. The failure of the state to unite the nation around a common vision was a clear result of the practices of a self-centred ruling class which acted through the state according to its own narrow interests that became totally subservient to those of foreign power. The state ended up taking a neocolonial form and thus continued to be experienced by the popular masses as a mere foreign imposition. The section of our conversation on nation-building shows how, in the absence of popular movements on which any emancipatory politics must be founded, nation-building ended up historically in subservience to colonialism. This process

¹ For important discussions of the ancient Egyptian concept of *Ma’at* and Egyptian thought more generally see Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation*, New York: Dover Publications, 2000 and Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. More generally see Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991.

culminated in the 1980s in a 'democratising mission' – 'democracy' being largely imposed from above and outside – following on from a colonial 'civilising mission' and a subsequent postcolonial 'development mission' all ultimately controlled by Western colonial interests.

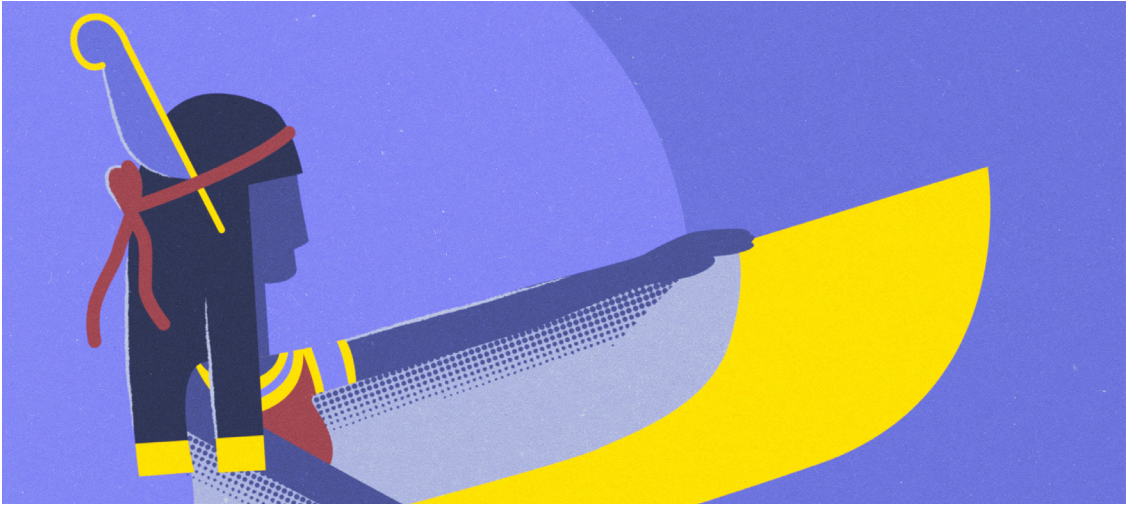
Wamba's arguments regarding spirituality, to which he was strongly committed, can be seen in our discussion of Kimpa Vita's rebellion against the Catholic Church at the end of the seventeenth century, in the religious idioms of Simon Kimbangu's millenarian nationalist movement of the 1920s and in the possibilities of a kind of 'liberation theology' today. The first two of these three processes were the closest thing in the history of the Congo to mass popular anti-colonial movements.

Wamba's analysis of the *Mbongi* and the *Palaver* shows that there exist, in Africa, important popular ways of resolving contradictions inherent among the people, i.e. methods of uniting communities so that their enemies (e.g. state power) can be successfully confronted. A process of this kind is a fundamental necessity in any emancipatory politics. The importance of such a collective acquisition of knowledge also comes to the fore in the section in which philosophy and dialectics are discussed. His philosophy was linked to endogenous African understandings of knowledge acquisition that do not separate out the individual as a knowing subject. The understanding of emancipatory politics as a distinct human activity therefore requires a collective dialectical subjectivity founded on but not reducible to the universalistic attributes of African cultures. It is in this manner that Wamba combined a sophisticated philosophical analysis with a principled commitment to emancipatory politics.

Finally, similar themes reappear in the discussion of pan-Africanism and the contemporary problems of Africa. The section on pan-Africanism outlines its divided history and puts forward a critique of African-American conceptions which ignored African views on the unity of Africa. This is followed by an analysis of the three pan-African trends in existence today. The section on Africa's contemporary problems and the politics of the Congo revolves around Wamba's attempts to understand how an alternative politics could be initiated in practice: putting the people first, learning from them and other lessons that could be learnt from Chinese and other popular struggles (e.g. the 'mass line'). This means a certain return to endogenous forms of knowledge production among other things (as in Amílcar Cabral's *Return to the Source*). In particular, the case of the Congo illustrates the general problem, that people failed to develop an autonomous politics, that is a politics independent of both colonial power and the postcolonial state – this was the tragedy of Patrice Lumumba.

Wamba also discussed the difficulties he faced in attempting to develop a form of politics distinct from party politics in Congo, as ultimately, if you do not, you remain a prisoner of state thinking and thus of neocolonialism. Unlike most African intellectuals, Wamba's politics was concerned with overcoming divisions between intellectuals

and the people. He understood the need to develop conceptions which could enable the overcoming of such divisions. Discussing and debating issues of common concern with him over the years was a constant joy and an immense source of intellectual stimulation for me. Always willing to talk – in fact Wamba was much more a conversationalist than a writer – and always humorous, Wamba made intellectual discussion a human pleasure. His personal behaviour as well as his intellectual orientation both stressed the universality of the human to which he was consistently committed. He was hoping that, as a man of peace (Wamba means ‘peace-bringer’ in Kikongo), he would have the opportunity to fulfil his vision for his country. His dream was unfortunately tragically curtailed.



Politics and Society in Ancient Egypt

Michael Neocosmos (MN): In order to understand politics as a specific collective human subjectivity and practice, it is probably important to begin at the beginning, namely with the Neolithic period broadly from 8000 to 4500 BCE when states first developed. On our continent, if not worldwide, it is ancient Egypt that gives us the earliest idea of politics and the state. Let us therefore begin by talking first about politics in ancient Egypt where the river Nile is the source of all life. But we should also briefly mention the period before the rise of the centralised state.² What do you think were the conditions that gave rise to state power, centralised control over military, justice and so on?

Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba (EWDW): These questions need a lot of study, because it is too easy to just reduce the answer to class divisions and class struggle. In the case of ancient Egypt, if we look at [the myths regarding] how the ancient Egyptians themselves explained who they were, in a cosmology/cosmogony, what is striking is that there was no supreme being or God who was a universal creator. But the God itself came from something called the *Nun*. This was [understood to be] the [initial/primordial] matter, a watery material, and a consciousness which was latent in there subsequently arose. This consciousness they called Amun-Ra. And this Amun-Ra said that everything originated from his drops of tears.

² The state in ancient Egypt is said to date from around 3000 BCE. It is divided into successive dynasties each under the overall rule of a pharaoh. Before that date people on the banks of the Nile lived in distinct independent smaller societies of agriculturalists. See Kathryn A. Bard, 'The Emergence of the Egyptian State', in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 57–82.

The important thing to note here is that there was no outside creator. But at the same time there was this notion of latency – because he said, ‘When I am still latent, I am Ra; when I become powerful and all the other deities come from me, I am Amun’. At some point he would become Amun-Ra. So, in other words already we are talking of a ‘One’ and a ‘Multiple’ at the same time. In other words, we can see a kind of dialectic at work.

Now what are the implications of that, that everything and all that exists is part of this consciousness that arises on its own from the *Nun*? It has been said that this is actually a [kind of] universalism that all blood animals share [the same origins which can be referred to as] ‘divinity’. This may not be the most appropriate term, but the point should be clear; [all living creatures have the same godly origins].

The other specificity we find is that this god of the Egyptians was not like the Jewish god, who became upset that his people made mistakes and thus decided to drown them in water. It is said that even when complaints were raised that humans were not going along with what he had expected Ra responds, ‘... but we cannot do this [kill], but if indeed you think that that can be done, then do it’. In the account of the cosmogony, Ra actually failed to massacre those who were not following his rules because when he went to the place where he was supposed to undertake the massacre, he found a red liquid that looked nice. So, he tasted it. It was like drinking wine and he got drunk and the time when he was supposed to massacre people passed. When he came to, the only thing that he could say was, ‘You see, I told you, there was no need for the massacre’.³

This god who recognised that the planets and animals were part of him was not so vicious as to go massacring people. In this order of the cosmos, what later will be called *Ma’at*, the worry the Egyptians had was always that, since they came from chaos, if they were not careful, everything could return to chaos. Somebody must be in charge of making sure that everything does not go back to chaos, and this must be the [pharaoh], the son of Ra. It seems then that this development of the cosmogony was to simply justify the existence of the pharaoh.

MN: Yes, indeed, but surely that argument would be a later ideological justification?

EWDW: Yes, but the point is that the issue of life is connected to the order of the universe, to everything that exists.

³ A detailed discussion of Egyptian myths of creation can be found in Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation*. See also Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt, History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

MN: Isn't there a problem with the thought that one person [even if they are a God or part-human, part-God] must stop society returning into chaos? Why must it be one person only? That was obviously a justification for the power of the pharaohs ...

EWDW: I agree, at some point this became the justification for the rule of the pharaoh. But what I am also trying to say is that even before the pharaonic system arises, how were the Egyptians viewing the condition they were in, in terms of their civilisation's dependency upon the Nile? That is the point.

MN: But we still do not know why there was a change towards the formation of a centralised state.

EWDW: Well one can refer to the myth of the two brothers Osiris and Seth to account for this.⁴ The story of Osiris says that at the beginning of time, two women decided that they have to study agriculture, how to grow food, and how to organise society around the land that they have thanks to the Nile. When they were doing this, a man said, 'To have it easier you need to calculate everything. You must know how much of everything you have, how heavy it is, how long the distances are and so on'. He said this because calculations would give precision to what they were trying to do.

So they started working and it was pleasant. Osiris, the brother of these two women, came and said, 'Oh, but this is very nice. I am going to take this to other communities so that they can also practise this system'. But the brother of Osiris, Seth, said, 'This is taking too much time. I think there is a way of doing it faster'. Seth was connected to a group with military skills. This group decided that sharing, producing together, and collaborating was too time-consuming. Seth and his military group decided to put an end to this collective process. Seth killed Osiris in a fight but his wife Isis and his son Horus somehow managed to put him together again. Osiris thus became the first to [apparently] resurrect from the dead.

It is this military caste that ended up ruling and providing all the justifications for the rule of the first dynasty. So approximately around 3000 BCE, this first dynasty decided that the majority of the people would work for the leisure of a minority. The minority enjoyed their leisure with the others working for them, at times even by force, as the dynasty possessed military power as well. All the other dynasties would come to provide their own different justifications for their rule but what I've explained is the first dynasty's rationale.

⁴ Osiris and Seth were two deities representing good and evil. By the end of the fifth dynasty (2345 BCE), the cult of Osiris became more central in Egypt. See also the original story 'The Contendings of Horus and Seth', in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, ed. William K. Simpson (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 91–103.

So, the myth suggests that the state arose because of a division in society; but how did this division come about? The division arose because Seth with the military skills said that sharing, collectively thinking together, took too long. But in any case, the notion of division, of a society divided, is there. We may have different stories [for how states arise], but this story from ancient Egypt explains how their dynasties arise.

MN: But presumably the pharaohs must have provided some benefits to the ordinary people.

EWDW: This is where we come to the question: did the conception of *Ma'at* start before the first dynasty or after? I would say it existed before dynastic power because *Ma'at* is concerned with balance, equilibrium, with justice and truth. When the dynastic state took over, they simply said that the pharaoh was the incarnation of *Ma'at*. We must all behave according to *Ma'at*.

MN: But does the pharaoh follow *Ma'at*?

EWDW: Well we have this story, *The Eloquent Peasant*.⁵ The eloquent peasant gathered food products to take to the city to sell. On the way he encountered a problem. A government official confiscated his property. So he asked, 'But is this justice? Is this the truth? Is this balance?' At each level of government he protested, until [he reached] the highest level of the High Steward who reported to the pharaoh, 'This peasant here, you probably should listen to him'.

The scribes recorded the arguments that the peasant made, the questions he was raising. The pharaoh listened to them. He said, 'You give back everything to him and give him even more because he convinces me that he is the one who really practises *Ma'at*. We have failed to practice *Ma'at*'.

[The experience of *The Eloquent Peasant*] is like saying that you have freedom in a capitalist society, but actually there is no real freedom. You say, 'We have the freedom to march, to demonstrate'. But the police come along and beat you! There was *Ma'at* which probably started before the pharaohs. But the use of *Ma'at* by the pharaoh and the officials in power was not necessarily systematically and consistently applied.

MN: No, and it couldn't be, because *Ma'at* implied some form of equality and

⁵ See Shemsu Bak, *Smi n skhty pn (The Story of the Eloquent Peasant)*, Penguine: Per Ankh Publishers, 2016.

Read *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* online here: <https://mjn.host.cs.st-andrews.ac.uk/egyptian/texts/corpus/pdf/Peasant.pdf>. For an important discussion see Chike Jeffers, 'Embodying Justice in Ancient Egypt: The Tale of *The Eloquent Peasant* as a Classic of Political Philosophy', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (2013): 421–442.

of solidarity. Whereas Egyptian society was a hierarchical society, so there was a contradiction.

EWDW: It is a contradiction, but the Egyptians were saying that the pharaoh is the incarnation of *Ma'at*. Because *The Eloquent Peasant* is asking does the pharaoh gain any sort of benefit as a result of his power? *Ma'at* requires him to carry out justice. But of course, this does not necessarily mean he really does so, or maybe he does to some extent only.

MN: It seems that the crucial issue is that the pharaoh, as the incarnation of *Ma'at*, was supposed to be able to provide justice. In other words, he was supposed to adjudicate fairly between various parties, in order for balance to continue so that chaos could be avoided. However, he could not because Egyptian society was hierarchical and based on power differentials. Thus the belief was contradictory, no?

EWDW: He was obliged to, because he was the son of God, of Ra or Amun-Ra, and *Ma'at* was the order of the universe. Otherwise there would be chaos. So he was obliged to do that. The other part [of their beliefs] that we neglected to mention is that the [idea of] order was not [simply concerned with] the order of the cosmos, of society, but after death the Egyptians believed there was also order. So that is why they had these 'confessions of innocence'. There was said to be a tribunal when you went to the ancestors. Have you behaved as you were supposed to behave? [Their belief was that, after death, the Goddess of *Ma'at* officiated at a ceremony holding a balance with a feather on one side and your heart on the other. You would only live after death if your heart was lighter than the feather].⁶ One feels that maybe if some of the problems that the pharaoh caused could come out in the tribunal, they may tilt the balance. So, if it was more positive, he was entitled to have a pyramid!

In sum, there is a kind of dialectic built in. True, the belief was contradictory, but the commoner still had a chance to raise an issue, to critique the state like this eloquent peasant. If we compare the situation in ancient Egypt to current capitalist societies, you have the feeling that [in the Egyptian case] there is a hegemonic universal element that prevails over the class aspect proper. In capitalist societies, it is the other way around. We have the greater dominance of exclusive class interests and less of the hegemonic caretaking of everybody. In Egyptian society you get the feeling that there was this implicit caretaking of everybody, but despite that, class interests were also in evidence for you had a class of priests and scribes, intellectuals who also enjoyed privileges.

⁶ For details see E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London: Penguin, 2008), especially, 366–378. This is a translation of the Papyrus of Ani held at the British Museum. See also Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 157–168.

The Egyptians conceived of every person as embodying an element of the divine, every deed, every animal. So, in that sense one can say there was some notion of universalism in that society. When the Egyptians referred to foreigners, they considered them as human, [not as somehow lacking in human attributes].

MN: So just clarify this point that you are making: the difference between Egyptian society and a capitalist society was what? Are class antagonisms more obvious or more dominant?

EWDW: No, it depends on the period [of capitalism you are referring to]. For example [during] the period of the [social democratic] welfare state [in Europe 1945-1980], you have the sense that the universalistic aspect is also alive, in other words the dominant class has decided that they have to take care of the civil rights of the dominated. They have to take care of their schooling and their social welfare. Otherwise there will be rebellions and crises. And in that scenario, the dominant class may also lose their hold on power. On the other hand, we have a situation in the United States today where [then] President Donald Trump does not care. Should poor people have medical insurance? 'No, no!', he cries. So today, the dominant narrow class interests are pushed to the fore more than under a social democratic system when other categories of society also derived some benefits under one overall common umbrella. In other words, we have lost that idea of the 'common good' or the 'national interest', that umbrella under which the interests of various classes [and not simply those of the dominant class] are also worthy of consideration, much as was the case in Africa during the period of 'nation-building' [immediately after independence in the 1960s and 1970s].

So the fundamental question is when you say 'nation-building', what are you actually building? Does the nation you are building take into account most interests? That is the real issue.



Nation-Building in Africa

“... built into this process of nation-building, is precisely the rise of forces that undermine the very notion of a nation based on some kind of equality or inclusion ...”

MN: During the early phase of independence in 1960s Africa, there was this idea of nation-building and this idea was very much a social democratic one. It was inclusive. Because the dominant idea was that everybody should benefit from development, for example. Development was not just for the rich. It was supposed to be for all, for the nation. What was it like then and how has it changed today?

EWDW: When national liberation movements came to power, they wanted to build a nation. If we take the case of *Ujamaa* in Tanzania, what do we notice? Initially they agreed that villagers should start farming themselves, independently, with *Ujamaa* and make this the national conception for building the nation.⁷ But the more they are organising, the bureaucracy, the administration are saying, ‘Ah no, but this cannot be’. The priority should be efficiency and to do things faster. So, the villagers

⁷ The literature on *Ujamaa* is extensive but see in particular Julius Nyerere, ‘The Arusha Declaration and TANU’s Policy on Socialism and Self-Reliance’ (1967), accessed 14 December 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nyerere/1967/arusha-declaration.htm>, and Ralph Ibbott, *Ujamaa: the hidden story of Tanzania’s socialist villages*, London: Crossroads Books, 2014.

themselves initially decided to do this *Ujamaa* together. But with the structure of state apparatuses put in place, the bureaucrats and the intelligence people in the party say, 'This is too narrow. Rather, we need bigger units for real economies of scale and efficient production'. So they decided on villagisation which was not necessarily an idea that came from the collective processes of the villagers themselves.

And later, they go and say, 'No, you have to have in every village, a village government, village management, which is linked to the party'. So, it is no longer quite the social organisation arising from among the villagers themselves, from their own initiative. It is now the bureaucrats, basically, deciding on what to do, how to organise production in the village and so on. Pressure is put on President Nyerere that the alternative is either socialism or poverty – 'We want "scientific socialism!"'. In the end, the whole project of *Ujamaa* is undermined. And with the development of this structure of the state, the one-party state and so on, a whole new social stratum emerges, which now decides that the easiest way to develop is to link up with the Bretton Woods Institutions. But Nyerere does not want to have the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank dictating their agenda to the country, he decides that he does not want to remain president. Even when people say, 'No, no, we still want you,' he leaves. He remains chairman of the party, but he gradually finds out that it is just not possible, because the suggestions he makes run counter to what the government is doing.

In the end the president – Ali Hassan Mwinyi – also becomes the chairman of the party, and I remember the speech Nyerere made to criticise how there were '... too many presidents here! It has simply become a commercial project'. So, the minister of security decided they should arrest Nyerere. Yes, but the army asked: 'Who is going to arrest Nyerere?' They took Mwalimu to Butyama, his village, and they told him, 'Wait here. We are going to see who is going to arrest you'.

What I am saying is that, built into this process of nation-building is precisely the rise of forces that undermine the very notion of a nation based on some kind of equality or inclusion or whatever we want to call it. And then, at the end, those we are talking about capture the present. At the end they won *The Century*, because now development becomes purely capitalist. With the attempted so-called 'non-capitalist path' to development, the thing that made it even worse was that in Eastern Europe and in Russia they were also having problems. They had also given up, so like the petty bourgeoisie in Dar es Salaam said: 'You see, we told you so!'

So that is where we are. We are now in a situation where there is a type of ruling class that is an ally of the world's dominant class and global multinationals. In other words, we are dealing with a class that is a facilitator of Western imperialism. They cannot even think what could be thought to be 'normal', in the sense that you get the rich stealing the money of the treasury, but they do not even want to invest it in the country. They invest it somewhere else, someplace via banking or offshore transactions.

MN: Like Dubai.

EWDW: Yes. So that you yourself, your interests are not national. Now your interest has become the interest of your new allies.

MN: You have a form of neocolonialism. So, to think about this, the nation, which is produced during a liberation struggle, is what unites people. People become unified around a notion of the nation. And then they gradually transform themselves into states. From people-nation it becomes nation-state. And then the nation is the state and that leads to greater and greater divisions.

EWDW: Yes. And the state here really must be understood as simply a bureaucracy, nothing more. Because normally there would be a dominant class that is organising the rest of society. Which means that all the social categories which are not necessarily part of the ruling class, nevertheless, have their interests taken care of. To get unity and peace, the peace of the state, that is how the nation must be built. But now, incredibly, you have a feeling that the interests of almost the majority are not quite taken care of. The state is used, so to speak, but the state is not dealing with the majority's needs.

MN: And yet the ruling class requires that majority in order to retain power ...

EWDW: Yes, you cannot have a state without people. But you are behaving as if the people do not count. So even for elections, you cannot have true and transparent elections because you know that the people would probably not bring you back into power. You have all kinds of goings on – even in Dar es Salaam, in the 2015 elections, you cannot really say they were transparent. No. Some of the opposition parties still think they are the ones who won, but somehow through manoeuvres, the CCM won.⁸ And it is easy, because the bureaucracy knows how to manipulate the results, in the counting, because that is where the problem is. At the ballot counting, not everybody is watching. You can have an observer where the people are voting but normally there are no observers during the counting.

The bureaucracy use and exploit the ignorance of the people. This I noticed in the DRC where they announced on television: 'Jean-Pierre Bemba got so many votes in this area and so many votes in that area, and Joseph Kabila so many here, so many there', and so on. And then they announce the total: 'Kabila has won'. It takes some clever person to take the same data and add it all up, and to find out that in fact the total number of votes they mentioned for Bemba is higher than what they are saying are the total votes for Kabila, the winner.

⁸ Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) or the Party of the Revolution was the successor to TANU (Tanganyika African National Union) when Tanganyika united with Zanzibar to form Tanzania in 1964.

Kabila won but then to proclaim the results, Apollinaire Malumalu, the president of the independent electoral commission, had to take the results in a military tank. So why should these votes be so heavily protected? I talked to Malumalu, he oversaw the first elections of Kabila and Bemba. I said, 'But you were the only one who was working on these results'. And he said, 'Ah, you know, these politicians!' So clearly, he was under such pressure that in fact, he just gave in. This is the sort of state-building or nation-building that is taking place.

MN: What we are talking about is that you now have to pretend that you are being democratic in order to be part of the Western sphere of influence. You have to pretend in some way. You cannot just obviously ignore the basic elements of liberal democracy.

EWDW: We have two histories here. One history is that because the national liberation struggle forced people to be together, the sense of how we decide on change or on the limitations of the mandate was supposed to be different from when independence was just granted, where people did not have a chance to really interact. And so they still think fractionally, so to speak. Today the requirement is that democratisation is a conditionality. So here it is much more artificial than when people at least have some sense of unity. You see what I am saying? There are two histories. But now what we are seeing is that both histories are coming together.

Even those who had experienced a liberation struggle, the Mozambicans, the Angolans, on the one hand, and the DRC on the other, that didn't really have any sort of struggle for independence, they all seem now to converge on this issue of democratisation being something required from without, not something that is arising from within. So it is really like having a 'civilising mission' again. 'Civilising mission', followed by 'developmental mission', and then 'democratising mission'.

MN: You have always said that the state at independence was just grafted onto the colonial state. It was never rooted among people's cultures and wishes. Therefore, they still see the state as an external imposition. The state remains external to people's lives. It is the continuation of a kind of colonial domination.

EWDW: It is the main enemy of the majority of the people. But the contradiction of the whole thing is that the people are also thinking that it is the state that should be doing this, that or the other for them. For example, when garbage is left all over the place, they expect that the state will collect and clean it up. At the same time, they have the feeling that the state is hostile to them.

MN: So it is the great pharaoh, the great man who must look after his people?

EWDW: Yes. But he is not doing this. It is much clearer in the context of the DRC in Goma because you know there, there is no electricity, no water. You know that the state is not working.

MN: They are not thinking of doing it themselves?

EWDW: No, like everything, the state must do it – but they also know that if you criticise the state, you are hit by the state.

You know there is ‘The People’s Constitution’ in the Congo. It was not written down but there are just a few articles, at least they call them articles. They are circulating among the people; they are informal. Article 11 says ‘Do what you can do on your own’, in French: *Article onze ‘Debrouillez-vous!’* Article 15 concerns transport, ‘Walk instead of waiting for a bus that does not come’. *Article quinze ‘Allez à pied!’* (‘manage alone’; ‘go on foot’).

MN: So these are a bit like proverbs.

EWDW: Yes, yes, proverbs. Within them is also a criticism of the state, in the sense that they are saying the state is not doing anything, do not count on it.

But now, my complaint is that they do not come to the other issue, that is the issue of protest. One time we were not having water for a whole month, where I was living, and I said we should go to the *regie des eaux* (‘water board’) that is supposed to provide us with water. I said we pay for water, but the water is not coming. So now we are going to demand it. ‘Ha,’ they said, ‘but you know the state, it has issues’. I could hear that there was a reluctance to protest. A child has not eaten the whole day. I said, ‘Let us have a food festival in our area’. Somebody comes and says, ‘Well, you know, your proposal is good but there are so many vicious people, maybe somebody may poison your food’. You see, so in other words there is a reluctance of people to organise on their own.

MN: There has to be a leader? There has to be someone who is senior?

EWDW: Yes, in order to lead the process, but we have to get to that point.

MN: Without a movement there cannot be any politics.

EWDW: Yes. There must be social organising independent of the state. What we are now seeing is that there is a controversy regarding Patrice Lumumba. That is where the issue is, well that is my view anyway. Lumumba’s position or project, the whole world fighting for independence and so on, but also the socialist countries supporting independence were all ready for that speech by Lumumba.⁹ Lumumba became very

⁹ See Patrice Lumumba, ‘Speech at the Ceremony of the Proclamation of the Congo’s Independence’ (30 June 1960), accessed 14 December 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/lumumba/1960/06/independence.htm>.

popular everywhere, but inside the country there was no real social organisation which could sustain Lumumba.

MN: There was no one to defend him?

EWDW: Most people were saying 'let us see', you know. It was just a few people that were connected to his own party, who knew.

MN: We have to come back to that, because this is a major problem. I mean even very progressive politicians being parachuted into power or coming to power, they may have a vision, but they have no social basis.

EWDW: Yes, no social movement independent of the state ... I think it is also a problem when we talk about the consciousness of those who were fighting for independence, their notions, their concerns, fighting to conquer state power.

MN: That's right.

EWDW: And that is probably where the problem lies. In other words, Lumumba was convinced that once he is in the state, he can do what he believes in, using that state.

MN: Well, it is seen in Nkrumah's famous statement. 'Seek ye first the political kingdom and everything shall be added unto thee'.

EWDW: You have the feeling that it is so even here in South Africa, where it was also agreed that we are not going to change the state, we are just going to keep it there.

One can blame Lumumba for failing to develop an independent social system. But also, at the same time his thinking was just not at that level. The thinking was at the level of once you are in the state you can now do what you believe in. And it turns out that no, the state is contradictory, to start with. And that being the case, Lumumba had to include ministers in his own government that did not share his perspective, with the result that when he finished his meetings with the Council of Ministers, there were some ministers who were meeting behind his back.

MN: Pan-Africanism had gripped the masses, the desire for a better world. People believed very much in the unity of Africa. And then it kind of turns into something else. Even in countries where there was a mass movement, like in Algeria for example, you still have the state basically taking over and substituting itself for people's actions, their independent actions. So, it was a general problem.

EWDW: Oh yes there was this shift. I do not know how to characterise the shift, but it was from a politics of freeing ourselves, to getting development going. And it was

believed that only the state was competent enough to get this development going. I guess that will be the issue, that will probably be where the break comes in, when the ruling class is now organising itself through a mission to develop the country.

MN: Yes indeed. So to summarise state-building ...

EWDW: Yes. So, whether it be Algeria or Angola, this duty of development just turns out to be catching up in fact. And even now it is still going on, you know. Now, we are supposed to be talking about 'post-development'. You realise that across the whole continent they are still into this 'catching up' of how to live like the other countries, the developed countries.



The State and the Public Good

*“... in the Congo, they call this ‘power sharing’.
Parties are fighting for power sharing, but not for
the state obligation to manage the public good.”*

MN: What is the vehicle for people to force the state to recognise the will of the people, to recognise that there is a common national good?

EWDW: Such vehicles are few because parties are acting as state organisations.

MN: Not as people’s organisations?

EWDW: Not as people’s or even as social organisations, or even as political organisations.

Parties see themselves as state organisations with only one mission, namely the conquest of state power. In other words, they come into competition with each other for state positions. And in the Congo, they call this ‘power sharing’. Parties are fighting for power sharing, but not for the state obligation to manage the public good. And then unfortunately when it comes to the social organisations, the social space is dominated by two groups. Increasingly the Assemblies of God and the non-governmental organisations or NGOs are dependent on donors, which means a mentality of welfare. In a way, a certain kind of charity. You do not have a social space where an alternative politics can be thought.

In the DRC, I was amazed that to create a church, you have to have *les statuts* ('statutes'). And *les statuts* are the same as in any state form of organisation. You must have a president, a treasurer, a secretary, etc.; if you do not have these office-bearers, you do not have *la personnalité juridique* ('legal personhood'). In other words, you are *de facto* and *de jure*, a state organ.

MN: You are actually an organ of the state. You have to be legitimised by the state.

EWDW: Yes. So, could you do things that would put pressure so that the state modifies its way of functioning? Obviously not. I was in a meeting in 2007 where an official came from the Ministry of Justice in Kinshasa. He said, 'The minister has accepted your proposal and so now you are going to be granted legal status, but, you know, if you keep having in-fighting, we are going to nullify this.' Therefore, an organisation ends up being something to be managed by the state.

Now you go to the organisation of poverty. At the University of BaKongo, I told them that there is poverty only because there are rich people. It is a direct connection. You cannot just have poverty on its own ... you spend so much time describing what the poor people are like, their level of income and so on. That is not the real problem. The problem is that there are some people who are rich.

If we decide that we really want to alleviate poverty, we can decide to make sure that the rich will redistribute their resources. I said, you know, when it comes to building socialism, one of the elements that the capitalists are so afraid of is the redistribution of resources. Of course, capitalists don't want it.

MN: Of course.

EWDW: Of course, you can do it based on an agreement in society, but that is not always possible, so you had people like Stalin doing it forcibly, expropriating the Kulaks, saying you know, we have to redistribute the land. This is for building socialism now. Then I said well when you say that, the state engaged in some kind of terror. This terror concerns this redistribution of resources, and the classes with the resources are resisting giving them up, even the extra they may have.

At the end of the lecture this student comes and says, 'Ah, but you, where did you study?' And I said, 'I studied in the United States. Why are you asking me?' 'Because of what you are teaching us. It is so new!' At the end of the course I had an open book exam. Oh man! You know, they said it was the most difficult thing to do, because I said use all the notes you have, the books and whatever. Because of the shortage of time and the fact that they were used to memorising things, what the teacher said they should memorise, it was very difficult for them when they had these questions where they had to be creative.

One of the questions was: 'You are engineering students. How can we realise a technological take-off in the country?' But I had already explained in the class that what happened in Europe was a connection between the artisans, the scientists and money. So here in Kinshasa we have artisans who are trying very hard repairing cars, sometimes making spare parts. You engineers, the only time you are going to see artisans is to repair your own car, not to think that you can connect scientifically and technologically. To make whatever the artisans are trying to, like if they want to produce the car, so that you can even produce it locally. You see? So now you will look for money to get the resources. This notion that we are going to send students abroad – yes, we want those too, but they will come home, there will still be this base of artisans, engineers and money. And then when you put all these together, then you can have the possibility of a take-off. You know, I had a good time myself because these are very, very sharp kids. It is a pity they were not taught properly so they just do not know what they have learnt.

Part of the class was composed of agronomists. The question to them was, 'You talk of *manioc* ('cassava'). They tell you it came from South America. You talk about peanuts; they tell you they come from America. You take this, they tell you it comes from wherever ... so what were our ancestors eating before those things existed?' They never thought of that question before. I said you can even go back and ask your parents. You are agronomists. There has to be some history of agriculture ... Because now there is talk about cassava being attacked by a disease, that it is very possible that this cassava is also going to disappear. Therefore, we have to think about what we are going to be eating next.

Later on I went to talk of spirituality at this African type of church. This guy at the church was saying we have to return to the types of food our ancestors were eating, because now people are so sick, and sometimes they become so big, but in the past, they were not living really badly, so we need to go back to the foods of our ancestors. I took notes and later on, I went to talk to him.

I said, 'But tell me first, what sorts of food can we go back to?' And then he says, 'It is really a serious issue you are asking about, because even forests have been reduced. The animals that used to be permanently in the forest and the trees, the roots that the ancestors used to find in the forest, there is no place now to find them.'

So I said, 'But when you said return to the old types of food, what did you mean?'

He said, 'Oh yes, there are some which are remaining. The issue is how we are going to reproduce them, to take care of them'. So he started telling me about the different sorts of seeds, plants that are still being used. Then about some plants that are for health purposes and so on.

Then I said, 'Why have the forests been reduced?' And he said, 'Oh yes, but the problem is this practice of burning. You burn the bush and we have been telling people not to burn the bush, but you have a type of agriculture that requires burning the bush.' You cut the trees and you have to burn so that you can plant. The control over those fires has become difficult. That is why the forests are being harmed. And this practice was introduced basically with forced commercial production, this practice of burning big areas, started like that. Economically, it helped, because that was the first time that the peasant had some income and, if you go to my area, you find that in almost every village there they have built houses with bricks, as it is a durable material. So now I have come to the realisation that in fact in some of these churches, their thinking is much more advanced than that of the intellectuals.

MN: Well, that is very possible. The intellectuals are cut off from the masses, while the churches are often closer to ordinary people. What we are saying about growing plants and so on, reminds me of Cabral, because Cabral on the one hand was an agronomist. But on the other hand, he says you have to '*Return to the Source*'.

EWDW: Yes. Yes.

MN: You have to go back to people in order to understand.

EWDW: You know, the whole business of food is really a social business. What are people's concerns? You cannot just find that by going to a library.

But the quarrel I had with the churches was on a different issue. From 2005 to 2010, I was going around and studying something like fourteen variants of Kimbanguist churches.¹⁰ I once visited the whole of Bas-Congo. The quarrel is this: they are all convinced that there is going to be a second independence. 'What do we do to make this independence happen?' I asked them. 'It has been prophesied!' they said.

MN: Oh, it will come automatically!

EWDW: In other words, we wait. It is going to happen. I kept telling them that God also wants us to do something before he can intervene!

So one said, 'Oh yes, God wants us to have, like Kimbangu said, spiritual maturity'.

'What does that spiritual maturity involve?'

¹⁰ Kimbanguism is an African religious movement named after Simon Kimbangu from the DRC; a number of churches claim adherence to his teachings today. See Marie-Louise Martin, *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976 and Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*, London: Zed Books, 2002.

'We all have to pray; we have to make sure we have good behaviour and so forth'.

So that is when I started introducing things like, you cannot have spiritual maturity if you are not concerned about all our ancestors who were sold to the New World, and you do not care about the descendants of those ancestors. We have to work for these descendants, if they want to come back to Africa. Then we will be showing that we are spiritually mature. He said, 'Oh yes, Kimbangu said these people will come back'. I said, 'Yes, but we have to do something for them to come back'.

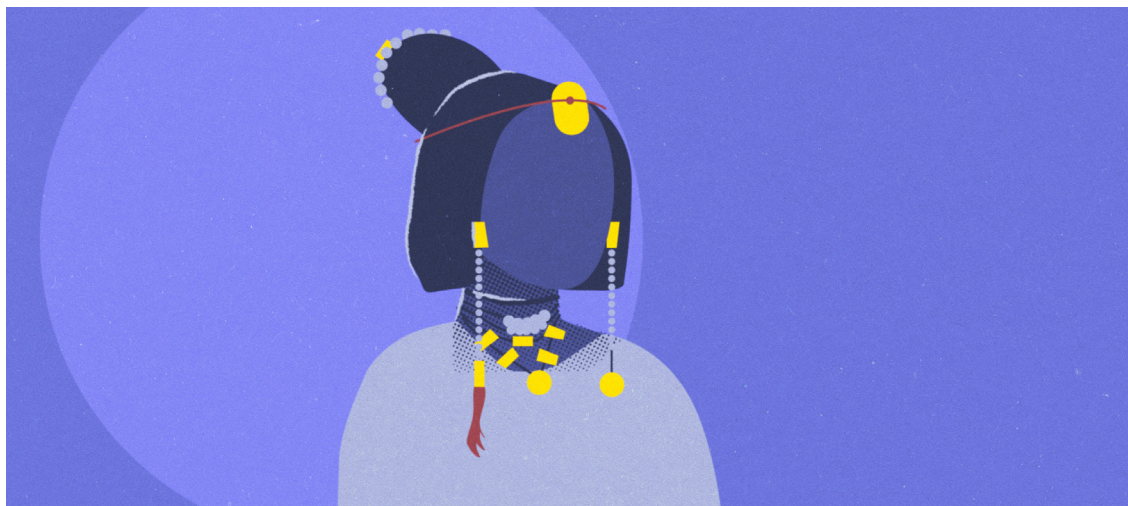
Then we started this *Le Mouvement Africain d'Affranchissement* ('African Movement for Emancipation'), an emancipation of the descendants. And then I said, 'Ah, but did you know we also had domestic slavery?'

'Ah, yes but you see the problem is we want those who were sold to come back, but maybe they developed some type of sorcery. When they come, they are going to destroy us!'

So, you can see the reluctance to get the descendants of the people who were in domestic slavery to return. Some came and said they wanted to come back. But the clan said no, '... because we do not know what sorts of traditions they have developed there'. You see, so I said, 'Look, spiritual maturity means also solving these sorts of problems'.

This is also apparent in the case of Lumumba. That is only one out of many cases, but the Lumumba case is one of mass guilt. Of course, it is the Belgians who did the killing, but, you know, still we have to say something [to address the issue]. We have to have some kind of cleansing ourselves, and I said that this has not happened. The only thing I know is that the Belgian senate organised a commission of inquiry to find out whether the Belgian government had anything to do with the killing of Lumumba. We have not had any commission of inquiry!

At the Sovereign National Conference (1991–1992), convened at the end of Mobutu's reign, nobody among those who were directly involved in Lumumba's assassination said we accept this is a problem. No! They put the blame on people who were dead already. Therefore, the whole issue of Lumumba became only 'Kasavubu fired him'. But who was the minister of the interior when Lumumba was arrested? It was Félix Tshisekedi. Who wrote the note to send Lumumba to Mbuji Mayi? Tshisekedi. There were people at the National Conference who proclaimed Tshisekedi a person without fault – *L'homme sans faute*! So, in other words, we are not even beginning to accept what is supposed to be the main problem regarding why our independence has never proceeded!



African Spirituality and Popular Struggles

“Colonialism was based on the notion that the ways of life and of living of the colonised were not worthwhile educationally, morally, not even for the very health of the colonised themselves.”

MN: As you mentioned, Tshisekedi is portrayed as the man of civil society who is going to democratise the country. But before we even get there, we must go further back in history.

You were talking about spirituality and your main point, which you made to me years ago, was that one of the nefarious effects of colonialism, which has not been studied enough, is that Africans were separated from their spirituality.

EWDW: Yes! From everything! Colonialism was based on the notion that the ways of life and of living of the colonised were not worthwhile educationally, morally, not even for the very health of the colonised themselves. My great uncle said, ‘When they came, they found us, and our ancestors strong. And now, they are claiming that if it had not been for them, we would have died. And while they are saying this, they have taken part of our land!’ All that was connected to religion, rituals and so on was said to be pagan.

MN: This is very important, because in Congo in particular, but not only in Congo, struggles against colonialism were often expressed in religious idioms. So, with Kimpa Vita for example it is obvious, right? And that starts early.

EWDW: Well, we can go back to the case of Kimpa Vita.¹¹ Here I also had a quarrel with my tribal clan. I asked them, after King Kanga was killed in the battle between the Portuguese and the Kongo Kingdom, which king do you know of who protested and organised a struggle against the taking of people as slaves? Of course, King Affonso wrote letters to the Vatican to protest that their children were being taken, but he did so only after the aristocracy themselves became threatened. But even then, he did not organise any sort of struggle to fight against slave traders, missionaries and so on. On the contrary he wanted more missionaries to come and build churches. He wanted a Congolese Christianity.

MN: He was a convert. But his Christianity was supposed to be indigenous?

EWDW: Indigenous, yes, but the point is that we cannot construe this sort of protest as a real rebellion against colonial slavery and the Portuguese. But with Kimpa Vita we can see this clearly. This was a woman who had been in the church. The way it was put was that she died, she went into a coma and came back, apparently with some kind of vision; anyway, she became very hostile to the church. She wrote a document called *Salve Antoniana* and used the figure of Saint Anthony, who was the saint of poor people. Researchers have had difficulty in translating the text of *Salve Antoniana* from KiKongo. The text says: 'The sacraments are of no use. Also, baptism is of no use. God wants sincerity of the heart!' You are dealing here with a critique of Catholicism as they were living it in the Kongo Kingdom.

So now she creates her own church which is based on local traditions; it is called the Antonines, the followers of Saint Anthony. It follows the traditions of *KiNgunza*¹² which fundamentally put at the centre of belief the notion that one can still communicate with the ancestors. In this person we see a real mobilisation of the people to try to restore the unity of the kingdom. So, she marches towards Mbanza Kongo, which was the capital city of Kongo, which had been burned after the defeat of King Kanga.

MN: Burned by the Portuguese?

EWDW: Yes, and then as the Kongo Kingdom had become divided up into smaller kingdoms, one of the kings who condoned the burning to death of Kimpa Vita was Pedro IV. So here is a young woman, about twenty-two, mobilising people. And then marching, but unfortunately the missionaries and the Portuguese prevailed on the king to say she had committed criminal sins. Now what was the main accusation? The main accusation was that she was a woman with a child out of wedlock. The king said

11 Kimpa Vita was one of the first anti-colonial leaders in Africa. See John K. Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

12 *KiNgunza* refers to Kongolese African traditional spirituality.

that in African tradition you cannot have a child without being married, so she had to be condemned for profaning tradition!

But this was just to back up the demands of the missionaries, who were afraid of losing members of the church as many people were joining the Antonines. Now, Kimpa Vita is burnt to death, and her child who is innocent is also burnt to death. Then you hear the BaKongo complaining: 'Oh, you know, these white people, these white people!' But who went to look for the wood in the bush? It was obviously a black person – I bet you would have gone too – to light the fire! Are we now just going to blame the white people? No, I mean, of course it was the white people. But you have to explain why these black people were going along.

MN: So how does that link up with the idea you were mentioning earlier, about the loss of spirituality? Because the king became a Catholic, but he was trying to have a form of Christianity which was rooted in African traditions. He was trying to retain a type of African spirituality.

EWDW: He wanted a Congolese Christianity. But at the same time Christianity was being criticised thoroughly from the point of view of its involvement in slavery. Because the missionaries who were preaching Christianity were also buying slaves. Not all of them, but, you know, many of them. And they were using – this is my own interpretation – the resources of the church to buy slaves.

An American historian said to me, 'Do not make a fuss because there was a slave mode of production in the Kongo Kingdom'. So, I asked the question, 'What kind of social formation was the Kongo Kingdom?' And he said, 'There was slavery, but slavery was only practised around the king. But in the villages, there was no slavery. There was some sort of a lineage mode of production taking place'. If I am a slave today in the king's compound, and I know that I can run to a village and become free, why do I stay there? We also know that they do not even have a standing army. This notion that there was a slave mode of production does not make sense. It does not.

There definitely was some kind of exploitation which the royal family was living off, but of what kind? I proposed it was more like a tributary mode of production with the officials going around the villages collecting tribute. Not exploitation within the production process itself. If we paint a picture of a society like that, obviously the ideology dominating society is the ideology that everything is related to everything else. It is very possible that when the Christians came and they talked about God loves you and so on, probably the royal family thought that this was another ideology they could also use. And they used it to justify their own dominance, justifying the kingdom and so on.

It took some time before people – not all people, to be sure, but some people – realised that they were facing not only a military defeat, but there was also this religious

problem. In fact the first king who was Christianised, after just a few years – I am not sure how long it took, but not too long – he returned to the traditional religion. The reason given – I do not think that was correct – was that he realised that in Christianity, you are not supposed to have more than one wife, and he wanted to have several wives.

MN: So we have the Kongo Kingdom which is in crisis because of these various goings on. But you also have societies which were in a sense acephalous, which were not dominated by the king, where Lemba develops right?¹³

EWDW: You see, when the kingdom was in crisis, small areas were controlled by some small kings. In some areas, because of the slave trade, people were running into hiding. The way my great-uncle put it was they were running ‘into the forest’.

Now, these people were not in contact with the state, because there was no state to be in contact with. And so, this is where the whole philosophy of Kimpa Vita takes root. The Antonines begin the movement of Lemba. It develops later, and then even those who are sent abroad also take this doctrine with them to Brazil, Haiti, Cuba, Mexico – recently I realised that it exists even in Venezuela.

After that you have tendencies for an acculturated *KiNgunza*. We can call it Christianised *Ngunza*. And there were also those who were trying to maintain the purity of the traditional religion without any Christian alterations. And then of course there were those who had adopted Christianity fully and had given up traditional religion. But, you know, the way ideas work, it was very, very difficult. You get a sense that even those who said that they overcame any Christian influences, when you actually read through their writings, you sense that they were still more or less affected.

For instance, in the conception they gave, you still have Christian influences. Because before you had Kimpa Vita, there was no notion of building a church as an institution. But after that, people were talking about a *Ngunza* church. This also shows some influence of Christianity, you see.

MN: So there was a direct link with colonial state practice?

EWDW: Yes. You, you get movements – I have difficulty in explaining these sorts of things, prophetic movements – where somebody, some leader rises up and he says he has had a vision. And then that becomes not just religious, but also social. So you have a prophetic movement. We can call Kimpa Vita’s Antonines a

13 On the Lemba secret society and its rituals see John M. Janzen, *Lemba, 1650–1930: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World*, New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1982.

prophetic movement. Then Simon Kimbangu's movement becomes the second phase of prophetic movements.

MN: That is much later? Are we talking about the 1920s? Is there nothing in between?

EWDW: In between you have this *Ngunza*, but you do not have a movement as such. How does such a movement arise? It is the same process that you have in politics. Can we know when the people's democratic movement is coming? Did we expect that the so-called Arab Spring was going to come? But when it comes, we can now say it was possible.

MN: Yes. So, it is an 'event' in Alain Badiou's sense; like you say, it is unpredictable.¹⁴

EWDW: Yes. So here too also, we do not know when these sorts of prophetic events will occur.

MN: But in the 1920s, movements were also developing in other countries more or less at the same time, not so? I am thinking of Marcus Garvey.

EWDW: There is a similarity in terms of period, yes. But you see the Belgians thought that Simon Kimbangu had a connection with Marcus Garvey. But there was none. But it is true there were some Congolese who went to meet and discuss with Marcus Garvey in 1928 when he was in Jamaica. Later I went to check. And it turns out that in fact in the Protestant Baptist church there was a missionary, I do not know if he was black or white, but a missionary who brought this idea of Pan-Africanism to the Congo. These people were connected with that church, and then they were the ones who went to meet Marcus Garvey. But you know, Kimbangu was not aware of that.

MN: What was the core idea of the Kimbangu movement?

EWDW: Simon Kimbangu gave his last sermon on 10 September 1921 at a place called Mbanza Nsanda. That sermon even now, when you read it, you are amazed, because he says: 'Now the powers are looking for me. I will be arrested. But they are going to make me physically constrained, but spiritually they cannot constrain me. And the work I have done – and this is six months' work actually – it will be difficult to destroy.' And then he says what he thinks is going to happen. He says,

The Belgians are going to go. Congo will be free. Africa, also, will be free. But the first rulers of free Africa will be working for the whites and will lead their people into miserable conditions, and unnecessary wars. The situation is going to be very bad. Some Africans are going to leave the continent to look for a better place to

14 See Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprising*, London: Verso, 2012.

live. They are not going to see their parents again. And some are going to adopt the languages of the whites – because at the time it is white, white, white, and they will forget their mothers' languages.

He continues:

I am assuring you these languages in the future will disappear, so please make sure your children and your grandchildren learn their mothers' languages ... It will take a long time before things begin to change. But before that we have to come back to the spiritual maturity we lost a long time ago. And then after some time there will be somebody who is going to come with three elements, in his power: political power, scientific power, and religious spiritual power. There is going to be a spiritual war ... you have never seen a spiritual war ... no mercy!

When you read this text, you come to the conclusion that this man is telling us about some kind of geopolitical reorganisation, because he says the descendants of slaves will return. If they want to, they will come back. And then he says but you Africans, locally you have to organise yourselves, otherwise those who are going to come are going to start ruling you. In one of the conferences I attended I said to myself, when the Hebrews returned to Israel, it basically brought a whole geopolitical change to the world.

If it is that descendants of slaves, as he says, will really come back, obviously there is going to be some change, and these are the ones who are probably going to make the United States of Africa a reality – which will lead to some kind of reorganisation of relationships in the world, essentially. When you read this sermon, you have a feeling that we are still in the horizon of what he was saying. And this raises the problem of the vision. In 1921, this person is thinking this way. We in the twenty-first century, we have not even had the ability to think that way. You really feel something because even the church that was supposedly built on his work, I would say has gone completely astray from his thinking. Because the more you focus on organising a church, that in itself comes to count much more than any idea of emancipation – which was the central idea of his sermon. And, it turns out in fact that the leader of the Kimbanguist church was a personal friend of Mobutu!

So, that is the sermon. Then you have the conversation. In 1922, some priests decided to visit Kimbangu in jail in Elizabethville. Here, as historians, we have the problem of deciding whether this sort of report is reliable, and I do not know whether it is correct or not, but regardless of those problems, what does the conversation convey? What sorts of things were reported? He tells his visitors that there is going to be a first independence, and a second independence. For the first independence, a person of a good heart, a Congolese person will be in the leadership, but satanic forces are going to rise, and he is going to be removed and he will die, because of some kind of poisoning. This does not seem quite right, but he is going to die anyway. And then there is going to be someone

who rules with a fist. And he is going to destroy the country. He is even going to change the name of the country. He is going to play with resources, with money. It is going to be very difficult. People will want him to leave, but he is going to be there. And then he says there is going to be a second independence. This is then the independence which will kick out the *mingizilla*.

Mingizilla means 'the newcomers', the people who come from elsewhere and who come into society, so in the Congo they call them *mingizilla*. The problem here is did Kimbangu mean *mingizilla* being the people from outside the BaKongo? In that case Mobutu is then also a *mingizilla*. Or did he foresee the Rwandese coming? So here it is a question of interpretation. But he says this second independence will kick out the *mingizilla*. And this is going to be very difficult. The kicking out of the whites is going to be easy, but to kick out the *mingizilla*, it is going to be difficult. But because it – this is the religious thing – is already planned spiritually, it is going to happen.

There will arise somebody who is going to militate for it. He is going to be mistreated, put in jail and so on, but he will succeed. And there will be people who are going to go along with him, and people who are going to be against him. And then he said, you know, it is best that you be *for* rather than *against* him. So that is the conversation in 1922. There was yet another conversation in 1944, with a man that I knew personally. But he is dead now, he died in 1951.

Part of the conversation is on the internet, but it is in KiKongo, I have not seen any translation anywhere. Anyway, Kimbangu gives his own account of how his arrest took place. He says, 'Of course the Belgians wanted to arrest me, but only because I was also betrayed by my own people'. Two chiefs from his area wrote a report to the colonial government that Kimbangu was obstructing the collection of taxes. So that was one of the reasons for his arrest. He was arrested, and he said, 'My people betrayed me'. And then he said, 'You are going to see that major churches are going to be built there, but it is nothing. It is nothing'. And he said, 'Many are going to be using my name, but you will know them by their acts and practices'.

Then it is here that he talks about the first president, the second president, the third – who is not going to last, he is going to be killed – and the fourth. And the person that he is talking to did not ask if there is going to be a fifth president or whatever. Some people speculated that Kimbangu meant Kabila by the fourth president. Of course, he did not give names, but the description he gives is not fitting. He did not give names, just to say the first one is going to be like this. The second one, like that. And he is not going to last, he is going to be killed.

Therefore, in the end it leaves room for speculation. Did Kimbangu have in mind Joseph Kabila, or what? Will there be another spiritual movement that will be the instrument of the change he is talking about, where a leader is going to emerge with

political, scientific, and spiritual power? So that is in the conversations of 1944. Now you have people who claim to receive messages, but it is a complicated thing where somebody says that Kimbangu came to talk to him. Now these people, their credibility is a little dubious.

MN: After this period the next movement is what? Pierre Mulele, the Lumumbists?

EWDW: The Lumumbists maintained that the first independence was sold out. Now they were fighting for a second independence. But there is nothing there in terms of what Kimbangu said. Unless by *mingizilla* he means the Belgians invading again. In that sense maybe we can say, yes, maybe Mulele was part of this. You know, but most of what he says about the second independence does not fit with the second independence idea of the Lumumbists.¹⁵

MN: Okay. So we have Lumumba, we have Mulele, and we have Che Guevara coming, linking up with presumably Kabila? And that is interesting. I mean the reason why he linked up with Kabila – he was not able to link up with Mulele, presumably.

EWDW: He would have wanted to do so, but you see Mulele was operating in the centre of the Congo. It was not easy for Guevara to get there. He thought that maybe from the east of Congo he could go to the centre, but that also was not possible. But in the east of the country Che became disappointed because Kabila was mostly absent so that there was no real political presence on the ground.

15 Pierre Mulele (1929–1968) was a follower of Lumumba who embarked on a guerrilla struggle against the Mobutu regime. See Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*, and Renée C. Fox, Willy de Craemer and Jean-Marie Riebaucourt, "The Second Independence": A Case Study of the Kwilu Rebellion in the Congo', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 8 no. 1, (Oct 1965): 78–109.



The Mbongi, the Palaver and Resolving Popular Contradictions

MN: Let us discuss the issue of handling contradictions among the people. We could start with the *Mbongi*, because that is precisely what it is about.

EWDW: So, you have the *Mbongi*. First of all, this is a site. In the villages there is a place around a fire which they call *Mbongi*, or *Boko*, or *Yemba*. These names are synonymous.

This is a place where, every day, every evening, after people finish doing what they were doing, they come and sit. The men sit there. The men and boys sit – women can also sit if there is a major issue to discuss – but otherwise, it is the men who are sitting there. They share the food. Each one brings whatever he can. This one brings peanuts, that one brings cassava and that one brings say some drinks like palm wine.

Women are bringing the food for their husbands and so, there is sharing there. Sometimes you have a problem between the elders and the younger people, the elders sometimes serve themselves and they eat and then they leave little for the children to eat. But there are different cases, like that of my father. If my father was around, he would say, 'No, no, we take out the food first for the boys and then the adults, we share'. When we were small we liked that: if my father was there we were very keen to go to the *Mbongi*, but if he was not there, we knew that these other people were going to eat first.

Now, the crucial issue with the *Mbongi* is that it is an exchange of everyday experiences. Maybe one person went hunting then he gives an account of what he found; what sort of animals he saw. Did he try to kill it, or did it run away, or whatever? Another one has gone fishing. He tells the story about what he found. Another went looking for palm

nuts and, maybe he brings some. And so on. We can call this an analysis of the situation of the day, through the exchange of experiences. But in the way these experiences are exchanged, references are made sometimes to collective knowledge, what we may call 'the dictionary'. The dictionary is construed as what the ancestors have said and learnt.

Now, philosophically, this is extremely important because it constitutes a theory of objectivity. In other words, you do not want to say, 'Michael said this'. Rather, you hear them say, 'The ancestors said this'. Even if the proverb that is being mentioned is just being made up right there, but it is said, 'as the ancestors say', the proverb so-and-so. And then, some other person may say, 'Yes, but the ancestors also said so-and-so'. So, as a result there is no quarrel about the character of the person who is quoting the ancestors because what is important is the truth of the statement, not the source or the person who utters it; and because we are not concerned with the subjectivity of the person, we can relate it to the ancestors because we all accept the ancestors' statements. You see?

MN: I understand. My question is, even if something said was invented on the spot, does everyone agree in fact that the ancestors did say this?

EWDW: Yes. Yes, the ancestors had said this.

MN: So, you cannot invent something off the top of your head?

EWDW: No. Let us take one proverb which says, 'A car that kills the cat, will kill the person'. So, obviously, this proverb does not come before the existence of cars. You see what I am saying? But people accept that the ancestor said, 'A car that kills the cat, will kill the person'. The truth of it is clear, you see? It is in that sense that I am saying that the time *when* these ancestors said it, may not be the crucial issue.

MN: It is commonly accepted; I mean they adhere to the same culture.

EWDW: The notion that you can say, 'The ancestors said this', is part of the fact that we are starting from traditions. Traditions are accumulated over time. So, before you say the new, you must state the old. It is to this old that you are referring when you say: 'Like the ancestors said'. Now, you are introducing the new. So, you have these sorts of goings-on. Now, the boys sitting at the *Mbongi* are learning, learning about the borders of the land. This man has said he was in such-and-such a place, where the limits of the community's land are. There is this palm tree which is there. So, they are learning. And they are also learning about who is who, but indirectly. For example, you know that my father is a very good person. That is, I think, from the point of view of the children. Whereas, this uncle, he has a lot of anger in him. So, you are learning who is who. And who to be afraid of, and who you can talk to.

Now, when there is a major issue like, say, somebody was caught doing something that is not acceptable, the issue is brought for discussion.

MN: So, is there a special *Palaver* for that? Not the usual one?

EWDW: So, we are sitting there, but it is a different sitting, now focused on this issue. This is the *Palaver* proper. This *Palaver* is aimed specifically at solving this particular problem.

We know that things can get messy. There are specialists that are called the *nzonzis*, the speakers or dialecticians; these are the people who clarify what is being said. Perhaps the person who is accused cannot even talk sense because he probably does not know how to express himself. So, there is a dialectician who is helping to present his case. But the other view is also presented by a dialectician, but this does not mean that they are the only ones that talk. This is where – in my view – *Plato's Dialogues* are limited because those who are talking, simply seem to be like the *nzonzis* only, but in the case of the *Palaver*, everybody talks. Even the children can talk, but the person who must clarify if there are misunderstandings is the *nzonzi*. For example, this person said something, and he says, 'Hey, you were insulting me'. So, the *nzonzi* says, 'No, he did not mean that. What he is saying is like this, like this'.

Let us say the conflict involves the land, that somebody has gone into somebody else's land and taken fruit. Normally, anybody in our collective land can have access to the fruit. But if you are not from this community who owns this land, you are of a different clan and then you come and you take the fruit without permission, you are now violating traditions because you have passed the limits of a community's land. Now, this is a case that can be addressed at this *Palaver*. Sometimes it can get heated. So, the *nzonzi* advises that we go to the place where the incident happened to see exactly where the borders are and where the tree is that the fruit was taken from in order to establish the location of the border. Then they come back and say, 'As you saw, this person crossed the boundary of our land. If he had asked for permission to get the fruit, there would have been no problem, but he did not. So, he was stealing'. After a debate, if he comes to say, 'Okay, I accept, I was hungry. I was passing by, I am sorry'. Now, those who feel aggrieved have to step aside. I call this some sort of commission. So, they go aside to say, 'What should we do to the man?' You see, because crime, here, is not just an individual issue.

MN: It is also a collective one.

EWDW: Yes. Even though he is an individual, he is also, so to speak, an incarnation of his clan, so it is this clan that has violated the land of this other clan, through this person's actions. So, regardless of what he is going to be asked to pay, there still has to be a cleansing. The decision that we take will be what this individual's responsibility is going to be, but also what his clan's responsibility is going to be. So, the responsibility of the

clan may simply be something like, 'You have not been teaching your boys well where the borders are. So, because of that, you must give us some palm wine'. That will cleanse them, you see? Now, for the one who has stolen, they are going to decide what he has to pay.

MN: What if it is a child? What if it is a boy who is not an adult? Because boys steal fruit from trees all the time.

EWDW: Well, if he is not an adult, the issue is not really serious at all. 'Ah, you know boys, he probably does not even know where the borders are'. But we are dealing with adults. So, the people in the commission sit down and then they come to present the decision. Now, what is extremely important, which is very difficult to convey in writing, is that the person who comes to present starts with a song, but a special song. When you just hear the first part of the song, you know exactly what the decision was. So, he is singing. He is singing and he is singing. Then he says something about the proverb that the ancestors put up. If there are some who object, they say, 'But the ancestors said this also'. So then, only at the end, he says, 'Okay, this is what we have decided', and then the others respond. When they respond, if there is agreement, there is a song which says, 'We have resolved the contradiction'. That is that.

MN: And if they have not?

EWDW: They will continue tomorrow to pursue the discussion. Or one may complain, 'No, now I am not being well represented here. My uncle is not here, he is away. So, can we wait for my uncle to come?' Then they say, 'Okay, we are going to postpone until your uncle comes'. So, this is the normal way a *Palaver* works. The summary of the proceedings is given – if it is an inter-clan conflict – by the head of the clan, who normally does not even intervene until the end. If it is a question concerning the whole village, it is the head of the village who gives the summary.

And you have a sense that people have actually agreed on how it should be resolved. So, there is a kind of enthusiasm, you know? But there are times when this doesn't work. My view is that, if the communities are becoming stratified you may have some people who go behind others' backs and pay the speaker to make him win the case. Then you can see that the *Palaver* ends with tension, because the contradiction has not been resolved. But then, what is very interesting are the slogans that are given. I call them 'prescriptions'. These are political prescriptions. So, the women pass around and say, 'Open well your eyes and your ears. Keep your mouth shut'. In other words, 'This thing has not been resolved. We are going to have another *Palaver*, but at this particular moment, one has to be very vigilant. Keep your eyes open and your ears open and keep your mouth shut'. So, they are like guidelines for conduct.

MN: And these prescriptions are directed to whom? To everyone? To all in the community?

EWDW: The mother says it to her children. And somebody might say it to their sister, or a sister to her brother. But what I am saying is that there are these prescriptions which arise. Sometimes out of nowhere some woman discovers, 'Ah, now, I saw the community. The balance is not there. So everybody should now do the following', and she pronounces some sort of prescription.

Now, the other part that is interesting is how a *Palaver* starts, how it is demanded. It is not like, 'Now we are going to have *Palaver*'. No. Say a woman goes to some place by the river, she meets with some man, and the man says something which the woman thinks was a really big insult, which made her look like nothing. In the evening, this woman goes around the village, 'In this village now, some people think they can just insult you. They just think they are superior to everyone else!!' And to express her anger, she can even take off her shirt. So, now, the head of the village or the clan says, 'Ah we must sit'. It means the community balance has broken down. There is something wrong.

So, then the *Palaver* is called. This woman has the right to say what is bothering her. And then they also say, 'Anybody who has something to say, this is the time. Because we have to have peace in this village. We cannot keep on having this thing'. So, then the *Palaver* begins, and everyone must speak, without fear. Nobody should remain silent, because what are you hiding? And nobody should look at somebody the wrong way. So, even gestures are being monitored. If you make some gestures with your mouth or your hand, you will be asked 'Why did you do this?' But it is not the head of the village who is the one conducting the discussion. It is these experts, the *nzonzis*. They are the ones asking, 'You made an innuendo. What do you have in you? Bring out what you have on your mind?' So, when everybody has spoken and you can sense that there is no longer anyone who feels like they have not been heard properly, the head of the village can now summarise what everyone agrees to.

So, how the *Palaver* starts, is like the way events take place.¹⁶ [They are unpredictable.] You cannot say, 'Tomorrow, some event is going to happen'. So, it happens and then you say, 'Okay, we may have a division in the community' – you say, 'We have to sit in a *Palaver*'. Nobody can say, 'Oh, but now, I am going to the market, and we will have to do it later'. No, no, we all have to sit, and we have to resolve this issue. So, the *Palaver* sits.

And some *Palavers* can be very complex, like the one I attended. In this case, a son was accusing his father because his son (the father's grandson, whom he had named after the father) became critically ill and died. The son went to a seer and they told him: 'You know, it is your father. What we see is that your son died because of your father – as your son was the namesake of your father.' So, the son was shocked. 'My father?' So, he comes to the *Palaver* with his uncle, who is not of the same clan as the father. So, we sit. There

¹⁶ The reference here is to Alain Badiou's theory of the event. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, London and New York: Continuum, 2007.

is a *Palaver*. I am there. The son explained, 'The seers have said that you did something that hurt the boy. That is why he got sick; so, please, I want to clear this up because you are my father. I can come to you to resolve any problem. Now, when this happens, I am confused.' The man who was being accused was the uncle of my mother. After a long talk on their side, and on our side, they say, 'Why do we not go to the commission to decide?'

Now, the bad part was that this great-uncle of mine is also normally the *nzonzi* in the clan.

He couldn't take up the issue himself. So, he went and he said, 'You know, I am not a sorcerer, but I have a bad mouth. A bad mouth. If I say something, something may happen. I said something. Ah, I said, my son went to the city to work, but since he has gone, he has not even sent me a bar of soap. So, this thing I said likely went to hurt this child'. And probably, that is why the son got the misfortune. He told us how he was going to present the case in the commission and we all agreed.

So, we went back to meet with the other side, the side of the clan with the son. Remember, my uncle, he is also one of the *nzonzis*, but he had to speak, because he was the one accused. So, first, he sang a song and then he said, 'You know, when your thoughts go above your head, it comes down on you. This is not just your son; he is my grandson also. And above all, he also has my name. He is my namesake. He is me. So it is like spitting and then the spit falls on you. Yes, so, do not think that I must have done something evil'. He goes into this very clever talk that he is not a sorcerer, but he has this misfortune of, when he says something, sometimes it can have an impact. That evening, he followed it all with a proverb and a song. Everybody and the elders said, 'Yes'. Even the aggrieved ones, they were convinced. And at the end, it was resolved, and you could feel the enthusiasm. Now, we could have food and drink. Everybody was happy. Then he gets the son and blesses the son's health – declaring, 'And your son, he is also my son!' The issue was resolved, but these are the more serious questions, the ones that involve sorcery.

Those are the *Palavers* which are most difficult, and then also those *Palavers* involving land borders. It is also because you have 'trading' with foreign allies. For example, we can authorise somebody to come to our land, to fetch palm wine from our palm trees. But now, later on, somebody can construe this as an event that proves that, 'This land must be ours because our great-uncle was coming to fetch the palm wine there. He could not have done that if it was not his land. So, this land must be ours'. In other words, a whole history of the land is cooked up on the basis of the fact that, because this man was authorised to get this wine but not from his land, his descendants claim that, because their uncle was coming here, that the palm trees must be theirs. Now, those are some of the difficulties because you are going to have two [different] stories.

So, on the one hand the clan knows the stories which say, 'No, no, no, your uncle was simply given permission to buy so-and-so, and this is how it was'. While on the other

hand the others say, 'Well, you know, that permission, we are not aware of it. We know that this is where our great-uncle was coming to fetch palm wine'. So, now, the *nzonzi* have to seek extra information, because these two clans have two stories that are completely contradictory. We need to know how the elders of another clan understand the situation. So, it turns out that there was an old man there who knew exactly that this person was just allowed to come to this land which is not his. The *Palaver* can now be resolved because there are witnesses. We call them 'witnesses'. The witness, who is respected age-wise and knowledgeable in the traditions of the region, has spoken. So, the problem is resolved.

You get *Palavers* concerning sorcery, *Palavers* concerning the land question, also *Palavers* concerning somebody who is found sleeping with somebody else's wife. That is also a very serious problem. Or you know, you have many traps for fishing, many traps for animals. So, now, you lay your traps for fishing, and somebody comes and takes the fish right from your trap. And he is caught. Now, this is also a very serious issue. Usually, the punishment is that he has to pay a pig.

There is also a kind of *Palaver* in a hierarchical society, or in a dynasty where the *Palaver* is organised among the members of the elite only and they are *Palavering* against the masses of the people. There may be some differences in how we treat the people. So, they are resolving among themselves. Now, those types of *Palavers*, in my opinion, are very interesting, because they tend to be very unilateral in terms of the rest of society.

MN: I think there are a number of issues that come to my mind. The first one, the most obvious one, is that people say, 'This was useful when you had small societies. Everybody knows everybody else, etc.'. Is it possible to have such a thing in a sophisticated, more advanced society? What would your answer be to that?

EWDW: Mao Zedong had an answer to that. Because the whole history of the Cultural Revolution, the mass movement, the mass line goes into that kind of issue. In other words, you do not necessarily have to deal with a small society to have a situation where you are engaging everybody to talk, to come to some common understanding. Like the way they were doing it with this mass line within the mass movement of the Cultural Revolution. We can say that the procedural aspect is not necessarily linked to the size of the group. That it is possible for it to be extended but the difference will be, first, the breadth of the problem. Because you are involving many, many people, and you do not have the common reference in terms of say a *nzonzi* or the like, but here you would have to find the guidelines while you are struggling. That is the problem. But the key issue is the mass line and the mass struggle; if you struggle over the problems, but can keep the line, or the majority, the masses.

Here, the idea is to maintain the balance of the community. Now, of course, when the societies are large like the Chinese, you cannot have the process in one area only. Or even

in one region. You decide to go to the university, you send the workers to do something there, and you send the intellectuals to the countryside. It becomes a little bit difficult to control, but in the end, if it goes through, I think we can end up with the same sort of situation where everyone is happy and some kind of balance is achieved. Of course, in the case of China, they had the workers come to the university. The conflict may become violent though. The kind of an environment where an understanding of both the position of the working class and the position of students is achieved takes time to achieve. And Mao had to call it off. If it was going to continue, I do not know how it was going to end. Was it going to be like the way it happened at the Sorbonne, in the Quartier Latin in Paris in 1968, where everybody could just come and discuss?

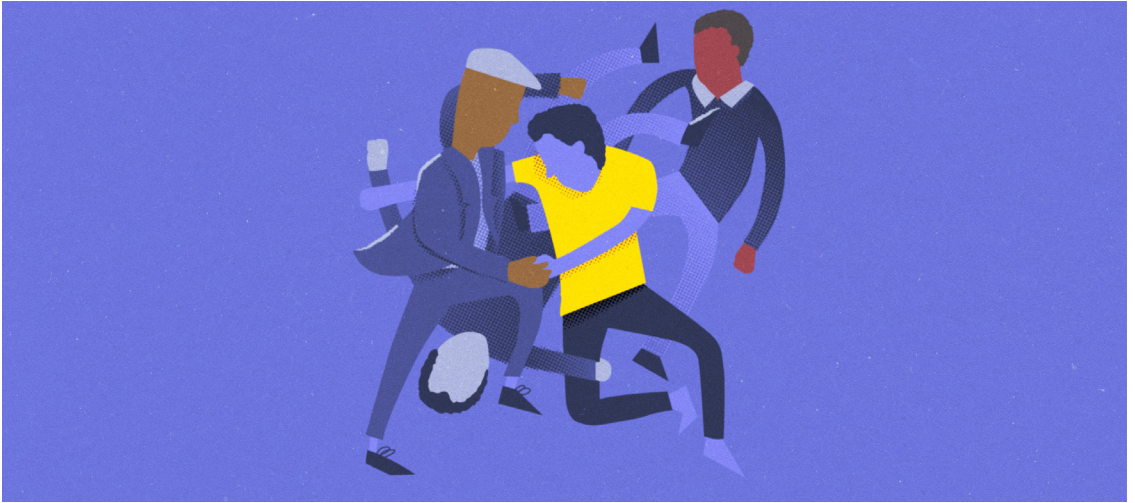
But there were action committees and assemblies. The assembly decided on a particular case, there was an action committee and so on. But then they did not handle the factories. They said the workers will be in charge of the factories. It is like saying, 'Okay, we are in this *Palaver* but when it comes to addressing the question of women then women must go to their section', and as a result you are not addressing the balance of the entire society.

In the case of May '68, the failure to also transform the factory like they were doing at the university limited the whole thing. And then the trade unions and Communist Party basically took over. And conservative Charles De Gaulle made a comeback. So, yes, the size and numbers of people involved matters, and the differences may be very, very sophisticated.

But I have the feeling that probably this is a way to resolve some of it, because resolving them in Stalin's way, we know how it ended.

MN: Oh yes, yes. You simply eliminate people.

EWDW: Yes. Mao did not succeed of course, but at least you can see that there was an attempt to do things differently. But the interests were so entrenched that, when he said, 'You go discuss with the headquarters; ask them a few questions!' And then he said, 'You people in the headquarters, why do you not listen to a few questions from the people?' You know, people in power are like that: 'Me being asked a question?!' So, how do you make these leaders who have entrenched themselves to be addressed by the common people, peasants and so on? And then make sure that they comply with the grievances that are being raised? Even the stature of Mao was not enough to ensure that, you see?



Philosophy and Dialectics

“It is very clear that, when you focus on the one – centralisation – you have stifled popular initiative. So, without local initiative you can’t talk about democracy.”

MN: Now, what can we say philosophically about this? I mean, you said it is a major philosophical problem.

EWDW: I was talking about the theory of knowledge. In the tradition of Plato, he tried very hard to make it as follows: ‘Let us persuade each other through asking some questions and so on’. But at some point, it just became, ‘How do I know?’ Immanuel Kant for example, formulates it in terms of, what can I know? What can I believe in? What can I say? But in fact, when we are dealing with society, the issue is not what can I know? Or like René Descartes, ‘I think therefore I am’. Here, the existence of the ‘I’ is not theorised. Thinking is going on, but you are saying you are the one doing the thinking. You have not theorised the ‘I’. You see? What Mao is saying is something else. Mao says: ‘No, the issue is not how do I know. The issue is, first of all, what sensitive knowledge do you get by involving yourself in a process?’ Now the question of theory of knowledge becomes not, ‘How do I know?’, but ‘How do we persuade ourselves to know something?’ Then you come to this mass line, and you struggle and that is what you get, a certain perceptual knowledge, from where you can now build to come to a leap towards rational knowledge.

Rational knowledge must have a perceptual knowledge base. How we get from this perceptual base to knowledge has been understood as a practical experiment for a long time. People want to make it a test, such as testing a logical sort of deduction. No, no, no. In that sense there is a sort of philosophical issue involved. It is raised by the critique Maurice Merleau-Ponty makes of Jean-Paul Sartre. Because Sartre was saying that 'existence precedes essence'. And that, when we know freedom, we are completely free. Merleau-Ponty went into this whole phenomenology of consciousness and how one gets to become even aware. It becomes clear that even freedom is conditioned freedom. It cannot just be like, 'If you are not assuming your freedom, *vous êtes un salaud*' ('you are a bastard'). And Sartre comes back to that in *Critique de la raison dialectique* (*Critique of Dialectical Reason*), where he now does realise that, in fact, it is not the individual per se, who is the subject of knowledge. The individual, yes, but he or she only exists within certain conditions.

I like the way Sylvain Lazarus put it: '*Le tout reste dans les conditions*' ('Everything depends on conditions'). Yes, on conditions. So that, for example, even the political line, to get it done, requires certain conditions. '*La politique est sous condition*' ('Politics is under condition').¹⁷ That is what Lazarus says, including, '*La condition de comprendre les conditions qui permettent la réalisation de cette politique*' ('The conditions which enable an understanding of the conditions that enable the realisation of this kind of politics').

MN: In other words, it is fundamentally about understanding the conditions which enable the realisation of that particular kind of politics.

EWDW: That politics. Yes. And so, Lazarus insists on what he calls '*un dispositif organisé pour organiser la politique*' ('an organised ensemble to organise politics').

MN: Yes, if there is no organised ensemble, there can be no politics.

EWDW: Yes. Then we really come more and more to the point. Because most philosophical thinking dislikes directives. All the indications seem to point to that. Kant is unable to tell us the relationship between perception and what he calls the '*noumenon*'.¹⁸ Something is there – which is not what I perceive. Only the dialectic can make us see that connection. Even in the English analytic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,' and then he says, 'Any sentence that is not well-formed, is meaningless'. Or something like that. If you have no well-formed sentences, you keep silent. So, there was this economist who asked, 'Does this make sense?' So, Wittgenstein said: 'You refute me!' It is not

¹⁷ See Sylvain Lazarus, *Anthropology of the Name*, Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2015.

¹⁸ For Kant, the *noumenon* refers to 'the thing in itself' as opposed to the phenomenon which refers to 'the thing as it appears' to the observer.

true that sense must necessarily have a logical well-formed formula. So, here again, we are dealing with a question that is pointing to dialectics.

MN: How does one understand dialectics? Is it simply contradiction?

EWDW: Well, that is part of it. But in my opinion, as Badiou says, in fact, nothing can exist without being divided. The existence of something is in scission even if it is only the figure and its place. So, anything is a placed thing. There is the thing and there is the place.¹⁹

MN: Where it is?

EWDW: Yes. Badiou comes with the notion, 'Force and place'. And in re-reading G. W. F. Hegel, he found that the dialectic is a structural sort of dialectic, which is more like just the place and what is placed.

The Chinese had this debate whereby some would say, 'one divides into two'. And the others were saying, 'No, two unite into one'.²⁰ But you know, the two uniting into one, is not a good proposition. That is what they were saying. Unity is completely provisional, but the real thing is, 'the one divides into two'. Now, when you come to the cosmogonies in the African context, they are trying to be concrete in the sense that healing and vision, in some sense, are connected and different at the same time. In other words, healing benefits from vision. And then you have power and sorcery, I mean, knowledge in the broad sense. So, knowledge has a certain relationship to power. At the same time, knowledge is not simply power. How do these four points – healing, vision, power, knowledge – get connected?

MN: Vision, being?

EWDW: In the African tradition it means, you are a seer. Concretely, these sorts of things exist. People who are seers. And healing – the people who can use herbs to heal. Now, this person who they say has this knowledge, he can even stifle power. So, in contemporary terms, we may say that the sorcerer is like the national security, but national security, in most countries, is still controlled power. In the traditional sense, it is the person who can limit the power of the one who is sitting in the seat of power. And so, that is why, at some point, even the chief must be a sorcerer, because otherwise he is going to be made useless by this other one.

Of course, knowledge is power, but now we know that only organised knowledge is power finally. Now, the kind of knowledge we are talking about, which seems to be controlling power, how do we come to construct it? It is on that basis that I try to read one of the

19 See Alain Badiou, *The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic*, Melbourne: re.press, 2011.

20 On this debate see Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*, (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 283–287 and Alain Badiou *The Century*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 58–67.

recent things that Badiou wrote, where he was saying that, 'Instead of affirmation, negation, collective action, there is also a fourth item'.²¹

MN: Yes, a fourth one. He talks about the withering away of the state itself.

EWDW: Yes, so, in other words, you have taken out, you have overthrown, the old regime. But you must also have in mind the new that you are going to put in its place and not just put old wine in new bottles as they say. But he has all these four affirmations.

In the case of the African cosmogonies, you are required to have a sense of spirituality. This is the vision part. You are also required to have a sense of healing, you know, but also power, and the knowledge that includes the capacity for the dead person's soul to become reincarnated. This is where it is taking place. The healer is trying to stop the disease, so that the person does not die, but when he dies, it is here that his soul, or whatever you want to call it, starts growing again, to be reborn.

MN: Can it be reborn collectively?

EWDW: Yes, yes. It could also be. Well, Badiou says we have immortality. But he put the immortality in the sense that we still talk about Plato, because of his work and so on. And there is probably going to be talk about him eternally. But here in Africa, the immortality that is being referred to, seems to be a little bit more inclusive and so, it is not just the fact that this person who has survived left traces that make him continue to be known, but it seems like he is, actually, reborn.

MN: Reborn as something we do not know?

EWDW: Something. Well, human, but not necessarily the one he was, you know? We would say that a new Platonist who developed Plato, but in some different way. It is like some sort of rebirth, but on a different basis.

MN: In a different context. Because now, the conditions are different.

EWDW: Different conditions. But of course, it is not exactly Plato, but it is Plato.

MN: Yes. I can see what you are saying. I mean people often say that about the father and the son. The son is different from the father, but he is also the father.

21 See Alain Badiou, 'Affirmative Dialectics: from Logic to Anthropology', *The International Journal of Badiou Studies* 2, no.1, (2013), 1–13 and Alain Badiou, 'Politics as a Nonexpressive Dialectic' in *Philosophy for Militants*, (London, Verso: 2012), 61–80.

EWDW: So, that is how far I think I had gone trying to think about these four terms.

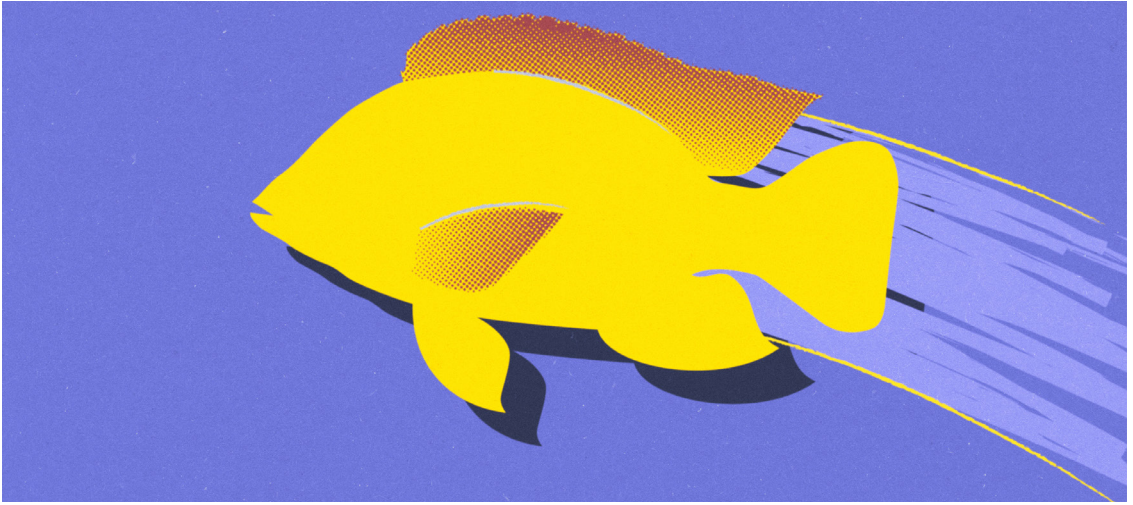
Dialectics, rhetoric and so on and so on. Now, I am still trying to work on this, but because the thinking of dialectics was stifled during the Cold War opposition between capitalists and communists, the intellectuals in capitalist countries felt that dialectics was a communist term. And the communists made it more dogmatic, so to speak. That is why the thinking did not develop as it was supposed to develop.

MN: The point Badiou makes about this, which I like, is when he says that dialectical thought always starts with the exception. Not from the rule. You cannot expect power to think in that way. Power cannot simply start from the exception. It simply starts from the rule, because it is the one that maintains the rule. So, dialectical thought must always be, in a sense, rebellious in one way or another.

EWDW: You know, two weeks ago, I think, I said that, for the first time, in the DRC, we have the multiplicity having a say on unity. Regarding the dialectic of the one and the multiplicity, now, people can see that democracy is not possible without it being based on the point of view of the multiplicity. Somebody came and said, 'You know, you are not making sense'.

MN: But you do not have to use the word 'multiplicity'. You can use other words.

EWDW: *Ja*, because when you say the exception, in fact, you are talking about the fact that any one among the many, could also be an exception. Hence multiplicity. And that, if you just reduce everything into one, then that is when we are not really talking democracy and we are always complaining that the dictators are also claiming to be democrats. But in the case of Congo, this is a very serious problem because of what is seen as the threat of 'tribalism', or whatever. So, they think there must be *The One*. It is, you know, like the notion that 'two unites into one'. We are saying, 'No, no, no. This is not leading us anywhere'. Centralisation of power since the 1960s is not helping anybody. We propose large decentralisation, but still the people in power do not want large decentralisation. It is very clear that, when you focus on the one – centralisation – you have stifled popular initiative. So, without local initiative you can't talk about democracy.



Pan-Africanism

MN: What are your views on Pan-Africanism?

EWDW: You know, Pan-Africanism started in the diaspora. It started in two sorts of ways. First, it is a biological principle which says that the fish knows that it lives in the water only when it is outside the water. So, these transplanted Africans, despite all the inclinations they had that Africa is very bad, despite all that, they still thought that they lived in the water much like a fish that is outside water. They remembered that they lived in water when they experienced the sort of discrimination that took place even after the abolition of slavery.

That is when you get the idea of *Négritude* starting first in Brazil, then later you get the Harlem Renaissance in the US. Marcus Garvey probably was the most vocal. After them came lawyers – you may say, intellectuals – they came up with the idea within the context of the movement of sending freed slaves, who wanted to go back, to Africa. On the other hand, on the African continent itself, you had theorising about the African personality. So, basically Pan-Africanism started in the diaspora, but it was also based, I would say, on a complete ignorance of what was really going on, on the continent.

MN: So, it is a bit of an idealised concept?

EWDW: Yes, but in fact they assumed that they knew better than those in the then colonies on the continent, about their suffering. With the result that the issue of how Africans thought about unity on the continent, for example, was not even addressed

because at the end this kind of Pan-Africanism boiled down to having Africans united as states or some such sort of unity. But they did not ask whether, beyond *our* conceptualisation of this unity, if there was an idea, however vague, of unity on the African continent? Then this unity was broken, because of slavery. And then during colonial times the unity became simply geographical, you know, territorial.

This was the British territorial decision and so it appeared as if the original kind of unity no longer existed. People could now say, okay look, we need an African unity which means all these boundaries must go away. So, we are going to have a United States of Africa. And now even contemporary Pan-Africanists say it is going to include even these Africans of the diaspora and we are going to make a sort of federation of states.

If both lines [diasporic and continental] had combined, there would have been an understanding of what the conceptions were – how Pan-Africanism was developing on the continent. The Pan-Africanism of the diaspora would probably have had a different sort of framing than it had because, at some point, it spread as some said it was a mass movement. Others said it was in fact an intellectual movement, with W. E. B. Du Bois at the helm. Which is probably what the first conception of the Organisation of African Unity actually was, with the leaders deciding that we unite together, and then African unity is supposed to arise!

MN: It was probably in 1945 in Manchester or was it before?

EWDW: Even before that, you had these intellectuals from the Caribbean who formed the first, and then the second and third congresses.²² There was in fact a congress in the US, divided between supporters of Du Bois and those of Marcus Garvey. There was even a split after the first congress.

You also had other congresses. Some interactions did come after all this but still you have a sense that the longer history of the continent was not considered. The assumption was that they were being told that Africans know nothing. Unfortunately, the later experience of Liberia and Sierra Leone did not do much to change that point of view. Sierra Leone was created when the British decided to end slavery and also assigned ships to combat the other ships which were still taking us into slavery. So they were liberators, yes. And those freed slaves were the ones they sent to Sierra Leone. You did not have to be from Sierra Leone, it is just that you ended up in Sierra Leone. Those who mostly came from the US were the ones who went to Liberia.

²² The Pan-African Congress – derived from the first Pan-African Conference of 1900 in London – consisted of a series of meetings to address issues facing Africa as a result of colonisation. The first was held in 1919 in Paris, then in 1921 and 1923 in London, 1927 in New York City, 1945 in Manchester, 1974 in Dar es Salaam and 1994 in Kampala. The more recent Pan-African Congress was the eighth one, held in 2014 in Johannesburg.

Today, we have three tendencies in the Pan-Africanist movement. First, the statist tendency remains one of the traditions of the Pan-African congresses. Their last congress took place in Johannesburg and the last I heard about the next one, they were proposing to have it in Windhoek, Namibia.

Second, there seems to be a tendency which says Pan-Africanism has to be socialist. The problem with that particular Pan-Africanism is that it takes the programme of Kwame Nkrumah unaltered because I believe that if Nkrumah were here today, he would have changed certain things. Therefore, there is no point in saying Nkrumah's is the final programme. Because if he himself were here, he surely would have changed something.

MN: Well, the circumstances are different now anyway.

EWDW: Yes of course! The view that says Pan-Africanism has to be socialist assumes that African society is just a classless society. It is seen as a divided community and the only problem we have is that these divisions are between Christians, Muslims, adherents of traditional religion, and so on. The purpose of this history is to create an ideological landscape where everybody is going to recognise themselves and this will be because of the consciousness of the masses, and the Convention People's Party would push for socialism.

It is not that history does not make communities you know, but it is the failure of Nkrumah; he failed to see that even people in his own party were not saying the same thing as he was. He cannot then go to imperialism and say, so now there are classes; but why a coup d'état in the first place if there were no class distinctions or contradictions? I have the feeling that this was probably also because of Nkrumah's training as a philosopher. You know, as Wittgenstein used to say, anything that does not have a well-formed formula, is nonsense. We are here confronted with this kind of reasoning. So you see that the army that the British left them, was left totally intact because Nkrumah believed in the professionalism of the military.

MN: You can guess what is going to happen!

EWDW: So now the likelihood is clear that these generals will conduct a coup d'état. He did not think that the British were also training the soldiers and told them that they must defend not only the territory but also liberal democracy! So, now you are saying you are a socialist, (with central planning and so on) and you think your army must behave professionally? You know, of course you are surprised, and then you accuse imperialism! Of course, the Americans probably did something, but firstly is this your own local standing army or what?

The third line in Pan-Africanism today, says we must have grassroots mass congresses, federalist congresses. There has been one meeting to lay down the statutes, rules and so

on. Now I was not able to attend it, but I am on the committee of what they call the Champions of Pan-Africanism. We have one contradiction, after we have created all these local branches we should be in a position to organise a referendum for African unity. My criticism is that to assume that those people in power are going to accept the results of the referendum, even if it is organised, is wishful thinking. They are assuming a little too much.

In the grassroots mass federalist congress, people of the African diaspora are fully part of the movement. We want to have the United States of Africa within a generation. That is the target for this grassroots movement. Of course we have to have a target, you know, but I hope we will be able to manage it.

So, those are the three Pan-Africanist tendencies in existence: the statist tendency, a tendency which says Pan-Africanism has to be socialist, and the need to have grassroots mass-federalist congresses. Because of the internet and improved communication facilities, one has the feeling that the consciousness of African unity is rising. And that due to that, there are probably going to be within French-speaking countries, enough mass movements to make a difference impacting on the state, because in those movements we are conceptualising certain things like trying to fight for the opening of borders. We will try to fight for having one passport, an identity card. These are some of the things going on within the Pan-Africanist movement.



Africa Today

“The struggle now is how to have some kind of autonomous politics that resolves the issue of the occupation of parts of the Eastern DRC and at the same time does not fall either on the side of the Chinese or on the side of the West.”

MN: How do you see the African continent today?

EWDW: What I can say is that there are possibilities of disasters in 20 years' time on the continent. That is where we have to start. If the statistics are accurate that 86% of Africans are under 25 years of age, it means that if nothing is done, if things are going the way they are now – bad education, unemployment increasing – then in 20 years it is going to be a disaster. That is one disaster.

The second looming disaster is the urgency of climate change and the actions to be taken. African states are still within the problematic stage of development which means they are still in the problematic stage of more growth. Now major events have already taken place. Mozambique has been hit, Bulawayo in Zimbabwe hit, part of South Africa hit with these natural disasters that are seen to be connected to climate change.

And things may continue on this path. In the forests of Congo, where the military is cutting timber – where the absorption of carbon dioxide takes place at a significant scale – my friends say about 15% of the forest has been cut. Consciousness should

develop amongst the people in order to insist that this is our land and we have to preserve it. This is not only a problem for Congo, but almost for the whole world. So, the absence of a consciousness of climate change may lead to a disaster. That is the second disaster.

The third potential disaster is that there is no movement of organised consciousness or protests against the possibility of nuclear war. Although we are not a party to producing these weapons, we should be part of those protesting, supporting the UN. Because when we have the likes of Trump in the US and Bolsonaro in Brazil, the likelihood that some accident may take place is really there. So, if that were to happen, we know that it starts the final catastrophe. You have Israel behaving like it can do whatever it wants. Trump behaving like he can just push the Pentagon to do anything. On the continent, there does not seem to be anyone saying, 'Hey, fellows, be careful'.

You know, part of that is that we pour more resources into useless expenditure. For instance, when you look at the Tanzanian budget so much money is being put into defence and security. This can only be for the harassment of the people, not to counter any external threat because which power can they contend with? If we cannot produce the kind of weapons that are going to make us matter on the world stage, in terms of security, then we might as well start thinking like Costa Rica and say we should not have an army; otherwise we have to think seriously about Africa and unification. So that is one more disaster.

Another possible disaster is electronic colonisation. Companies like Microsoft, Amazon, Apple and Facebook are controlling the pool of data. We are lucky in the sense that data is so huge, no one can manage it all, not even artificial intelligence robots. Which means that they are not going to take all individuals into account. But if you are targeted, they will manage you.

We have to think about what will require us to develop scientific technological awareness and practice, because what is needed now is for electronic technology to be decentralised. Because the centralisation of this technology, in a sense, favours dictatorship. Can we be part of those who are thinking in terms of how to decentralise these sorts of technical knowledge? Because soon, and more and more, we are going to get robots being the main centralising pressure. Thus far there does not seem to be the kind of technology that would favour decentralisation. There is that sort of imminent disaster also.

Then there is the question of identity, African identity. This is important in terms of African unification because most of the existing so-called identities are just territorial. I am South African, I am Tanzanian. The argument for this is usually, 'Oh, you know, even in Europe that is how the countries were formed'. Yes, but here we are having this problem of trying to create unification. In Europe it was not people from outside

who were defining their territorial make-up. In Africa it is outsiders who are engaging in territorial management without any sort of feedback from anybody on the continent.

So how do we begin to overcome this question of African identity? That is why one of the solutions we were talking about is to go back to master the entire history of Africa. Some people are writing that, in fact, prior to the Egyptian dynasties, there was some kind of African communalism and those values, although not dominant, seem to still be lingering on. These may be the basic raw materials for some new identity.

In 2050, Africa will have close to 30 billion people, a little bit more than the Chinese in fact. It is a lot of pressure in terms of the existing resources which are not being well organised. We come to the economic problem, and the Europeans are very worried and scared about this, because they think that more Africans will migrate to Europe because their population is declining. So, there is a discourse that leaders have to do something in order to reduce the population of Africa.

When you look at poverty data in 2004/2005, of the poorest countries of the world, 23 were in Africa. Insofar as the economy is concerned, we are having major difficulties, but it is a difficulty of thinking, first of all. How can an African leader sign up to the Washington Consensus? What is the thinking behind this? This consensus is telling you to open up your economy! Privatisise the little power you have! Reduce even the state! So, the economy must be open for investments, as a result it is the large multinationals that are going to come, forcing you to only have the export sector as the economy, more or less.

MN: Yes, the extraction of national resources and land grabbing.

EWDW: And you still sign this!! And then you still obey, you start privatising the state. So, then you will cut the social aspect of the state – education, health and so on; there will be suffering, because supposedly you have to have minimal government for just governance.

These leaders have become, within this process, the facilitators of the 'looting machine'. Now some leaders are saying, 'Oh no, we do not collaborate, but we do this to create employment.' But when industrialisation has become automated, you are not going to create many, many jobs anyway, are you?

And if you decided no, we do not want automation taking over, you will only be producing for the domestic market, well in fact you will not be, because imported goods will be cheaper. So, there is a problem of thinking here. There must be a renewal of thought before we get to a policy that can be developed for the kind of economy that is required on this continent in order to make a difference. This economy must take care of the climate issue, the demographic issue, the possibility of rethinking African unification, and must deal with the issue of the health of the youth, and the preparation of youth.

Now insofar as what is to be done, especially in terms of the youth, my thinking is that the whole educational system has to be revamped, because like Karl Marx says in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, the educator must be educated! Who is going to educate the educator? The critique of the content of education on the continent has gone quite far. We have a sense of what the main criticism is in terms of the teaching of history, the emphasis on certain parts of history, ignoring other parts, that kind of thing, and so giving the impression that history started with colonialism, etc. What is now needed is to think what kind of institutions would agree with the critique that we are making? For example, we have not studied initiation schools as educational sorts of institutions, which did not detach people for a long time from society. My nephew, who is thirty years old, is still at school. He does not know much about how our society is growing. In initiation, you have got to be close to your people. You are being initiated. You are also involved in applying what you are learning.

In this education transplanted from Europe, very few are in it in a vocational sense. Like nursing, of course you have to be close to the patients, and maybe doctors also. In Dar es Salaam, they had this engineering education linked to the artisans. So, you have a sense there that something is different, but in sociology, economics and so on, it is like after ten years you are still preparing yourself. And you may not necessarily be following what is happening. What kind of institutions would be favourable to the criticism of the content of the educational system? That is where my feeling and thinking is.

This is also a critique of politics. In the case of Mao, he put across a slogan that intellectuals should integrate into the rural community to at least be aware of rural people and their problems. You may be accomplished and qualified but if you spend some time, a year or two, in the countryside, you are probably going to start thinking a little bit differently. And then hopefully, link up with the people. So, the integration of intellectuals into the masses of the people is needed. Cabral spoke of this process as class suicide.

When you say that, some people do not quite understand what you are saying. I put forward a notion that the academic petty-bourgeois mentality – this notion that *you* know, and the masses of the people know nothing and cannot teach you anything – must be combatted because Cabral's '*Return to the Source*' means that you are going to learn something.

Now on this question of climate change, an exchange of experience is also lacking. In other words, there is a lot of thinking in India, in Latin America about post-development, eco-socialism, etc. Those kinds of thinking on the continent are not yet developing. In South Africa, you have some discussions, but elsewhere, we are still not quite there yet.

Because you have this unpreparedness, you cannot see how the communities deal with their environment, how they treat the trees, how they treat the animals, what does conservation mean, these sorts of things. Those exchanges of experience will probably force

the rulers to start thinking about ecology. Like what happened with the cyclone in Mozambique: they must have realised that they had cut too many trees in Mozambique! Now they have to think about growing trees.

MN: Let me push you on this, in order to focus a bit more precisely. There is a very common term doing the rounds at the moment, and that is 'decoloniality'. It is sometimes purely an academic exercise, but what you are talking about is a unified return to endogenous forms of understanding and knowledge and taking these seriously, but not as the only answers. Would you see this as part of a decolonising process?

EWDW: How must we get out of capitalism? How do we do this? There is no thinking about this on the continent. You know, even this idea of decoloniality. Decoloniality makes sense only when we are also thinking about getting out of capitalism, because otherwise, you know, it becomes just like cultural studies in the United States. Some people are clearly trying to formulate how to get out of capitalism. In 1968 I studied in France; I studied the Cultural Revolution in China. The difficulty we have now is that, first of all, if we are getting out of capitalism it means socialisation at the international level. That is what the Paris Commune was saying in 1871: an international commune, that would include not just the French, the Italians but everybody – there were also Africans who were there. Nationalism on this continent is still more or less dominant. Well of course it is not only Africa, but the view of the problem within an international context has declined. There has been an increase in narrow nationalism.

MN: What they call populism, which is actually fascism and the exclusion of migrants, xenophobia and so on.

EWDW: Internationalist thinking is being hampered by the concern about economic growth, development and so on. And even now some people are still thinking that to say we are getting out of capitalism, is to become like the Soviet Union!! But even the Soviet Union had to change! I told them no, it is not that at all! So now, coupled with this idea of decoloniality, this thinking of how to get out of capitalism, and the development of new institutions, one may think that would probably create a real movement that would be instrumental in some sort of fundamental change. That is what should not be based exclusively within universities.

MN: What do you think the future of the DRC is? What has happened now since Joseph Kabila has left power?

EWDW: We can say that the main issue in the DRC, which has so far been unresolved, is the issue remaining from when there was the so-called Cold War, because that is when the problems of the Congo started. The people could not develop a relatively autonomous politics vis-à-vis this dualistic struggle of the so-called Cold War. The elimination of

Lumumba's government put the Congo in the camp of the West. And Mobutu's accession to power and all that was a consolidation of that process.

Being linked to the West made it difficult for those of us who thought that we could have some form of relative autonomy from the Cold War, as we were very easily accused of being communists. We have not graduated from that. When it was possible to graduate from that was during the Sovereign National Conference (1991–1992), at the time when the West was tired of Mobutu and was thinking that, since the Soviet Union had collapsed, there might have been a possibility to let Congo acquire a certain degree of freedom. But unfortunately, the conference was hijacked by the pro-Mobutu group.

They just keep holding the country back, more or less. The way it is happening, the democratisation that is now supposed to provide for this sort of free space, becomes too controlled. It is a democracy 'from above', with no fairness, with no transparency. At the time they instilled this fear that things may get out of hand. And then you add to that the arrival of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, who brings in the Rwandese and so on. Not that the Rwandese were not already there – Barthélémy Bisengimana, the man who was running Mobutu's politics, was in fact Rwandese – but with Kabila they were there even more openly. Even the chief of the armed forces was Rwandese. He was legally put there. He was a defence minister in Rwanda, but now he becomes a military advisor in Congo.

So today – because politics is focused on issues arising from the Eastern DRC – you have the issue of Rwanda wanting to have some claim on part of Congo. Rwanda's economy is dependent on the resources of the Congo. But Rwanda is supported by the US and the West. So, this whole discourse is structured not so much in terms of how we graduate from the West, but in relation to this occupation coming from the Eastern DRC. And it turns out that rumours are circulating that even though Joseph Kabila is claiming to be a Congolese, in fact he is a Rwandese, you know, that kind of rumour.

The struggle now is how to have some kind of autonomous politics that resolves the issue of the occupation of parts of the East and at the same time does not fall either on the side of the Chinese or on the side of the West. Now that is not easy. It is not easy, because there are no people's politics in existence. That is the problem. There are no developed people's politics because of the way that the people experienced a simple continuation of the repression under Mobutu. And rebellions are simply prolonged protests. What is passing as democracy ensures that protest is focused only on saying that you do not go to work on one day when you protest. Therefore, it amounts to a strike without any results because nobody cares whether you come to work or not. After all, unemployment is so high. It is you who is suffering because you need to go out to look for food.

MN: And they might not employ you when you go back.

EWDW: Well, those who must be at work, even when there are these sorts of strikes, they go back, because otherwise they are going to be chased away permanently by their employers. The problem is how to create these sorts of people's politics where it is not just manipulation that dominates.

To say look, politics is thought. Everyone thinks. We have to think about how politics is organised in the Congo, from the point of view of the state and from the point of view of the people. From the point of view of the people, we have to generate that sort of politics. And so how do we generate it? We have organised this forum where people – anybody – can come; but once you have come there are certain terms of reference we have to follow, you know, that we have learnt from the Asian revolutions.

We are descended from these struggles. We can learn from all these struggles – social and religious struggles – and we are descended from Lumumba's struggles and so forth. What sorts of lessons should we learn from that? Even from France in May '68, what sorts of lessons? So that is why we set up three basic things in the new *Mbongi a Nsi*, because the original version was a little bit broader.²³ One was a series of lectures on the kinds of subjects which we think people are thinking about. I gave one lecture, and unfortunately that is the only one I gave. People are still waiting for the second. That one was about colonialism yesterday, today, and tomorrow. It was packed with people. Even my uncle was there. He said, 'Ah, now you are talking like the way we should be talking'. They have been waiting for the follow-up. But there has been no follow-up so far.

Secondly, we have to have *conversations de salon* ('salon discussions')! Here I was thinking that in France, you have a tradition of these discussions going back to the seventeenth century. But when you look at the Congo, it is like there are no gatherings where people are thinking, just simply thinking, not just drinking. There they only discuss politics when they are drinking in the bar. But it is not like you are focusing on something, you know like Jean-Jacques Rousseau comes to the *salon* with his discourse of inequality! We are trying to organise conversations. Somebody introduces the conversation, and we discuss it. We put forward whatever we get from the discussion. We react to what was introduced and make it a debate. We have agreed to having ten or eleven conversations or even more. The first conversation was about the international situation. The speaker introduced their idea of how we are to understand this situation. The second one was about how politics in Congo is organised; we discussed that. The third one was about the state – in particular how the state has been organised in the Congo. Somebody introduced a discussion about the elections which was to think about the results of the elections and what lessons we can learn from them.

²³ The *Mbongi a Nsi* was a political invention which Wamba-dia-Wamba inaugurated. It consisted of a number of meetings where a small number of militants discussed political questions of any kind after a guiding introduction. It was an attempt to adapt the rural *Mbongi* discussed above to an urban setting in order to develop a new form of political subjectivity that was based among the masses.

That was the second aspect of the *Mbongi*. The third part of the process was to help secondary school students – especially the seniors – to prepare them before they go to university and hoping that by doing so, a very different way of thinking will be introduced at the university.

These were the main sorts of things besides what we call study groups. Here one person would say, ‘Can you read this then we discuss?’ Different parts of the city can create their own *Mbongi*. There were two. The idea in fact was that if you think you are in the process of reading or wanting to debate a book, you invite us [the convenors of *Mbongi a Nsi*] for a conversation. We are starting in Kinshasa, then moving through Bas-Congo.

Now the problem we faced was inequality in levels of consciousness. It is a very serious problem, because what I would assume to be known, it turned out that the others did not know, they were not following. And for me that was surprising to find out that they did not know about Haiti. There was no interaction in terms of what Haiti is, what had they achieved, etc. It is just that they were teaching, or they were simply taking descriptive courses. They never grasped the centrality of politics in terms of slave struggles, for example. The main problem was the uneven development of the core group. And not just because of studying, but also because of different experiences. Because I have been involved in many struggles, but many of these fellows hardly experienced any struggles.

I told them what we are interested in is not cadres; rather, we are interested in militants. Militants are people who are aware of what kind of political prescriptions they are advancing, that they are pushing. On the other hand, a cadre receives orders. You see the distinction? Because they were asking: ‘Are we going to become a party?’ I said no, no, no. I had also to speak on a critique of the political party and what is happening with it worldwide. The fact that people assume that politics is simply a question of taking state power. They do not see this idea that it is the party-state or the state-party which is in crisis. This crisis did not only take place in the Soviet Union. But even in Congo you have a major crisis of our political party.

MN: Even in Europe and in France obviously, there is a crisis of the party form everywhere.

EWDW: Yes, the party form. And the state as a model of organisation, because even a church is a bureaucratic institution as I already mentioned. The church is spiritual and bureaucratic, they say. And look, it is exactly the way the state wants any organisation to be.

So, this is the state model of politics and this state model cannot form the basis of some kind of people’s politics. We have to organise differently from the way the state does. This was very difficult in the *Mbongi*, because the people who came wanted to back a new party. The idea of the party of the new type as in China was mentioned. But if the

party is a state structure, what kind of a new type is it? The notion of the new type means what exactly? So that is where we have a problem. Between the new type and the old type!

In the past, you could say that a revolution retained power or did not. A revolutionary government and so on. Now you must have the understanding that a revolutionary state still has a repressive component. That sometimes, even the democratic state, like in the case of Congo, is just repressive. People think their main enemy is the state. So how can you organise a politics for people which is patterned on the state?

But you have to have concrete political battles. Now what is the aim of these political battles? The aim is to resolve contradictions among the people.

MN: So then we are back where we started.

EWDW: Yes. And these contradictions are not only personal, they also concern social justice. Ultimately unity among the people depends on these battles. How do we pose the issues at stake? We cannot do so without looking for a specific kind of politics. But what kind of politics? When we have found the politics, we have to find a way for these politics to be organised. We have not yet reached that level of thinking of the kind of politics that we must now try to develop. We have not got that far, no.

This interview has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity. The full transcript of the interview can be found at the archives at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Campbell Collections and the UNISA Archives in Pretoria.

Bibliography

- Assmann, Jan. *The Mind of Egypt, History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Assmann, Jan. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. London and New York: Continuum, 2007.
- Badiou, Alain. *The Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
- Badiou, Alain. *The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic*. Melbourne: re.press, 2011.
- Badiou, Alain. 'Politics as a Nonexpressive Dialectic'. In *Philosophy for Militants*, 61–80. London: Verso, 2012.
- Badiou, Alain. 'Affirmative Dialectics: From Logic to Anthropology'. In *The International Journal of Badiou Studies* 2, no.1, (2013) 1–13.
- Badiou, Alain. *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprising*. London: Verso, 2012.
- Bak, Shemsu. *Smi n skhty pn* ('*The Story of the Eloquent Peasant*'). Popenguine: Per Ankh Publishers, 2016.
- Bard, Kathryn A. 'The Emergence of the Egyptian State'. In *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, edited by Ian Shaw, 57–82. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Budge, E. A. Wallis. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. London: Penguin, 2008.
- Diop, Cheikh Anta. *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*. New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991.
- Fox, Renee C., Willy de Craemer, and Jean-Marie Ribeaucourt. "'The Second Independence': A Case Study of the Kwilu Rebellion in the Congo". In *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 8, no. 1 (Oct 1965) 78–109.
- Frankfort, Henri. *Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Interpretation*. New York: Dover Publications, 2000.
- Ibbott, Ralph. *Ujamaa: The Hidden Story of Tanzania's Socialist Villages*. London: Crossroads Books, 2014.

Janzen, John M. *Lemba, 1650–1930: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World*. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1982.

Jeffers, Chike. 'Embodying Justice in Ancient Egypt: The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant as a Classic of Political Philosophy'. In *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (2013) 421–442.

Lazarus, Sylvain. *Anthropology of the Name*. Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2015.

Lumumba, Patrice. 'Speech at the Ceremony of the Proclamation of the Congo's Independence' (30 June 1960). Accessed 14 December 2021. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/lumumba/1960/06/independence.htm>.

Meisner, Maurice. *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic*. New York: The Free Press, 1999.

Martin, Marie-Louise. *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976.

Nyerere, Julius. 'The Arusha Declaration and TANU's Policy on Socialism and Self-Reliance' (1967). Accessed 14 December 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nyerere/1967/arusha-declaration.htm>.

Nzongola-Ntalaja, Georges. *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*. London: Zed Books, 2002.

Shaw, Ian. 2002. *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Thornton, John K. *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

'The Contendings of Horus and Seth'. In *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, edited by William K. Simpson, 91–103. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.









Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research
*is an international, movement-driven institution
focused on stimulating intellectual debate that serves
people's aspirations.*

www.thetricontinental.org

Instituto Tricontinental de Investigación Social
*en una institución promovida por los movimientos,
dedicada a estimular el debate intelectual al servicio
de las aspiraciones del pueblo.*

www.eltricontinental.org

Instituto Tricontinental de Pesquisa Social
*é uma instituição internacional, organizado por
movimentos, com foco em estimular o debate
intelectual para o serviço das aspirações do povo.*

www.otricontinental.org