

## ***Experiences of Democracy in Africa: Reflections on Practices of Communalist Palaver as a Social Method of Resolving Contradictions among the People.\****

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Discussions about democracy in Africa, the lack of it or the need for it, have become rather *fashionable*. Radical intellectuals (Marxist or not) are *demanding* democracy—often understood as a multi-party system, i.e., as a formal political scheme—to be authorized by the existing one-party state—through which people will “participate” in the decision-making of the entire country, society and people. In this perspective, democracy is seen or viewed from the point of view of the dominant/ruling classes. It is a modification of a form of *class rule* which is being demanded, i.e., a form of association or partnership to the possible sharing in the class interests rather than a construction of community solidarity geared towards restricting the ruling class. Democracy, from the point of view of the ruling class, is just a project of founding and re-founding (i.e. legitimatizing) class rule, and not that of strengthening the community solidarity against the very basis of the strength of the class rule, namely the absence of independent (from that class rule) forms of organization of community solidarity. It is also a way of resolving differences among members of the ruling class.

This conception of democracy is due, in part, to the history of development of democracy in the western world. From ancient Greece to the bourgeois world, democracy was a way of politically organizing (demobilizing) some dominated classes (whose support is needed for legitimizing dominant class rule) to be associated (or neutralized) in the intense exploitation of one section of society excluded from the “real humanity.” It has always been a form of class leadership of the ruling class vis-à-vis ruled classes. Ancient Greek democracy was based on the exploitation of slaves—whom Aristotle described as “animated machines.” The social group called “free people” were accommodated through democracy. To them, the slave masters’ exploitation was made to seem normal. Socrates’ claim that slaves were people even capable of philosophizing must have been one of the crimes that led him to death. Did the “free people,” arising on the basis of community exchange, win their inclusion in the democratic participation? Why could they not unite with slaves—even in slave uprisings?

Bourgeois democracy “developed” on the basis of intense exploitation of Black slaves, the murdering of native Americans and, later on, colonized non-European peoples. The “*European nation,*” as wrote Attila Agh “*is the one which oppresses other nations.*” Oppresses, that is economically exploits them, politically keeps them in subordination and through direct and indirect means. It hinders them in the construction of a national

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\* An English translation, of a speech (in French) given to a group of African intellectuals.

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state, and on the cultural level it subordinates them to “Western values” and therefore hinders the formation of a national consciousness and the feeling of a particular national identity.”<sup>1</sup> Bourgeois dominated classes were thus democratically entertained and associated—no matter how marginally and for the legitimacy of bourgeois class rule—in the class exploitation of classes and peoples excluded from the “genuine humanity” (or in the bourgeois epoch: excluded from civilization and “universal history”).

In this perspective, one may say that African intellectuals, already thriving on the basis of the drips of blood and sweat of the imperialist—through local bourgeois-super-exploited poor peasants and workers—within the context of the imperialist separation of manual and mental labor—are demanding full participation in the decision-making over the governing of those workers and poor peasants. This is how one intellectual put it: “We want an open forum to be able also to address the workers and the peasants.”<sup>2</sup> Fortunately or unfortunately, the reigning and the dominant imperialist bourgeois classes are opposed to providing such an open forum. An “open forum” can only be won through struggles of the masses of peasants and workers who, ultimately, must also address the intellectuals themselves.

The question of popular democracy is basically geared towards the development and reinforcement of an organic solidarity link that ultimately transforms the class-antagonism-divided society into a real classless and stateless community. The people’s conception of democracy is in line with people’s historical struggles for and towards the classless and stateless community. It aims at harassing imperialist-based bourgeois representative power that does not come from the large masses of people. Historical experiences of that movement, centered around the people’s mastering of contradictions among the people, have to be the starting point from which to examine the process of development of people’s capacity for popular democracy.

It would be good, for example, to study situations in which African peoples have succeeded, through real organic links of solidarity, in overthrowing oppressive, exploitative and divisive forces and powers. How, for example, did the masses of people of Congo-Brazzaville overthrow the puppet regime of F. Youlou and its organic allies, or more recently, how did they succeed in removing former president Joachim Yhombi Opango?

It is in this spirit that I want to reflect on a specific experience, that of the “lineage or community” palaver as I experienced it in my region of origin among the Kongo-speaking people (Zaire, Angola and Congo).

It is rather difficult to say exactly when the practice of the palaver started in our African communities and what were its stages of development, its apogee and even its recent gradual disappearance. African legends link the origin of the palaver to mythical ancestral foundations. As I experienced it, as it was practiced in our village communities, the palaver is an appropriate community method and practice to resolve contradictions among the people, to strengthen organic mutual links of solidarity among all the members of the community (clan, lineage, village etc.), to completely isolate divisive tendencies and forces from each member of the community as well as from the entire community.

As in the case of historical practices of democracy, the palaver assumed diverse forms, depending on the time, the place and the type of the dominant political regime prevailing

in society. The class which rules society determines positively or negatively the real content of the palaver: either the entire community participates in and organizes itself into a palaver or certain social strata of privileged and ruling groups only do palaver effectively; the palaver is, in this case, aimed at directly resolving contradictions among the members of the ruling minority. Properly speaking, this is not a real case of palaver, i.e., a public debate involving everybody. The following remarks are based on my experience, as an active member of palavering community, in Kongo-speaking society. Although in a degenerate manner, the palaver is still practiced there as part of the so-called “the custom of the land” (“Fu-kia Nsi”).

The palaver is not very often well understood. Colonialist anthropologists (organic intellectuals of colonialism) and leaders of neo-colonial Africa and their organic intellectuals have spread/created too much confusion on the question; they have made the infallibility of the Chief or the leader as the core of the so-called “Africanity”—the specificity of the African cultural heritage. They went as far as claiming that democracy is un-African—to ideologically legitimize, and secure the reproduction of, their power. Power, so it is claimed, in its “traditional African conception” was based on the worshipping of the Leader—who derived his/her power from the ancestors, to worship the ancestors was also to worship their representative in the community. This of course, has often been the dominant ideology of the aristocratic class rule. Our new pharaohs very rarely speak of the palaver; when they do, it is implied that only the Leader palavers himself/ herself in front of the people’s crowd, whose only role is restricted to that of applauding hysterically. When the Leader has spoken, the sacred words, ancestrally revealed to him/her, become the law. (Truth is arrived at, not through Socratic dialectic, but through the ‘bad rhetoric’ of the sophists).

As an organizational form of a generalized organic community criticism and self-criticism, the palaver has never been a useless verbal disputation nor a form of generalized anarchy, as it is claimed by all sorts of oppressors and dictators. As a kind of community strike, one day the entire community rises up and emerges on the ‘historical’ scene. It demands, and must be given all rights to speak—to shout out ‘all it has on its chest.’ Women, men children; old and young people; everybody speaks on all matters pertaining to the community’s life. The palaver takes form as a thorough process of ‘spiritual’ cleaning-up of the community’s “house” (oikos)—including its most remote corners (i.e., individual and collective unconscious), collectively desacralizing the community’s taboos, if only temporarily. It is a collective/individual cleaning-up of people as community (physically, biologically, anthropologically, sociologically and spiritually). The palaver appears as a mass bursting of active involvement in matters of the entire community and of “*free*” or “*liberated*” (i.e., with no taboos, no restrictions, no “diplomacy,” etc) speaking. It is in this sense that the palaver can be assimilated to a communal expression of “mass ideological communism.”<sup>3</sup> At least, in so far as expressive communicability is concerned, in a palaver, the principle is: to each according to one’s spiritual and bodily wants.

The palaver emerges first of all as a semi-organized/mostly spontaneous form of mass total outrage against experienced restrictive one-sidedness in the community. It asserts the living autonomy of the living humanity, of each individual in the community as well as the cementing organic solidarity of the whole community in its originality, complexity

and living (as opposed to artificial) organizability. It asserts the “liveness” of life in each individual and of the entire community against all the obstacles to its normal flowing.

When the palaver is *artificially* organized by oppressive ruling powers, however, it degenerates—into a *formal* exercise without life and void of mass spontaneous creativity: people speak, as it is said, with “tied tongues or with tongues in the cheek.” We see this even today with the ‘famous dialogues with the masses of people’ called for by today’s African obscurantist dictators.

In the palaver, as a social moment, it is important that major, even very serious, conflicts be resolved and not just be re-channeled elsewhere. Those conflicts, emerging in, and threatening the life/existence of the community qua community, need to be resolved with appropriate methods. That is why the masses of the community rise up and demand that they be *integrally heard*. No order is destroyed by another order; it is only from disorder that new order may emerge. The palaver thus develops and is practically ended only after those conflicts are positively resolved, i.e., after the order which gave rise to them is destroyed. Conflicts are not resolved if such an order ended up being strengthened. How a palaver ends determines the length of the period before another one emerges. The more conflicts emerge in the community, the more palavers that are organized. I say the palaver is organized; it is more correct to say that the palavers take shape with the gradual intervention, eruption of the masses of the community on the scene.

Palavers appear as ideological struggles assuming appropriate form to resolve real community’s conflicts giving rise to ideological tensions (called in Kikongo—“ntuntani”, “ntantani” or “mbengelele”—literally: war of ideas, cultural or spiritual terrorism). Those conflicts threaten to bring about a crisis of unity of the entire community or of its subdivisions (village, clan, lineage, etc). The thread which holds the community members together is said to be threatening to break. Such an ideological tension which develops into a palaver is usually focalized on the practice of sorcery (“kindoki”), i.e., the exercise of power in the manner that *divides* or splits the community into antagonist camps of oppressed (victims) and oppressors (sorcerers). The ultimate principal objective of the palaver is first of all, to impose organically in the entire community a new form of exercise of power—a good sorcery, a sorcery of protection of the entire community (“kindoki kia ndudila kanda”) which must overthrow the bad one (sorcery to kill) from the post of command and its complete banishment from the entire community (through rituals). And secondly, it is to strengthen the community people’s power—people’s determination of selves and the community’s organic affairs—being threatened to be dismantled through a politico-spiritual terrorism. For example, one hears recited the following sayings attributed to the ancestors: “In the clan, there must be no poor, no rich, no chief, no slaves; they all must be chiefs, all philosophers; they all must sleep and wake up together.”<sup>4</sup> It is because the organic equality between community members is threatened—that is why the palaver demands its re-installment. As I saw it practiced, the palaver appeared to be a process of mass ideological struggles to prevent the formation and consolidation of classes.

The community crisis may be revealed, initiated, foretold, provoked or precipitated by a significant event—the sudden death of a community member, for example—or an insignificant one such as an elder says a ‘bad word,’ to a non-elder who reacts with unexpected indignation. It is like a workers’ strike, almost anything—when conditions

are ripe and this can be seen only retrospectively—can initiate it. Those events will be referred to as evidences of practices of sorcery—i.e., cases of ‘bad exercise’ of power in the community. The ‘social causes’ of the death of the deceased community members reveal the existence of a real division in the community social relations. It is, of course, assumed that social crisis has an impact on the psychology, biology and physics of the community. Through ‘spiritual terrorism’ entertained/unleashed by the “bad forces” of the sorcerer (i.e., the most powerful member), the community member had to die. The elder says ‘bad words’ to a non-elder, without any “reason,” because, it is said that in a community where ‘spiritual terrorism’ prevails, “some people think that they can just sit on others’ heads.” Those types of events may precipitate the mass demand for a complete say on the community affairs. An exchange of “bitter words” between two or more individuals, or even songs of protest sung by some people at the funeral of the deceased, may ultimately force community members to take sides.

The deliberate organization of the palaver may thus, sooner or later, be demanded to make “all of us, without exception, lay our cards on the community’s public table,” so that the long lasting terrorism inside our bodies and minds be at last removed. The extremely provocative, taboo-free language used forces everyone in the community to *be ultimately concerned*. Symbolic scenes such as an old woman taking off all her clothes to protest against (or contribute to) the ‘spiritual terrorism’ are not uncommon.

The community crisis is viewed as a non-reproduction of social relations sanctioned by the line of ‘founding ancestors’ or a form of regulation, by a minority, of the contradictory evolution of those relations. As people say, “in the name of the ancestors, some ‘bad people’ want us to be stepped upon.” Political leadership is always a class question; the main difficulty in the analysis of the palaver is that of clearly determining what its class character is. My hypothesis is that the palaver, in my region, was a mass rebellion against an emerging ‘bureaucratic’ class of elders.

It is against class rules—bringing terrorism (“ntantani”) in the community—that the masses of people appeal to the founding ancestors. Dreams about a particularly ‘communalist’ founding ancestor—real or imagined—are announced as clear directives from the founding ancestors to reinstall the nostalgic “past community free of ideological terrorism.”

As a political line in a given historical period of transition to classes, however, the so-called “line of the ancestors” assumes a specific class content; it is the line of an emerging class, which wants to lead and dominate the entire community. This class is not yet able to exercise a real class economic domination—due to the level of development of productive forces—and a class ideological hegemony in the community. It must still have recourse to the community ideology of ‘ancestor worship.’ It thus wants to lead the community and does so in the name of and under the cover (‘protection’) of the ‘founding ancestors’: the power of the living, but the ideology and language of the dead. It is a form of bureaucratic class, i.e., a class which oppresses the masses through its bureaucratic positions—as head of the village, head of the clan, head of the fire place (“ntumu mbongi”), elder, uncle, etc.—allowing the members of this class to present themselves as the real servants (seat, representation, agency, incarnation, voice) of the powers of the ancestors. When they open their mouths, it is claimed that it is the ancestors speaking through them, and the masses of the community must obey them

without question and reservation. The ideology, so tied to the ancestors, is precisely that of sorcery, i.e., the ideology of making people believe that this class has a power of direct communication with the dead ancestors (who always remain watchful of the living community's well-being). Class directives or guidelines are presented as "visions," "revelations" ("Kimona meso"), "dreams instigated by the ancestors who came through revelations to give new directives" for the organization of the community or "ancestors' sayings" ("ngana zata bambuta"—proverbs left by ancestors).

Of course, against such a veiled (mystified) usurpation of the community power ("kundu"), elements of the masses of the community also call for the community non-elders to rebel, to rise up in the *name of ancestors* who came through visions and dreams to say that the community has deviated from the ancestor line; it is imperative that it be re-oriented on the correct trajectory. The division of the community into two is thus reflected through the conflict of interpretations of the "ancestral line" and each camp must prove publicly the soundness of its interpretation. The palaver is thus organized to confront those two antagonist interpretations.

The power of the oppressive class is exercised through a mastery of "sorcery's tricks" and an intimidation of the community's masses based on the mythology of the ancestral omnipotent power that the class members are armed with. By all kinds of tricks, the members of the ruling group frighten (or kill 'mysteriously' by sorcery or magic) the most rebellious members of the community. That is why the mass resistance is often expressed through accusations of members of the ruling group of *cannibalism*. "The elder-uncle ate my son," is a common cry. An ideology of techniques of protection (fetishism?) against the sorcerer's power also develops. Some herbalist charlatans exploit it to their advantage. Intra-class struggles also take the form of sorcerers' confrontation ("mekana").

Any bureaucratic class uses secrecy as the preferred form of the practice of the class rule. That is why the mass bursting, demanding the organization of the palaver, requires that all secrets be *made public*. Confidentiality is a form of class rule. For, as it is said in Kongo community, once a sorcerer is *publicly exposed* in the presence of the whole community, he/she becomes unable to destroy or to hurt anybody; his/her power of sorcery transforms itself into its opposite and this fact has serious consequences—including the possibility for the sorcery's power to boomerang on the sorcerer him/herself. It is interesting to note that in the matrilineal Kongo community, a women sorcerer is viewed as the most powerful of all; it is also interesting to note that initiation to the real foundations (as opposed to appearances) of the class power in the community, done under strict oath for respect of secrecy, was a very secret affair. People were said to have been eliminated because of their having disclosed secrets.

With colonial penetration, after the defeat of the mass resistance against such a penetration, some members—if not all of this elder class—became the candidates to fill lower bureaucratic positions in colonial local administrative or church hierarchies. A new social stratum very often emerges through those hierarchies. Former 'notorious sorcerers'—according to the masses of people's view—became deacons in leading local Christian communities or colonially appointed chiefs ("chiefs rnedailles") imposed as leaders of different colonial administrative units. When it was called for, the palaver was demanded then against the leadership of "people in the service of foreigners," later on

called “white blacks” (“mindele ndombe”) to “restore the ancestors’ line in the post of command.” The content of this line might not have been fixed—it could have been even a pure utopia. Whatever it was, it represented a theory of mass resistance. This line was now and then understood as conforming to that of the national independence (“the right of, the first occupant”) or, and above all, as a sort of egalitarian anti-hierarchical dictatorship of the masses of people often described as “communalism.” The powerlessness of sorcerers in front of colonial power was ridiculed and a call for an organic unity of the community was issued.

The call to that organic community unity was theorized in a number of ways (songs, “ancestral sayings,” etc.). The following Kongo poem was often recited:

Mu kanda ka mukadi mputu

Mu kanda ka mukadi mvwama

Mu kanda ka mukadi mfumu

Mu kanda ka mukadi nnanga

Babo mfumu na mfumu

Babo nganga na nganga

Mu kanda, sekila kumosi

Mu kanda, sikamana kumosi

Mu kanda mbeni ku mbasi

Mu kanda kinenga ye dedede

Mu kanda, kingenga/kimpambudi mwanana.<sup>5</sup>

As might be expected, it was on the pretext of the colonial state or church demands/obligations that members of the new bureaucratic stratum gave themselves a right to a derogation from their traditional ancestral obligations. They see themselves as having become people—consecrated people—in the service of the state or the church (“Beto twayikidi kweto bantu ba Leta evo ba Dibundu”).

The palaver requires of and provides to each community member the right to carry out, and the obligation to be subjected to, *an integral critique* of/by everyone without exception. It inaugurates, if only temporarily, an egalitarian collective dictatorship (=communal *organic* centralism). Such a radical mass demand, under the colonial over-determination, becomes unfortunately impossible to carry out completely: small dictators, under colonial (administrative or church) protection, bypass the mass call requiring them to submit themselves to an integral and public criticism and self-criticism. In the early 1950s, for example, the catechists and “chets medalles” (‘mfumu mpalata’) were among the leaders of the boycott of the “munkukusa” (a public individual and collective oath to give up all forms of sorcery)—a deformed kind of palaver in Luozi region (Zaire). Besides colonial over-determination, there was another crucial problem: a mass call for egalitarianism or communalism where classes are already formed can only be organized by a specific class rule. Structurally, the peasant class is unable to politically and

permanently organize such a call. That is why the palaver tended to be spontaneous and short-lived.

There was a time, it is true, when the Church was seen by village community members as a true shelter against the “bad sorcerers” who, under all kinds of pretexts, were acting as small dictators in the community—often in the name of the resistance against colonial domination. Sorcery intimidation trying to block the evangelical expansion made the church take openly a stand against sorcery—now redefined through the doctrine of sin. Sorcery was viewed as the exercise of power against the opening of the community to a new form of ideology—Christianity. The notion of the integral equality of all people before god, recalling the ancestors’ sanctioned integral equality and the idea of the “spiritual immunization” against sins (sorcery) recalling the ideology of techniques of production against powers of sorcerers, were seen as being truly in favour of the egalitarian community. Some even claimed that some missionaries were actually known dead ancestors who came back. Seen from the ancestral point of view, however, such equality was to be realizable here on Earth, and not in the world beyond.

The weak members of the community-in-crisis (under colonial assault) found shelter in the Church. The egalitarian character of the Church, proving practically nonexistent in reality, will be one of the causes of the rising syncretic religious movements (Ngunzism, etc.) agitating for direct communication with god against any foreign or native intermediaries.

Many mass uprisings in the community end in failures: the real targets of the generalized critique and self-criticism find protective shelter in imperialist structures of domination and the unity of the community, aimed at by the palavering mass movement, fails to materialize. The village thus becomes a focal point of continuous ideological tensions, which make life there unlivable. “The village has died: it has become a place of continuous disputes. There is no more any social, spiritual or personal peace and rest”—it is said in the village. (“Vata. diafwidi: Diayikidi myuma ye mayuma, bwagimunina kwaku nkutu nkatu.”) From the view of ideological formations, the rural migration to cities becomes a way of seeking shelter against those continuous disputes. But even in the cities where ‘sorcerers did follow,’ private property and its ideology of individualism relied on the ideology of techniques of protection against sorcerers— protective fetishism entertained by herbalist nganga.

It can be seen, nevertheless, and very schematically, why the palaver gradually disappears as more imperialist socio-economic transformations fatally attack the rural community. As an elementary form of struggle for “people’s democracy,” must we not study the lessons—whatever they may be—of the palaver? To do this does not imply restoring the ante-capitalist African commune but as a historical experience of prefiguration of “proletarian people’s democracy”—or more appropriately by people’s organic centralism to emerge with communism.

A mass ideological uprising against the division of community into oppressors and oppressed forces the community leaders to let the entire community organize into a palavering community. Even if, at the end of the palaver, those leaders retained their leadership position, the rebelling masses temporarily had succeeded in democratizing completely debates on all the affairs of the entire community.

How then is a palaver organized? At the express request of those who feel wronged as a result of some deviation from what is seen as the line of the ancestors (understood as the mass line or line of mass democracy), deviation seen as being practiced by certain members of the clan, and following a general consensus of all the members of the clan, the head of the clan calls for a palaver ('ntungasani'=generalized self-questioning) to resolve those contradictions within the community whose unhealthy development would bring about a social, psychological and even physiological imbalance in the community. The "kinenga kia nsi" (equilibrium within the community) is in danger of being upset and broken; the real causes can only be identified by having the palaver. In this sense, the palaver can also be assimilated to a generalized Maoist inquiry—with the whole community being a self-investigation squad. This community war without weapons, this self-questioning of all the community's members, this *ntungasani*, is carried out following guiding principles and in a manner sanctioned by the ancestors. Every clan member, including children who can speak, has an equal right to speak, the distinction between initiated and uninitiated ("babulua meso ye biyinga") and the right of seniority are subordinated to the rigorous equality of all clan members as sanctioned by the ancestors' line. The crisis is often experienced as the breaking of the ancestral thread, by some clan members or especially by the 'bad head of the clan' tying all members of the clan together. For, as it is said: "nsinga dikanda ninga kaka ka tabuka ko," the ancestral thread which holds together all clan members including those who are already dead but who still 'live' as witnesses against power usurpers, this thread can well be stretched and even vibrate from tension, but it must not be broken. It is because the thread of the clan is about to be broken that there is a crisis and that the palaver is required to resolve it. The palaver is thus a struggle which must restore the unity of the community; one can recognize here the familiar formula: unity-division-struggle—stronger unity.

Since unity here is 'erroneously' conceived as a primordial ancestral state to which one should return, the unification process leading to a new unity is not subject to the class systematization of its stages. There is no exploited revolutionary class which would be able to realize the revolved peasants' demand. "... a certain type of collective communism", write Badiou and Balmes,<sup>6</sup> "comes forth unavoidably on the basis of mass revolts, even non-proletarian ones. In the ideological sphere, thought of as a contradictory sphere, a relatively stable contradiction develops which opposes egalitarian ideas, the whole thing tied up to the question of private property and the state. A certain *ideological mass communism* is the affair of the people, and does not wait for the proletariat. It is evident that this ideological communism of popular revolt does not possess the historical means for its immediate realization; the real forces of power which it sets in motion are not necessarily those in whose name it has affirmed itself." The relative immobility of rural productive forces means that the egalitarian unity of the community can be conceived only as a return to the golden age of ancestral communalism.

The new pharaohs of our independent countries, giving themselves the title of "founding fathers of the independent nation", will use this theory of the primordial unity at the origin of the community as a key to justify the perpetuation of their dictatorial bureaucratic power (that is claimed to be the reproduction of the old and original community power). The process of *unification through struggle* is, by them, declared alien to the temple of ancestral authority that the nation's new architects attempt to build

around themselves. Even new mass uprisings, in line with the process of unification through struggle, are said to be fomented from the outside.

One is here neither divided into two nor are two fused into one; there is only the eternal return of the primordial unity at the origin—an hermetically compact one, i.e., a fossil-monument—incarnated by the chief. The masses demand an opening up to the people; the new pharaohs impose a compact enclosure, a restoration of an obscurantist rule of the cave (pyramidal pharaohic eternalization). It is not so strange that our new pharaohs act as their predecessors. These were devoting the country's resources to the building of pyramids, i.e., eternal monuments—tombs; their present successors devote the national resources to the building of the one Party monuments. Incidentally, defenders of the restoration of the ancient Egyptian Negro-African world view don't always realize that the Bokassas, Mobutus and Kenyattas are not far from acting as modern pharaohs.

The palaver starts off with a statement, a sort of oath of loyalty to the ancestors, in the presence of all community members, by the head of the clan or by a spokesman for the entire clan (when the head is himself being openly called into question). After having heard the accusatory statement of the case by the victim who, by means of a protest which is often symbolically violent (exposing one's nudity, for instance), initiates the necessity for the palaver, the head of the clan or the spokesman begins by "ta bungu"—taking an oath—i.e., to re-affirm solemnly the line of the ancestors (what is viewed as its correct interpretation), invoking them in opposition to the apparent deviationist line, which is the cause of the crisis in the clan, without necessarily specifying by name those who are being accused, speaking in an analogical way—"tela mu bizenga." Those who feel accused must defend their line as clearly and as honestly as possible before the whole community of the living as well as the dead. Very quickly the accusers and the accused become generalized: it is the whole community which is accusing and being accused—the whole community is called on by the whole community to answer. Sometimes every clan member is made to speak in turn, and for several times following a contingent topological order. For several hours sometimes, different people speak, bringing forth everything in their hearts and on their minds so to speak, without any visible direction seeming to emerge. The debates are interrupted now and then by small meetings taking place aside from the palaver (in a corner) called for by those who ask for them and go to prepare their statements of positions and counter-positions. These meetings in the corner are called "mfundu"—(from "mamfundu", whispered conversation).

In order to make communication easier, in this completely free (sometimes even heated) free-speech carnival of debate, already known specialists, or occasional ones emerging on the spot, of systematized popular wisdom (proverbs, etc.), the Nzonzi. are called forth. The Nzonzi are literally "speakers", masters of the clarification of speech. They function as competent handlers of dialectics: they are therefore dialecticians. They can and do make use of rhetoric but they are not above all rhetoricians. They are very able detectors of the divisive "bad word"—and stimulators of the palaver and they help to assure that it does not degenerate into violent antagonism. They know how to make very severe criticisms without offending or silencing the one criticized: it is crucial that the latter continues to speak. The Nzonzi are thus the cadres of the popular democracy organized through the palaver. There are those who emerge and discover themselves competent Nzonzi through the very dialectics of the palaver.

To evoke the ancestors is to re-affirm their line, the one which allowed the community to reproduce itself before the present crisis. What is at stake in the process of generalized self-criticism is the destruction of erroneous lines whose theses (“bad speech”) have to be harassed and obstinately pursued in each statement made or each accomplice silence by posing correct statements (theses) of the ancestral line with the help of the specialists of ideological clarification, the Nzonzi. The latter’s principal role is to assure that all obstacles which might slow down the normal process and proceedings of the palaver to their conclusion be eliminated. Since the more the community is united the more it is divided, in order to be truly united it must have been thoroughly divided. The palaver is an appropriate means of thoroughly dividing the community in order to truly unify it more strongly than before. Silence, intimidating anger, evil eye (“lundeso”), menacing gestures, etc., are attacked, discouraged and exposed. It is also the Nzonzi who facilitate bringing this about. This is why, in order to be a good Nzonzi, one must know how to *listen* attentively and tirelessly, to rapidly *pick up* the essence of each word spoken, to attentively *observe* every look, every gesture, every silence, and to *grasp* their respective significance (their target) and at the same time to elaborate, in conformity with the axiomatics of popular wisdom (ideology), arguments to counter these unjust positions and/or to re-affirm or reinforce correct positions. The Nzonzi is thus a thinker engaged in mental dialogue interacting in words and gestures with the members of the community organized in a palaver (in the process of community unification through struggle) successively and simultaneously to seek out and destroy the “bad word” exposed as a thesis deviating from the ancestral line. The incarnates of this “bad word” are said to be witches (sorcerers), “ndoki”.

The role of the Nzonzi is not to openly take sides with a thesis of a member of the community but to assure that the criticism and self-criticism are carried out according to the ancestral procedure of mass democracy. It happens at times that the various Nzonzi may be placed on two strongly opposed sides or camps which are formed in the very process of the palaver. In any case, a Nzonzi who shows himself *to be blind to the correctness of the theses* put forward by **both** sides is seen to have been corrupted and as a result unable to act as a true specialist in ideological clarification and becoming a mystifier (“Nzonzi za luvunu”—lying Nzonzis). He is thus transformed into a target of the palaver.

The collective self-criticism is carried out under the intellectual (dialectical) leadership of the Nzonzis who articulate positions and counter-positions in relation to the theoretical, ideological and symbolic requirements of the palaver. The Nzonzis, by using all sorts of stylistic turns of phrases, symbolic analogies full of imagery, songs, etc., express more clearly the “correct theses:” those which reflect the political and ideological line of the ancestors as well as the “deviationist theses.” The intellectual and symbolic gymnastics directed by the Nzonzis is aimed at leading the holders of “erroneous theses” to admit publicly, not by use of physical or moral threat or by witchcraft (spiritual terrorism), but by the sole generalized collective debate, that they deviate from the “community right line.”

Although the objective of the palaver is to resolve intra-community contradictions by tracking down and isolating “the enemy in our midst”, as they say, the defense, the elaboration and the classification of theses and counter-arguments make necessary

repeated theoretical interventions and collective assessments by stages. It is thus through the palaver that the techniques of theoretical interventions are developed : proverbs, theses—songs, paradoxes (=“bimbangumuna”), stories, riddles, allegories and other figures of style, philosophical turns of phrases, all sorts of strategies of clarification/demonstration/questioning, uninterrupted discussion, analogies, brain storming, group therapy, dialectical inquiry, meditation, provocative silence, a sort of spiritual community message to get rid of the spiritual terrorism in the community. The democratic demand made by the palaver on everyone is *to be simple and clear*; for, “wata ngana; bangula ngana; mumbongi a zingana walembana zo bangula wafwila mu zingana” (we say proverbs in order to be clear, to explain: those who have said proverbs to confuse have died because of the confusion they caused). The meanings of words are constantly shifting; words being caught in the movement of destruction/construction “which is that of true knowledge”. What counts is reaching the target and harassing it. The palaver is an industry of creation of new ideas.

The uninterrupted discussion must push those who practice the deviationist line in an unconfessed way to expose and identify themselves (“Nkewa swama uswamanga nkila ukusolose”—the monkey hides but his tail can still be seen), and to publicly admit their mistakes; and then together with the whole community to set out a plan for the rectification of their errors. The chief, as leader, intervenes only to sum up the gains made at each stage; this sum-up announces and opens the next stage. At the end, the head intervenes again at the request of the community to summarize clearly the group decision and to reconstruct with the participation of the whole community the procedure and the stages through which the decision was arrived at. The community’s decision, the ultimate outcome of this whole spiritual community massage, is announced and expressed by a general consensus often in the form of a statement-song-(chanson-these). It goes without saying that the process of the palaver can be very long indeed, but it is only the thorough carrying out and final outcome of this process, that is to say, the complete resolution of the contradictions among the people, which guarantees the correct solution to the community crisis.

As one can see: the palaver, besides being an ideological and philosophical struggle organized and carried out communarily, is also and above all a process of very intense generalized mass education (the palaver as a hot medium). Not only does the chief have an opportunity to become aware of the various ideas which form the social consciousness/unconsciousness of his people, he also sees more clearly the image which the community has of him and the role which this community assigns to him. (Power comes from the people). At the same time he has the opportunity to lay before the community the difficulties of his task, his own personal limitations and past errors, etc. The unity of the community is reinforced after the palaver. The people’s respect for the chief, who was able to let the palaver take place and to adhere to the technique passed down, becomes greater and deeper. Both the true “community enthusiasm” and warmth towards the chief come forth. It is through the systematization of the ideas collectively produced during the palaver that the chief, with the help of the Nzonzi and other sages of the community, formulates correct directives based on the ancestral line of which the community is the incarnation, in its movement of popular democracy, to assure that it continues in the right direction/trajectory.

At the same time, one must not forget the divided nature of the palaver: according to whether it constitutes a form of development of a mass resistance movement against power within the community, against the formation or consolidation of classes, against tendencies toward division within the community, or whether it is an instrument of domination of power against the people (the palaver as a spectacle organized by power). In the first instance the palaver is truly a process of generalized self-criticism able to bring about a strengthening of the people against power and therefore a control by the people of power within the community. This, in an elementary way, foreshadows the correct exercise of proletarian dictatorship—a people rooted rule. And it is only in the this sense that the palaver is a process of popular democratization: One must imagine the great feeling of rejoicing in the community at the end of a palaver: thus the latter ends up with a celebration, a kind of carnival where people feel again the spirits of the great dead ancestors ‘truly living amongst us’ as it is said.

But, when the power is oppressive and uses all means—often classified under the category of “bad witchcraft or sorcery”—to consolidate this power against the people, then the palaver, often artificial, is nothing more than a means of identifying the true “agitators for democracy” that those in power have to put down in order to reinforce their authority, that is to say, their oppression on the entire community. The palaver then becomes a humiliating cross-examination of those who dare to contest power and is therefore a disputation process full of arbitrariness and deformation of people’s statements to spread fear and authority in the members of the community. The Nzonzi, those real people’s cadres, becomes true “sophists of those in power”, policemen of free, spontaneous and creative speech who demagogically intimidate the people on behalf of the powerful. Such a palaver ends up in a suffocating silence which weighs down on the whole community. Secrecy, taking over the post of command, and political and ideological ignorance becoming the only community knowledge, the masses’ directive becomes: “keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut.” (“Duka munuaku, zibula makutu ye kiesa meso.”) Already resistance for the popular counter-attack is being prepared.

It was in such an oppressive perspective that the colonial state was using the “nzonzi” and the “mfumu za nsi” (so-called “customary chiefs”), very colonially selected, as its organic intellectuals with one foot in the colonial state and one foot in the reproduced pre-colonial traditions. It is this (at least in part) which gave the practice of “sorcery” (=techniques in the most general sense of the word)—“kindoki”—its divided character: that which was a weapon for defense against all internal usurpation of power, had also become a means of oppressing the members of the community on behalf of the minority exercising power oppressively. Every technique that is not controlled by the community people riots, as it were, and boomerangs against that same people. It was noted that people who were formerly respected “sorcerers” (sages or technicians) became real allies and organic intellectuals of the colonial state. The masses of the villagers referred to them as “those who have ceased to be themselves, those who ceased to be real people” (“ka basala moko” or “ka basala bantu ko”).

We must also recognize, as Babakar Sine<sup>7</sup> suggests, that with the process of the so-called “enlargement of scale” that African societies are undergoing, within the context of imperialist dominated urbanization processes, the efficacy of the palaver as practice of

democratization, of generalized popular education and of resolution of contradictions among the people, may be considerably modified. It will be necessary, in those conditions, to deal with the material bases of the inevitable extension and qualitative transformation of the practice of the palaver at the national level. And to do so in the framework of the organization of the class alliance between workers and poor peasants. The practice of the palaver under the proletarian class leadership, might well lead to new *conception* and *uses* of modern audio-visual techniques. In cities such as Kinshasa, some aspects of the palaver are more and more taking new forms “*radio trottoir*” (“street radio”), criticism made through singing, through preaching/praying aloud in a church, through meanings of proper names (adopted with the policy of authenticity); through popular drama, etc.

Of course, what we have said about the palaver was not necessarily universal in Africa. Feudal Africa, for example, could not possibly have organized the palaver as a process of democratization and of people’s control of power, but, instead as a spectacle of paternalist mystification. The palaver, in the framework of a study of popular cultures of the African masses, must be thoroughly studied. I have just hinted at some important aspects. *It is, however, true that only a regime that practices a generalized and conscientious self-criticism will agitate in favor of such a study.*

Let us draw some lessons from the teachings of the palaver as we have tried to analyze it. (1) There cannot be any people’s consensus through silence; the latter is also seen as accomplice, i.e., as an obstacle to the process of democratization. (2) Democracy is first of all a free collective and individual exercise of free speech by everyone and by the whole community. It is a complete freeing, allowed by the democratizing community, of one’s whole body, its senses, its gestures, etc., so that no aspect of bodily creativity is fixed or blocked. The integral freeing of the community speaking (*la parole communautaire*) requires and stimulates the very attentive listening to each other and thus the mutual respect for each other’s right to speak—no matter how insignificant. (3) A true leader is the one who listens tirelessly, attentively and strictly respecting the most insignificant meaning of the community’s spontaneous and diverse speaking before concentrating it into directives. The leader is not the one who silences that speaking. (4) A true cadre, Nzonzi, has as a duty to surmount every obstacle to clarification, democratization, simplification, creative community spontaneity, integral community spiritual massage, people’s grasp of what is new, community life process, etc. That is why the turns of Zones speaking please so much those who participate in the palavering community. They are so constructed as if they were actually made to express the real “intended meaning” by the now unified and revived community. (“Muanki, nkatia Nzonzi yena! —He is, indeed, a really true Nzonzi—the participants say.)

Despite all the pompous speeches on the recourse to ancestral traditions, in today’s Black Africa, no country, as far I know, has been able to organize a generalized free discussion to collectively deal with the profound crisis of politico-socio-economic institutions of our countries. Leaders behave here as if they made no mistakes and thus are above criticism; and the people as a whole has nothing to teach the leader, who knows everything. (This is often experienced as leaders behaving as if they were in fact above the constitution and the law.)

When elections are organized (often on imperialist pressure), they are nothing but a bureaucratic police practice: even through them, it is not allowed to express one's real point of view. Results are often known even before the votes are counted. Elections are no longer a way of assessing what the community actually thinks of power, but a simple confirmation of what the community *must* think of it. To wish to be a candidate for the presidency when the "father of the nation" has not said the last word is the highest crime in our societies. The one Party has become such an ivory tower that its principal role has become to institutionalize the silence of the masses of people, and claim this silence to be "people's general consensus". The all-powerful "normal channel" and its very technical "normal procedure" keep the people's spontaneous speaking shut up. Small dictators, incapable of listening attentively, crown themselves as "fathers of the nations" to thus silence any possible criticism. A father is a father—no matter how evil he may be and nobody chooses one's father or changes him to get another. The history of a whole people becomes transformed into a series of tasty tales of the natural genealogy of the "father of the nation" whose acts, deeds and words are the "naturally incarnated will of the people". The sad thing is that it is imperialists that often pressure these "fathers of the nations" to listen a little bit to their "children".

Their Excellencies "fathers of the nations" get their "knowledge" and directives from somewhere else outside of their people whom they actually view as a mass of imbeciles. National congresses of the political parties are organized not as real palavers but as festivals of confirmation of the opinions of the "leader-guide." They talk about everything except the mistakes of the "father of the nation" and the community procedure for the process of their rectification. Those congresses are not organized on the basis of a free uninterrupted discussion but on that of *fear*, silence, threatening intimidation and approval with no questioning of the directives of the "leader-guide" that he is himself incapable of getting the community as a whole to validate. These directives, it goes without saying, don't come from the palavering community.

### **To govern has become to silence the governed**

The "one-party cadres", who know the "leader-guide's" thought before he opens his mouth, are overzealous in harassing, terrorizing, and imposing silence on the people in the name of the "father of the nation". This is, of course, known as "political mass mobilization"—done by people recruited from the lumpen proletariat and with no clear political shrewdness. A people to whom free spontaneous and creative speaking is forbidden is an oppressed people—who can only speak with "a tied tongue". African peoples must be given back all their free and creative speaking. As we saw, such a restoration is won through a mass struggle; it is never a gift from "the father of the nation". The attentive listening, by the leader, or all the members of the community and every member's speaking before the leader, outside of palavering community situation, are not necessarily indication of liberation and creativity—the leader's silence is also accomplice (it is a cat taking the snake's poison).

It must be clear why self-proclaimed "socialist leaders" who make the farce of trying to make their countries be socialist from a subjective choice basis cannot succeed. That is to say, those who think of themselves as the *originating source* which must spread socialism in the country forget that it is the rebelling masses who make history. Historically, democratic rights have been the results and victories of sharp mass struggles and not gifts

from “fathers of the nations”. Those are the same struggles which do transform the leaders themselves: self-cultivation and asceticism of a leader don’t guarantee any democratic rights. The class suicide that Cabral speaks of is imposed, forced by the mass struggles and not just subjectively selected.

Before concluding, brief remarks on the significance of the palaver on the question of “African philosophy” are in order. The palaver is also a *philosophical situation*: as it materializes the possibility of a real critical effort by the participants (individually as well as collectively), the palaver calls forth the emergence or constitution of the philosophical element. The African ideology (“African philosophy”) in search of its philosophical foundation must look for it through practices of the palaver, and not in meanings buried or hidden under “elements of discursivity” it effectively helps to produce or develop. The articulation of those elements into a discourse must be grasped through the one that the palaver gives rise to. The role of the chief in the process of a successful palaver is not far from the one Plato wished for “the philosopher-king”, absolutely the opposite of one acting arbitrarily.

“I shall present”, says Plato “what I think and, if someone among you thinks that I am asserting a proposition that is not true, he must summon me and refute me. For, I don’t allow to myself what I say about a truth I am not sure of. I shall enquire together with you, so that if the one who opposes me seems to be right, I’ll be the first to pass my arms to him.” (Gorgias 506—a rough translation from the French.) Any participant in the palaver may effectively say the same thing. But even more every participant knows that the validation of conditions of validity does not point to the imitations of an individuality, nor is it of “forms” (ancestors?) outside of the living community as such, nor even that of the limitations of the community in its integrality (including the “dead ancestors”—forms), but instead to the very activity of the *palavering community*.

Thus, marks and distinctive signs or the mechanism of the articulability of meaning for the treatment of speaking in its pluridimensionality don’t get their full signification but through the balance of forces in/of the palavering community, since it is here that variations of meaning of words, marks and distinctive signs are critically experienced. The appeal to distinctive signs, in isolation, does not validate anything—if anything it is a form of attachment to fixed traditions. That is why it is not sure that hermeneutics is meaningful outside of interpretations of theological writings whose target is a pre-given world. “For whom does one philosophize”? aims at the requirement of a palavering situation. This is what P. Hountondji may also mean by “philosophy as a public debate.”

The Anglo-Saxon tradition of analytical philosophy which made “common language” the foundation of validity is not very far: “common language” is nothing but a poor form of the palaver—as there is no fixed “common-language. To reduce philosophy to a “written palaver” (what Plato tried in his dialogues) is the same thing as reducing the palaver to a discussion among the sole Nzonzi. That is the crux of the matter in philosophy in general and “African philosophy” in particular. Against sophists’ rhetorical method, philosophy developed through dialectical method. The latter cannot successfully be practiced, on paper, by an individual—this is why there is a tendency to return often and often to Plato. Outside of a philosophical situation, similar to the palaver, philosophy becomes derailed, and a minority’s folly. One can imagine why the palavering Socrates left no writings. Is it not true that major breakthroughs in philosophy are related to major mass movements?

## REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup> Attila Agh, *National Development in Third World*. Budapest: Institute for World Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1984, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> M.N. Marando, *Party Democracy in Africa*. Paper presented at the Marxism in Africa Symposium, UDSM, 9th-10th March, 1983, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou & Francois Balmes, *De 'ideologie*. Paris: Yenan "Syntheses", F. Maspero, 1976, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Rough translation of: Mukanda ka mukadi mputu, ka mukadi mvwama, ka mukadi mfumu, ka mukadi minnanga; babo mfumu ye mfumu, mganga; ye nganga; babo sekila kumosi, sikama kumosi.

<sup>5</sup> Translation:

In the Clan, there must be no poor  
 In the Clan , there must be no rich  
 In the Clan, there must be no chief  
 In the Clan, there must be no slaves  
 They must be all chiefs  
 They must be all philosophers  
 In the Clan all must sleep together  
 In the Clan all must wake together  
 In the Clan there must be no enemies  
 In the Clan there must be only equilibrium and justice  
 In the Clan there must be no individualism.

<sup>6</sup> A. Badiou & F. Balmes, op. cit. p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> Babakar Sine, *Imperialisme et Theories Sociologiques du Development*, Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1975, pp. 180-181.