From “Life-Water” to “Death-Water” or On the Foundations of African Artistic Creation from Yesterday to Tomorrow

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The foundations of African art have been the subject of numerous attempts at definition and analysis. In determining the “Year One” of African art, some begin in 1921, with the publication of the novel *Batewala* by René Maran, while others refer to 1906, the year in which the South African writer Thomas Mofolo published his novel *The Traveller of the East*. In some instances, even colonial administrators, such as Charles Béart, the former director of l’École Normale Wil- liam Ponty in Senegal, have proclaimed themselves as “the initiators and principal sources of inspiration” of art in Africa! To anyone who might believe him, Béart stated that it was he who was “the kindly godfather of African theater” [3], that it was he who had taught his African students to understand theater. These contradictory accounts have produced conflicting results, as each analyst would speak of “sources,” “origins,” “foundations” and “first creators,” reflecting a crypto-personal bias.

Nevertheless, according to Joseph Ki-Zerbo, there have been sufficient historical evidence and facts regarding African arts and civilizations to establish an identity of their own. As he points out, it is peoples of the black continent who gave birth to civilization for the longest period of World History. . . . When “Antiquity” began, Africa was, via Egypt, the locomotive and the teacher of the world, introducing writing, centralized power, the pyramids and monumental architecture, sciences, etc. Moreover, the mother of Egypt is Nubia and its sub-Saharan extensions [4].

This powerful remark clearly establishes Africa’s place as an authority in the arts and allows for the foundations of African art to be studied from a viewpoint different from the simplistic approach of dates and places of works published during the colonial period.

Three approaches may then be used in determining the possibility or impossibility of defining a single source of African artistic production: the first establishes the aquatic nature of African “being”; the second illustrates the power of water in artistic content and forms; the third suggests cultural constants that may enable a better reading of African arts in the future. I will discuss these three in the following pages.

OF THE AQUATIC NATURE OF AFRICAN EXISTENCE

To speak of African “being” is to refer specifically to an ontology that precedes revealed religions, such as Islam and Christianity. In this Africa, the living and the dead are joined in a powerful reality named “existence.” The living being is just as the dead; in other words, in this reality, the being—whether human, vegetable, animal, mineral or stone, whether it lives or dies—is always animated by a force. Each force has its place within a hierarchy, rising from a grain of sand to God, from the visible to the invisible, from the audible to the inaudible.

Father Placide Tempels had correctly recognized this specificity when he wrote:

We Westerners see power as being an attribute of being, and we have elaborated a notion of being which is separate from the notion of power. It seems to me that primitive peoples did not interpret reality in this way. Their notion of being is essentially dynamic. . . . To them, power was a necessary element of being [5].

It is unnecessary to elaborate upon the Reverend Father’s use of the word “primitive,” loaded as it is with exclusionary meaning, as the author’s thinking was well in line with colonial ideology. Let us, however, give him credit for recognizing Western ignorance of a profound truth in Africa, a truth that Birago Diop, in a classic example of African poetry, enjoins us all never to forget: “Those who have died are never gone; They are in the water that flows/They are the water that sleeps/The dead have not died.Listen more often/To things than to beings/Hear the voice of water” [6].

It is important to note that this African ontology is monotheistic: there is one God, called Ngai by the Gikuyu of Kenya, or Roog Seen by the Sereres of Senegal. Nigerian author Chinua Achebe also spoke of the existence of this one God when he wrote the following fictional dialogue between Mr. Brown, a Catholic missionary, and Akunna, an Ibo religious chief:

“Say that there is one Supreme God, who made heaven and earth,” said Akunna to Mr. Brown. “We believe in Him as well and we call him Chukwu. He created the entire world and the other gods.”

“There are no other Gods,” said Mr. Brown. “Chukwu is the only God, and all the others are false gods. You carve a piece of
wood...and you call it god. But it's still a piece of wood."

"Yes," said Akunna. "It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree it came from was created by Chukwu, as were, in truth, all the lesser gods. But He created them to be His messengers, so that we might approach Him through them. It is like you, yourself. You are the chief of your church...or sent here as a messenger, and you, in turn, name your own messengers and servants." [7]

This is almost a sermon by Akunna on the meaning of monotheism. Thus through fictional writing does Achebe reveal the depth of Western incomprehension of the modes of thought and deeds of African civilizations.

This African religion can therefore be seen as monotheistic and imbued with agricultural content, in which the other gods speak: rain, wind, water, animal, plant...It is as though this society were an extended family of gods surrounded by their messengers and servants, with each one—from the Supreme God to the messenger gods—considered as a father, mother or grandfather. Senghor wrote: "The Black African pantheon is one of the richest that exists. It is plausible that the pantheons of Mediterranean religions, particularly that of Greece, may be of Negroid origins, starting with that of the Egypt of the Pharaohs" [8].

I will not comment here on the otherwise very appropriate question of whether black civilizations predate the Egyptian and Greek, as this might lead our thoughts astray. Our purpose here is to assert the narrow correlation between this African ontology and the power of water.

One must first understand that water is power. It is never dead, in the sense of being unusable or spent. It is life-water when it purifies, it is death-water when it soaks. I do not say "dead water"—I speak of water as a sign of life, and water as a sign of death, but always of water full of Existence, because there is no non-being in water.

Thus water is always and everywhere imbued with spirituality. It is the only being able to adapt its powers according to circumstances, while other beings communicate instead in terms of the duality of their existence. In other words, whereas the living, once initiated, can speak to the dead and vice versa, and whereas the lion is not only the king of the forest but also the totem of the Ndiaye family, water is the only force that is not twain. Thus, when one accidentally spills hot water onto the ground, one immediately runs to find cool water to pour onto the same place in order to be forgiven. Each being can thus keep its spirituality and its compass in the unreal, but water has greater power: the capacity to rejuvenate, to heal and especially to draw life forth from death and to bring death upon life.

This can be seen in the water used by sorcerers, healers, or spell-casters. This water is often feitid and stinking but must nevertheless be drunk sip by sip if one hopes to defeat an adversary. Yet this water can be neutralized by another water, this one quite human—urine—for, as everyone knows, the urine of men and women is a water that is highly sought out by anyone wishing to exercise the effects of other waters.

The Dogons of Mali believe that it is the union of two waters that gives life to the human race—in this case, the encounter between a man's sperm and the moisture of a woman's vagina. But on this joining of waters one must add a word: since the sole action of sperm is not sufficient to conceive man, it is the word of water that bears and maintains the humidity necessary to human procreation...and the Nommo [the spirit of water], by this means...transforms the water-water into a seed, and gives it the appearance of a human [9].

The Dogons' Nommo is therefore a water god, but at the same time also heat, sperm and word. In the Serere populations of Tooki in the Baol region of Senegal, the same force of the water-being in the evolutionary process of man is revealed in the form of Roog Seen (the Senegalese name for the one God). This force is seen on three levels: the first consists of the 9 months of gestation in dark waters; the second corresponds to the duration of life on earth, during which man is but water (blood being water) mixed with mud; the third is the end of this terrestrial life, when man is returned to grains of sand and vegetable elements, in order to nourish new lives through rainy-water or ground waters.

In Wolof society, the water handed to a visitor, whether thirsty or not, upon crossing the threshold of a house is not only a token of good manners but communicates a wish that the water might through its powers attenuate one's sufferings and reinforce inner peace. Similarly, whenever water is poured before or behind a person who has just arrived or left, it is a prayer to the heavens that peace and happiness might guide that person's footsteps.

Even today, one can still see the fronts of houses, galleries, artists' studios, market displays, shop windows and thresholds of stores held by Africans being splashed with water early each morning. Even automobile wheels are watered every day upon leaving the garage. This behavior perpetuates centuries-old practices, according to which water poured each morning chases away the evil of the night and brings peace, success and prosperity for the duration of the day.

Besides these attributes of water, which focus on humanity's being, there are others that bring out the power of water in relation to nature. Indeed, it is rainwater that brings life and color to the dried-out savannah, while the falls of Dindefelo, in the Kedougou region of Senegal, are known as effective remedies against stress and various other malfunctions of the human organism.

As for seawater, who can ignore its therapeutic virtues for those suffering from those ailments called "evil eye," "evil tongue" and "evil spirit"? No doctor, even the most highly decorated graduate of the greatest schools and universities of the West, has ever been able to diagnose or cure these ailments, though the remedy is simply to bathe in the ocean or to wash one's face in seawater regularly.

But it is also true that rainwater and river water can also bring about desolation and disaster for humans and animals. When this occurs, as was the case in Saint-Louis, Senegal, in 1999 (the river bed overflowed, with the added complication of flooding rains), humanity, in its sins, is designated as the one and only being responsible for the catastrophes. It was said in this case that humans had offended Mame Coumba Bang, the river genie. People were then seen making offerings—often in the form of curdled milk thrown onto the waters—that modernism had almost caused them to forget.

Water is therefore intrinsic to the thought and practices arising from this African ontology. The aquatic nature of this world, consequently, has repercussions in the manners of representing all that is experienced, dreamed and imagined by this society—in short, on artistic production.

**ON THE ORIGINS OF AFRICAN ART**

Whether recognized as such or not, every work of art belonging to this sub-Saharan Africa appears as a concentrate of relations between visible and invisible, present and absent, real and unreal, because art is, above all else, the realm of images, suggestions and symbols; in other words,
it is the realm of all vocabulary through which the ontology of power-beings is expressed.

If one could go back thousands of years to pause at the frescoes in the African caves of the Kalahari or the Tassili, one would discover that these paintings express not only the self-image of the artists of that era, but also their desire to act upon the represented forces in order to appropriate them. Moreover, analyzing such works teaches us about the period’s place in the evolution of agricultural and mechanical techniques, economic activities and various other cultural occupations in which water was inevitably central. The frescoes are also evidence of proficiency in applied art, with their depiction of shepherds and their flocks, feasts and ritual ceremonies.

In these sites, the rhythm of life and the ambience of the surrounding world are portrayed with precision and refined symbolism, revealing the artists’ level of technical control. One notes that the objects of representational depiction are mainly animals in motion, whereas men and women are more stylized, as if to better underline the human capacity for abstraction; all of this is treated gracefully in chrome.

Nonetheless, it may seem audacious to seek out a relation of cause and effect between water and African artistic creation. Why, one might ask, would water—which is being—be the only being amongst all others to inspire artistic creation? How can one link water to arts in Africa, when only 34 percent of African borders correspond to hydrographic supports?

While these questions may well seem legitimate to someone with a tourist’s vision of Africa, they lose sight of the fact that art does not exist outside of sociocultural beliefs, that muses are born, and that art does not exist outside of socio-economic activities and various other cultural occupations in which water was inevitably central. The frescoes are also evidence of proficiency in applied art, with their depiction of shepherds and their flocks, feasts and ritual ceremonies.

Thus, Abdoulaye Sadji, in his artistic renovation of Africa, this environment, these dreams, the thoughts of the individual. For in Africa, this environment, these dreams, these fantasies and these thoughts are jealously imprinted with the vitality of this hierarchy of power-beings, where water is the only being indispensable to all others. Thus, Abdoulaye Sadji, in his artistic renovation of the Lebou people’s founding myth, draws inspiration from life-water and death-water and from their mysteries. The Lebou story is set in a community of fishermen who lived peacefully until one day the sea genies decided to aid one of them, Ngalka, a brave among braves. Though his wedding to a water goddess was celebrated in the depths of the sea, the bride joined him in their marital hearth on terra firma. They had one child, Tounka. The water goddess was highly offended when Ngalka took on a second, and this time very earthly, wife. The manifestation of the goddess’ wrath was not long in coming: fires, floods and madness descended upon Ngalka until his death. Both life-water and death-water were experienced by the townspeople during this episode in the life of one of their own—having first been blessed by water, Ngalka later came to be ruined by it, leading him to his grave, as no remedy could ever cure him.

Senghor interpreted the importance that Sadji had attributed to water in this work as a characteristic of all African artistic creation: “In truth,” he said, “we are like manatees who, according to African myth, go to drink at the source in the days of yore, when they were quadrupeds or men” [11]. This point of view is fully shared by Tchicaya U Tam’Si, who understood that his poetry was “like the river Congo, which carries as many corpses as water hyacinths” [12]: this quote pertains not only to the fluidity of his poetry, but also to the variety of its content. One must read Tchicaya to see how these irregular verses within regular stanzas cause us to bob in the waters of a poet that speaks nature’s truth.

On another level, one may cite the example of the sculptors who chose to work close to the Cross River to emphasize, once again, the importance of water as a foundation of African artistic creation. Calling upon the water genies enhanced their skillfulness in working the hard basalt. To them we owe famed sculptures with expressive facial traits that defy posterity. Also notable is the example of certain populations living by the mouth of the Congo River, whose typical sculptures depict a mother and child figure—these peoples turn out works, dictated by water genies, that symbolize fertility. Women seeking fertility wear such figures to ensure healthy and abundant maternity.

Other examples illustrating the importance of water to artistic creation include the Fon people’s bas-relief sculptures, depicting a jar pierced with holes, supported by a pair of hands, symbolizing the union of all Fons to save the kingdom, as well as the Baoule doors that depict male and female elephants, symbols of the strength and longevity that characterized the reign of Queen Abrah Pokou in Côte d’Ivoire mythology. Both Fon and Baoule artists make constant references to the power of water, which symbolizes for them the common riches that must be preserved and represents the sacrifices made to the water genies, which allowed their people to align themselves with Queen Pokou.

In the same vein, Olympe Bhely-Quenum recalls an African legend in which two young people in love, unable to obtain their parents’ consent for their relationship, throw themselves into the waters of a lake. Fifteen years later, they are changed into water genies, and from then on the lake itself sings, enticing generations of young lovers to its waters, where many pay with their lives for the intransigence of the first couple’s parents [13].

This legend attributes the origins of music to water, reflecting a major African belief according to which, in ancient times, the kora, an instrument with 21 strings, was fished out of the water where water genies had beautifully (and jealously) played it. The Dogons also preach that musical rhythm was the first of all the arts, with dancing, sculpture and painting appearing afterwards.

Even within the context of a modern artform such as cinema, African creation contains the inspiration of water. Carmen (2001), Joseph Gai Ramaka’s latest film, is a good example. It is true that both Bizet’s opera and Prosper Merimee’s Carmen provided the basis for Ramaka’s character Carmen, a woman whose passion devours the men and women she meets along the way. But for his own version of the story, Ramaka chose to make the ocean itself the central character, competing even with the character of Carmen.

Indeed, it is water itself that witnesses Carmen’s trials and tribulations, just as it serves as the final resting place for the lesbian prison guard who could not survive the end of her love affair with Carmen. It is water again that is the confidential listener of Yande Codou’s daily singing in the film. Most importantly, water is at the center of all of the dissolve, zoom-in and zoom-out effects, which the director achieves brilliantly, so that the beauty of the ocean at all times of the day renders Carmen’s various moods and attitudes, and those of her conquests, mere ephemeral episodes in the life of a society.

Given these examples, it is as though, in the midst of modernism, African ontology were avenging itself by influencing African artists, whether or not they accept this ontology consciously. Thus, the cause-and-effect relationship between water and the sources of African artistic creation is not fortuitous—it is at the heart of life and death in the
daily existence of African societies. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether this relationship will continue to be relevant in a world that, it is said, may yet destroy all identities—tomorrow, if not today.

**ARTISTIC CONSTANTS FOR TOMORROW**

Studying the present state of African arts and their environments reveals one certainty: that the past has not simply survived, but exists in the entirety of daily life. Water is still poured onto the foot-steps of university professors on their way to or back from Europe; water over which words of good omen have been pronounced is still kept in a small vial at the bottom of one’s travel bags. Whether it runs from a hotel faucet or is bottled spring water purchased at the supermarket, whether it was drawn from a well or a river, water remains the power-being in the minds and practices of many Africans.

If art may be defined as the graphic expression of all that causes emotion and pleasure in men, whilst offering a support through which the invisible may be read, then African art remains a bridge between the past and the future, because, if yesterday’s beliefs inspired certain forms in African art, their survival has brought about the realization of artforms and contents not identical to their predecessors, to be sure, but just as full of the colors and life of the past.

However, this survival does not solely consist of traces. It is pulsating life that plunges its roots into the thought patterns and lifestyles of Africa’s children so forcefully that the future is already at hand.

An example of this phenomenon is the work *Le rêve aquatique*, by the painter Jacob Yacouba [14]. This painting expresses the artist’s thirst for communion with his vital element: water. The marine background color that covers the totality of the pictorial space is lit up in its central spot painted all in white. Here again, we find the same yearning for timeless fluidity, that same human dream—to appropriate the power of water.

Baye Mouké Traoré’s tapestry entitled *Mbaan Gacee* [15] is another artistic expression seeking to tame the water-being. This work is a mixed composition in which calabashes, beads and fishing nets are used to represent the working of wool. Every means is used to make the representation of the marine environment an alphabet with which to read the symbolic system of images.

Sculptor Babacar Sédikh Traoré was the first to use the power of water at the forefront of his design [16]. In his work, he depicted live animals at the circumference of a large amount of water. His aim was to symbolize the concept that being, in its natural state, which is water, is aesthetically as well as spiritually immeasurable.

On the basis of these works, it can be argued that today and tomorrow, as long as African artists maintain their presence in the world of beings, neither American globalization nor the tendency towards standardization of behavior will erase the bases that make African creation unique. Regardless of the warmth of their words and their music, the smoothness of their colors and forms, and the length of their visits to other cultural worlds, such African artists, suffused with being, will always be characterized by the “DNA” of their education and cultural environment.

Of course, one will never be able to say anything about any work of art that is 30 percent Baoule, 15 percent Mandingo, and the remainder French or Canadian, since what we have inside is integrated into our flesh and irrigated with our blood; these elements are indivisible. This is what makes us not hybrid monsters, but men and women of synthesis who do not hide their origins, who are proud of what the present has made of them and enthusiastic about their participation in building tomorrow.

The work of Amadou Sow, an African painter who has lived in Vienna for decades, says this with eloquence. Though he is familiar with every curve and corner of Western art, Amadou breathes into each of his works the primeval African savannah, with its ochre tones and its contours always rising to the call of the heavens. This creates images powerful enough to transport its viewers into the architecture of Timbuktu, into the black holes of the Djenné people’s dwellings, which bring to mind the theoretical black holes of space that science has not yet deciphered. Anyone looking at an Amadou Sow painting can immediately tell that it is not German or Polish art, but also that it is certainly not “cow-tail and voodoo” African art either, and yet that it is definitely art created by an African.

The same feeling would arise from listening to the rhythmic percussion pieces performed by Doudou Ndiaye Rose and his Rosettes; they would demonstrate that this art has permutations beyond those taught in Western academies. In following the choreography of the Rosettes, one would inevitably turn to dictionaries of African culture in order to search for the meaning of each *galan*, the variations in rhythm and the aesthetic value behind each pause and occasional silence.

In Africa, each contemporary artistic practice carries the seed of what its rhythm will become in the future. Therefore, there are no artistic constants, but a dynamic system of continuous change.

One must therefore conclude by stating that the future fertility of African artists will depend on their capacity to listen to water and upon their willingness to allow themselves to be imprinted by the call of all beings that dwell in the day-to-day existence of their society and of their world.

It is essential to avoid nostalgic platitudes for the past riches of Ibo, Yili, Bambara or Ashanti art; it is also out of the question for artists to hole up in a cultural cave of sorts in the hope of creating the new out of the old. Rather, artists of both today and tomorrow will have to know how to answer, through art, such questions as “Where am I?” “Who am I?” and “Where do I come from?” This must be done not only from a metaphysical perspective, but with total consciousness of the place and role of science, economy and politics in the communications of men. And in this search for practical and artistic answers, the power of the water-being-power over any being, over Existence, shall not be ignored.

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**References and Notes**


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