

21st - 22nd November 2009

### Ancient myths at the ordeal of modernity in African literatures

African literatures (North and South of the Sahara, and those from all other formerly colonised countries) emerged from a socio-political environment which forced them to claim that their ancestral culture defined their humanism (which existed before the "civilising mission" of the colonizer), and show that their language, narrative and poetic performances conformed to the norms of colonial institutions such as schools, the press and literary texts. Besides, entering literature in such a context, assumed that African writers aspired to express the unshakeable particularity of their lives and take up the challenge of competing with the foreigner on the latter's grounds by using the tools of his narrative, and of his modernity.

This double injunction has oriented from the beginning the writing and reflexive work of African writers, producing a large diversity of ideological attitudes and esthetic propositions. But the dual concern for fidelity to one's roots and opening up to the modern world (clearly dominated by esthetic canons and schemes of thoughts emerging from European History) has interested the writers, the artists (and more widely the elites) from colonised countries in search of the affirmation of their identity.

Today, the acceleration of the dynamics of globalisation tends to challenge the relations of domination (in principle, if not in fact) and accentuate both the mixing of cultures and the consolidation of identities.

The ex-wretched of the earth have decided with conviction to make their voices heard among the nations' concert. Furthermore, intellectuals from the north and from the south of the planet have committed themselves to creating a new humanism and a new universalism fed by a mutual civilising heritage, and artists have decided to outline the frontiers of this new humanism and universalism and intensify underlying desires.

For decades, the literatures from colonised countries have mainly been perceived from their hybrid prism, to the extent that they were sometimes reduced to a more or less talented interweaving of motifs which were intended to belong either to the African cultural heritage or to the 'Other'. This approach, although asserting the benefits of hybridisation – a positive assertion because it rejects racist attitudes – remains trapped by its own binary system. As a matter of fact, if the socio-ideological reading of these literatures which prevailed when they emerged (including its critics) has been shown to be unconvincing, the inflationist resort to the hybrid concept to explain (or celebrate) these texts also appears to have reached its limit. Not because the key is wrong or inadequate but rather because it pivots the reading on a sort of hybrid essence which differentiates it from other literatures. Now, these different literatures live and are renewed (at substantially different degrees, for obvious historical reasons) through their varying levels of conflictual interaction with other texts and cultures. Furthermore, from time immemorial, literatures, arts and sciences from everywhere have been mutually enriching thanks to both peaceful voyages and war expeditions.

Therefore, through this conference we would like to attempt a slight displacement in order to avoid ( as much as we can in an always over-determined universe through dominating relations) binary traps and leave more room for a neutral category which opens up to a field of liberty and complexity, the very conditions for the blossoming of great works. So, without rejecting the proposed explanations given by socio-political and/or phenomenological descriptions of hybridisation - we invite you to question the trial of integration through which texts express secular myths (whatever the conditions of their appearance) in connection with the rationality which presides in the modern apprehension of reality as elaborated since the Renaissance, through the History of European civilisation.

As they are at the heart of deep genealogical, political, cultural, conceptual esthetic, moral changes, and because of the colonial intrusions which are carried on by the dominating relations scheduled by globalisation, African authors (amongst others) have the distinction of triggering some esthetic responses to the existential interrogations of our times. The question we are asking is: what representation do African writers suggest out of this civilizing explosion which puts them in a position where they become part of this scientific and technical modernity (in which the ancients did not participate) and, at the same time, to apply for a full integration in this modernity where "one is part of the world", carved by another History. Or, more simply, among certain African writers, how do secular myths (created to explain the world), and contemporary myths, which are part of the triumph of science and technology, compete and take turns in explaining the revolution and maybe give us signs of the future which we are facing.

Every participant will have to ponder on literary text(s) of his/her choice to show this "symbolic guerilla" (in reference to Khatibi when he speaks of 'linguistic guerilla' in connection with francophone writers) which deeply structures the universe of African writers. Ancestral myths through the way they are saved, transformed, amputated,

manipulated, disfigured by the collective memory and their frictions with other beauty canons, philosophies, thought patterns, ways of living ... specific to economical, social, ecological, sanitary, parental, love, modernity.

We expect full and fruitful exchanges thanks to your thoughts and reflections on these matters as they will be delivered without any taboos. We are looking for a vivifying breath in the domain of literary criticism in general and more particularly in the field of African studies.

*Thank you for your cooperation*

*Naget Khadda for the organising committee*

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