

## SLĀV AND KANATA: THE DEFEAT

With respect to literature, theatre, and the anti-colonial struggle, Beatrice of Congo is both an emblem and a major theatrical work.

Known by her Kongo name of Kimpa Vita, this Beatrice (her Christian name), at some twenty years old stood, as early as the start of the 18th century, in opposition to the dominating and colonizing force of Christianity and against the ravages of slavery, calling for a resurgence of the Kingdom of Kongo, at the time destabilized, and for a form of spirituality devoid of the racial categorizations propagated and taught by the missionaries. Called by the name of Saint Anthony, she took on the role of liberator of the bodies and souls of the Kongo people and was burned alive, accused of heresy by the authorities who viewed her as a "false saint."<sup>1</sup>

Although it may be tempting to draw parallels, as many did, between her fate and that of Joan of Arc, a French woman, born more than 2 centuries earlier, the fact remains that the story of Kimpa Vita, which gave rise to a 3-act play by the Ivorian playwright Bernard Dadié,<sup>2</sup> illuminates in a compelling manner the dramatic facts and force which point to the complexity of the colonial enterprise. What could be summed up in retrospect as an example of "cultural appropriation" by a native who claimed to be, on a par with white Christians, called to the Kingdom of God, illustrates, rather, the attempt at cultural *reappropriation* that was at the heart of her entire endeavor, and which led her to the stake on July 2, 1706.

This play drew forth a whole swath of committed literature to which, half a century later, we remain indebted, while the work of cultural reappropriation, after centuries of slavery and colonization continues: "No other writer from Sub-Saharan Africa," maintains Romuald Fonkwa, in discussing this body of work, "developed the anthropological counter-narrative to such a high degree through literature. Dadié's tactic here is to be seen, in turn, [...] to become a foreigner for the other instead of merely foreign and thus occupy the position of an undeniable observer" [translation].<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The report of Father Bernardo Callo, to Cardinal Giuseppe Sacripanti, Propaganda Prefect (Rome, December 12, 1710) in Jardin BIHBR 33, 1964, p. 449.

<sup>2</sup> Béatrice du Congo, Bernard Dadié, *Présence Africaine* (1970), a play in 3 acts.

<sup>3</sup> Salon du livre de Genève, presentation by Romuald Fonkwa. Bernard Dadié, un siècle de négritude, April 19, 2016 (Bernard Dadié was then 100 years old).

Who, then, can take on the task of developing an anthropological counter-narrative that is truly likely to illuminate, while sublimating, human nature and history, and from which position?

And yet we spout forth, in this wonderful country, about freedom of expression, and still more, about freedom of artistic expression. And we cast ourselves unambiguously in the role of potential forerunners in a human adventure the peak of whose imaginative landscape, it is thought, can be reached by borrowing from this illustrious story of the struggle for freedom, in which of course not everyone is positioned equally, its most sublime aesthetic creations. All the while, naturally, appealing to universal sentiment and the right to invoke it at anytime

Certainly, the sorcerer's apprentices, embodied by artists, can and must protect their creative freedom. But one cannot expect their work to be self-luminous. Should we not, perhaps, seriously question ourselves as to the intended audiences of our artistic flights of fancy: how closely should they or can they resemble ourselves? Because let's face it, what can Aboriginal people and Black Afro-descendants, *living* in America, expect from cultural productions which, at one and the same time, principally concern and exclude them?

In what sense can such works, however "terrific" they may be, distance and detach themselves from an entire system of representation at work in our societies of large-scale cultural consumption, a large part of which is truncated on the level of image and discourse because it is unable to ensure a significant presence of Aboriginal and Black people, and is, quite simply, designed to minimize their real historical role?

What of these presences that are integral to the history of America, and what of the societal, political, cultural and artistic dynamics that characterize them? For it is on their behalf that this cultural borrowing is offered up, like an exhumation, and for reasons solely concerning those who believe they owe nothing to this system whose primary beneficiaries they indisputably are, and which —such irony and arrogance— they declare they refuse to be ruled by... and worse, that they feel themselves to be its victims.

"Common sense is the best shared thing in the world," said Descartes.

But it is not clear that the same maxim applies to freedom of expression, because some have greater means to make use of it than others. A question of common sense, indeed, as it seems that not everyone can be free, in the same way, and at the same time.

So then, whose turn is it?

One can well appreciate the crucial importance of the counter-narrative... provided it is one.

However all this does not work like a well-oiled machine whereby, in the best of all possible worlds,<sup>4</sup> everyone would have their share. Thus the cases that concern us and that prompted this short note, already too long for today's busy reader, fall into the category of gross inequity. And those who take no note of this and argue instead that they should take pride in rising above cultural barriers, and above colour, to achieve universality, occupy a position and arrogate to themselves a right which those they claim to represent cannot in reality attain.

Did not the Black Lives Matter movement in America manage to sow doubt in people's minds alerting them to the fact that the situation of Blacks (though many in Québec consider that this does not concern us), was not a "cause" to defend, but a concrete and daily reality that can no longer be simply raised to the universal level, as if washed clean of its all too prevalent circumstances?

How different could it be for the first inhabitants of this country, with whom a reconciliation is being sought? And in fact, are we not witnessing the warning signs of a reconciliation based on erasure?

Is the universal, given these struggles and challenges, consequently excluded... or reconfigured? Can we in Québec view ourselves as capable of the intellectual and aesthetic effort, the sensitivity, needed to reconfigure the universal, when the catechism of "good intentions" is invariably repeated in chorus —it can well be said— by the media which, it appears, is clearly intent on absolving everyone.

Yet, as English saying goes : "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." A little "common sense" moral that we learn prior to adolescence and that speaks quite clearly for itself, so well does it reflect the daily experience of humans.

But in Québec, there is no way of getting beyond this stage of good intentions which, under the banner of innocence, is held up as a democratic principle: any debate must invariably be brought back to this so as to balance the attendant forces, that is, in order to quash any semblance of doubt as to this innocence, with which we may well

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<sup>4</sup> It is far from my intention to reduce to this simple idea the work of the philosopher and mathematician (G.W. Leibniz) from whom we draw this expression.

associate a bit of ignorance, but definitely not complacency and incompetence, much less anything to do specifically with privilege.

And it is this presumed innocence, which some can protest to more than others, that is said to enfold in a single embrace the suffering of others, and to do so in the sacrosanct name of freedom of expression.

The fact that *SLĀV* and *Kanata* have been put on trial is, absurdly and undoubtedly, the result of a neocolonial narrative (in reality, post-neocolonial), in which groups, elites and representatives of art and culture who see themselves as in no way indebted to it, believe they can, on their own, backed up by "good research" and "solid expertise," lay bare the finest details of this narrative, in the name of art.

But art does not have this power.

"As for we artists, we can present ourselves in public not as we are and convince ourselves of the rightfulness of our own mistakes" [translation], wrote the man of theatre.<sup>5</sup>

It is pointless to elaborate here on the disastrous effect of the humiliation felt by those whose absence these works were intended to illuminate, because that would go beyond the pale. For this isn't about compassion, but rather about the inalienable right to human dignity.

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<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Turp, "Quant à nous, artistes, nous pouvons nous montrer en public tels que nous ne sommes pas et nous convaincre de la vérité de nos propres errements" from "Du bon usage de l'ennui" in *Revue de théâtre JEU* 141, p. 47, Montréal, 2011.