

Maa ka Maaya ka ca a yere kono¹

On Multiplicity, Difference, Becoming and Heritage

Concept: 13th Rencontres de Bamako/ Biennale Africaine de la Photographie,

Bamako

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Picture her rotating
the earth into a shape
of lives becoming ...

9

Picture her saying:
*You have within you the strength,
the patience, and the passion
to reach for the stars,
to change the world ...*

11

Imagine her saying:
*I freed a thousand slaves,
could have freed
a thousand more if they
only knew they were slaves ...*

21

Picture this woman
freedom bound ... tasting a
people's preserved breath ...

23

Picture her walking,
running, reviving
a country's breath ...

24

Picture black voices
leaving behind
lost tongues ...

Excerpts from *Haiku and Tanka for Harriet Tubman*, Sonia Sanchez

¹ Les Personnes de la Personne sont Multiples dans la Personne / The Persons of The person are Multiple in the Person

On Becoming in Being

The impositions of notions of singularity – as in singular and unchangeable beings, single and inalterable identities, single and fixed planes or spaces in which we find ourselves and navigate in, singular and immutable cultures, jealous deities and their singular belief structures, the single story or politics or political system – seem to be some of the most challenging concepts to get rid of post liberation and independence, from the forces that have held a huge part of the world under bondage for too long a time. The forcing of these concepts down our throats has meant a loss of multiplicity, fragmentations and points of intersections of different ways of being and eventually a loss of complex notions of humanity and complex narratives.

When asked in an Oct 1998 New York State Writers Institute interview “what is the importance of stories ?” Chinua Achebe responded “well, it is story(telling) that makes us human. And that’s why we insist. Whenever we are in doubt about who we are, we go to stories because this is one thing that we have done in the human race. There is no group that doesn’t do it. It seems to be central to the very nature, to the very fact of our humanity to tell who we are. And to let that story keep us in mind of this. Because there will be days when we are not quite sure whether we are human or even more commonly whether other people are human. It is in the story that we get this continuity of this affirmation that you are human and that your humanity is contingent on the humanity of your neighbour. ”

If Chinua Achebe was right in his assumption that it is in storytelling that we find our humanity – in its unique complexity and multiplicity – then one of the places in which one might want to look is in Amos Tutuola’s “The Palm-Wine Drinkard.” This novel is particularly important in the way the notions of becoming, multiplicity, of difference, not only within the human, but also with other creatures and landscapes and spaces are manifested. Most of the stories in Amos Tutuola’s novel refer back to stories told in Yoruba and other African popular cultures, to which almost every kid can relate. The man in search of his dead palm-wine tapster meets gods, can fight with death, can become a lizard and follow people into endless forests, while he encounters people who can pull out their body parts. The palm-wine drinkard could command jujus, and transform

himself into a big canoe. He could interact with the 'Water Spirit woman' in the 'Bush of the Ghosts' and could transform himself into a big bird like an aeroplane and could fly away his wife, just as much as he transforms his wife into a wooden-doll and puts her in his pocket, as well as he could sell his death before entering the 'white tree' of the Faithful-Mother. In "The Palm-Wine Drinkard," humans encounter spirits, negotiate with ghosts and freak creatures, gods are within reach, and death is an integral part of life. Humans co-exist and capture huge curious creatures, and vice versa, and each could become each other. They are saved by good creatures like 'drum, song and dance'. Creatures speak languages that sound like church bells, and humans and their companions dwell atop 'Unknown Mountains,' Red-towns with red creatures and red-kings, or in unreturnable-heaven's town. In the Faithful-Mother's White Tree, it is a life of abundance, never short of palm-wine nor food, a gamble with money earned from selling one's death.

In "The Palm-Wine Drinkard," life is in a constant state of becoming, and every being, form, landscape seems too to be in that state of becoming. If this story reveals anything about our humanity, then it is the impermanence thereof, the multiplicity of forms and aesthetics that this humanity can claim, and the refusal to accept that which we see as the only reality. Philosophically speaking, 'becoming' is the possibility of change in a thing that has being. If we agree that every matter is in a constant process of change, then each of these beings will have multiple states of and ways of being, existing.

Our concern for this **13th Rencontres de Bamako/ Biennale Africaine de la Photographie, Bamako** is on deliberations on storytelling, the multiple facets of humanity we accommodate, on Becoming in Being, acknowledging processuality, embracing difference and multiplicity in existences, embracing fragmentations within ourselves, as much as our layered and compound identities, and ways of being in the world, of forms, of landscapes, of beliefs.

It is important to stress that Becoming in Being should and can not be reduced to issues of personal identity, but must be considered within the realms of quotidian and even state politics. Sometimes, it is even the personal Becoming in Being that has an impact on the state political scenery. Upon independence across the African continent in the

1950s and 60s, a great lot of strong nationalist leaders in whose hands the hope and future of the continent was bestowed like Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, or Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal overstayed their welcome. Many of them in their being became something else. In our contemporary, there are too many examples to name. Even our national constitutions written with the best intentions to set up democratic and prosperous societies become in their being. Often not to the best. Recently across Africa, we have witnessed constitutional amendments by incumbent politicians to extend their stay in power or advocate for the centralisation of power. In Guinea, in the Comoros, in Egypt, in Ivory Coast, in Rwanda and many other places, the national constitutions' beings have been twisted into becoming for individuals to stay longer in power. In places like Cameroon or Equatorial Guinea, this has been normalised, and we have seen constitutional changes of that nature in Burundi, the Republic of Congo, Chad, Gabon, Togo or Uganda in favour of incumbents.

Becoming in being is about transformations, transitions, changes within a given state of existence.

In thinking about multiplicity within our sociopolitical contexts, it is important to think of the importance of our heritage/ patrimony. Not only do we need to acknowledge and embrace our multiple heritages, but we also need to de-patriarchise the notion of patrimony. The French word *Patrimoine* that comes from the Latin *patrimonium* literally means "the heritage of the father". How can we imagine heritage - as historical, social and cultural marker - within a frame of matriarchy - whereby female histories and feminist perspectives and modes of care, egalitarian structures constitute the discourses and receptibility of the heritage? In reflecting on the multiplicity of patrimony, let us try to imagine a concept of *matrimoine*.

Never too Much...

Maybe one of the most violent afflictions of the colonial enterprise and/in its manifold

manifestations was its ability to reduce us into persons devoid of multiplicity and relegated to a notion of individuals as single beings.

In his beautiful and insightful eulogy on Little Richard, the legendary musician and performer who journeyed to the land of the ancestors in May 2020, with the title "Too black, too queer, too holy: why Little Richard never truly got his dues,"² Tavia Nyong'o reflects on Little Richard's unapologetic Blackness, his gender-non-conformism, and how Little Richard once introduced himself as "Little Richard, King of the Blues ... and the Queen, too!" This beckons a reflection as to if it was Little Richard's "too much" of anything or anyway that really stood in his way rather than the crossroads, the intersections, the cuts and overlaps that were the hurdles. So, what if it wasn't because he was "Too black, too queer, too holy," but that he dared to be variant and holy, while black, or dared to be black and variant, while holy. The point is the limits of being multiple in a world that prescribes and imposes singularity.

Even More Multiplicity and Difference

At this juncture, it is worth cogitating on that famous conversation aboard the Queen Mary between Edouard Glissant and Manthia Diawara³. When the latter asked what departure means to him, the former, Glissant, responded that "It's the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity."⁴ He proceeded in saying that Africa has been the source of all kinds of diasporas, and one of Africa's vocations is to be a kind of foundational Unity which develops and transforms itself into a Diversity, and moreover he is of the opinion that the African diaspora has the responsibility to help the world "realize its true self, in other words its multiplicity, and to respect itself as such."⁵ Over two decades prior to this conversation between Diawara

² Tavia Nyong'o. Too black, too queer, too holy: why Little Richard never truly got his dues. The Guardian. 12 May 2020

³ One World In Relation. Edouard Glissant in conversation with Manthia Diawara

⁴ *ibid* 2

⁵ *ibid* 2

and Glissant, Amadou Hampâté Bâ published "Aspects de la Civilisation Africaine,"⁶ wherein his reflections on "Person" and "Personhood" in Bambara and Peul cosmogony very much find echo in Glissant's thoughts. He wrote:

"Tradition teaches that initially there is Maa, the Person-receptacle, then Maaya, i.e. the various aspects of Maa contained in the Maa-receptacle. As the Bambara expression says: 'Maa ka Maaya ka ca a yere kono' (The persons of the person are multiple in the person.) One finds exactly the same notion among the Fulani. The concept of the person is thus, from the outset, very complex. It implies an interior multiplicity – concentric or superimposed planes of existence (physical, psychological and spiritual at various levels) as well as a constant dynamism."⁷

These two ancestors point to us that we are fundamentally multiple beings, with notions of personhood that constantly betray our multiplicities of beings, even though societies might aim at suffocating the multiplicity. Sometimes our mere existence is resistance. Little Richard couldn't be anything other than unapologetically Black, Queer and Holy. And it is these that predicated his emergence as the most influential musician and performer in his generation. Indeed: The King and the Queen.

It is thus fair to say that issues of multiplicity, difference and complexity are at the crux of Africanness and African pasts and presents as elucidated by both Glissant and Hampâté Bâ. If we have survived the countless malicious and clamant snares which have been set up for us in the past hundreds of years, it is thanks to our ability to exist as multiple beings. To constantly morph from one being to the other. Constantly contorting. And if the world is to survive the dire moments in which we all find ourselves — a pandemic highly informed and fashioned by the infirmities of the neoliberal capitalist enterprise — then we must embrace the passage from unity to multiplicity and consent not to be

⁶ Amadou Hampâté Bâ. *Aspects de la civilisation africaine*. Éditions Presence Africaine. 1972

⁷ Translated by Susan B. Hunt. "La tradition enseigne en effet qu'il y a d'abord Maa, la Personne-réceptacle, puis Maaya, c'est-à-dire les divers aspects de Maa contenus dans le Maa-réceptacle. Comme le dit l'expression bambara <<Maa ka Maaya ka ca a yere kono>>: <<les personnes de la personne sont multiples dans la personne.>> On retrouve exactement la même notion chez les Peuls. La notion de personne est donc, au départ, très complexe. Elle implique une multiplicité intérieure, des plans d'existence concentriques ou superposés (physiques, psychiques et spirituels à différents niveaux), ainsi qu'une dynamique constante."

single beings, as well as learn how to accept our dynamism and navigate the multiple, concentric or superimposed physical, psychic and spiritual planes of our existences. Not only as ever diasporic citizens, but as citizens of the world.

Answer Jam Question

When question drop for mouth,
Question go start to run,
When answer drop for mouth,
Answer run after am,
When answer jam question for road
Another thing go shale-o

Why you mash my leg for ground?
You no see my leg for road?
Why you mash my leg for ground?
You no see my leg for road?

Question dem drop for mouth,
Question go start to run

Why you put your leg for road?
You no see say I dey come?
Why you put your leg for road?
You no see say I dey come?

Fela Kuti, Question Jam Answer

In Fela Kuti and the Africa 70's seminal piece "Question Jam Answer" from the 1972 Roforofo Fight album, a confrontation between the question and the answer is staged when both of them meet (jam) on the road. 'Question' accuses 'answer' of not seeing and stepping on its leg, and instead of an apology 'answer' retorts unsympathetically with a cynical "why did you put your leg in my way, didn't you see me coming?". In this piece that featured Tony Allen on percussion, Ayo Azenabor on bass and Tony Njoku on trumpet a.o. one could read this feud as a reckoning on where the emphasis should be. Is it to be the question or the answer? Exhibition making is not really about giving answers but finding ways of posing questions, which might or might not be answered. It is about

the process. In another take of "Question Jam Answer," at least from the Cameroon pidgin point of view, jam becomes a lack. I.e. the question lacks an answer. In the context of this edition of the biennale of photography, we would like to imagine a flip, i.e. "Answer Jam Question." What if all we are dealing with are supposed answers to questions that we do not even yet know? What are the questions we should be asking about our humanity today? Is the question possibly not who we are but who we wish to become, and how many?

In this 13th edition of the biennale with the title **Maa ka Maaya ka ca a yere kono** artists, curators, scholars, activists, and people of all walks of life are invited to reflect collectively on Becoming in Being, on the processes and processuality of being, on embracing multiplicities of being and differences, on acknowledging that consent not to be a single being, on embracing compound, layered as much as fragmented identities, as much as layered, complex, non-linear understandings of space(s) and time(s).

Special Projects

Retrospectives Carrie Mae Weems, María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Samuel Fosso

Three important artists and artistic positions that one can relate to concepts of multiplicity of being, processuality and difference are Carrie Mae Weems, María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Samuel Fosso. In any case, these are some of the most fascinating storytellers through the still medium of photography. They are also astounding artists whose works reveal the undercurrents of the performativity of photography. "Art has to do with imagining the unimaginable" and "how to make the invisible visible" are two of many statements that one can take along from watching a 2015 National Gallery of Art interview in which Carrie Mae Weems discusses her artistic process. In her efforts to bring people that have been conspicuously and disproportionately left out of the historicity in general and art history in particular, Carrie Mae Weems has devised performative artistic methods that have re-inscribed those beings into some form of history, or told stories that evidently feature these people. In her works in which she

inserts her body and others in the scene to tell the many stories beyond the singular narrative, it is not only about the multiple beings and stories, but also the alternative – space-wise – in which these stories can be told. The works purposefully complexify and distort the status quo and givens embedded in the power gradients that produce class, racial and gender inequalities. Talking about her work, but also the works of Theaster Gates, Rick Lowe and Mark Bradford in an interview with Rianna Jade Parker for Frieze Magazine, Carrie Mae Weems states: “The ideas of generosity that are embedded in that kind of work are amazing and, in a lot of ways, unique. There are not a lot of Anglo artists who work in this way, because the position of ‘I’ has been so totalized there. Black people are working from the position of ‘we’. We talk about community much more. We talk about who we are as a people emerging out of a situation. We participate differently around the question of social and artistic responsibility and then social possibility. And so, mapping that is something I’m deeply interested in and that I’ve been doing for a very long time.”

In her poem “Nesting the owl,” María Magdalena Campos-Pons writes “Abuela/ grandmother, is it true that when the owl is singing we just hear the voice of a loved one long departed?” The owl becomes the carrier of messages of and from the great beyond. In the triptych “Nesting II (2000)” two owls flank the artist, who in the manner of theanthropism becomes an owl. This notion of become and embodiment other beings, as well as embracing multiple identities is fundamental in Campos-Pons’ work. Our biographies are never singular, and if Campos-Pons’ work is reflective of her biography, then it is a manifestation of the multiple historical, but also geographical trajectories that culminate in the artist. Lines from the African continent, Asia and the Americas merge in a creolised self and a vast body of work that manifests a perpetual creolisation. In her photography, installations and especially performances, she adopts methods of ritualistic incantations that call on the many, for example as processions or music ensembles. In these contexts and spaces she creates f.e the intervention Campos-Pons and Neil Leonard did for documenta 14 in Kassel “Bar Matanzas” they used food, design, music and the people, to convoke not only the culture of Matanzas, but also the spirits of all those people abducted from the African continent, shipped across the Atlantic and the

spirits of all those indigenous peoples brutally dispossessed of their lands and disposed of to create sugar and other plantations. With the music of the iconic rumba group Los Muñequitos de Matanzas whose 65th anniversary they commemorated, they invoked ritualistic spaces and transcendental spaces of the multiple - some seen and others unseen. Somehow we could hear the voices of the long departed.

Through self-portraiture and performativity, Samuel Fosso assumes, claims, mimics and even becomes other identities. Hereby, supposed boundaries of gender, race, religion, and disciplines are constantly shattered. He could become Pope John Paul as much as Angela Davis or Nelson Mandela as he so wishes. Since opening his own photographic studio as a 13 year old boy, Samuel Fosso has produced an incredible body of work. In an interview for his recently published monograph "Autoportrait," Okwui Enwezor asked Fosso: "So, more than merely reflecting yourself—the artist/ego, if you will—the main impetus for your self-portraits was staging a series of ideal selves, situations, and guises in your self-constituted theater of postcolonial identity. (...) It's quite an achievement for a thirteen-year-old to initiate such a complex study of urban African identity and male desire." To which Fosso responded: "I did not know I was making art photography. What I did know was that I was transforming myself into what I wanted to become. I was living out a series of ideas about myself. These images also extend beyond photography. Making them gave me the opportunity to engage in my own biography: going back to when I was a child, when no one thought I was a desirable child to photograph. At the same time, I discovered images of contemporary events in South Africa and the plight of black people in America. All these things contributed to shaping my lens. Art photography was something completely foreign to me until I arrived in Bamako for the first *Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie*."

There is a sustained effort in becoming, and the consent not to be a single being that underlines the extensive practices of these two artists. It is work dedicating two retrospectives on their works for the 13th edition of the Bamako Biennale.

Waka Like Musa

One of the special projects of the **13th Rencontres de Bamako/ Biennale Africaine de la Photographie, Bamako** will take us back to the Thirteen Hundreds and will be titled **Waka Like Musa**. Specifically, this exhibition will take its cue from the pilgrimage (*hajj*) made by the great ruler Mansa Musa in 1324 C.E to Mecca. This journey will stand in as a metaphor for the connection between the geopolitical constructs “West Africa” and the “Middle East.” Departing from his kingdom of Mali that spread across most of modern-day Mali, Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso, Mansa Musa and his entourage journeyed through Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Palestine to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.

This pilgrimage by emperor Musa, considered the richest human being that ever walked the face of the earth is full of all kinds of anecdotes and stories. As narrated by Arab writers of the time, Musa’s caravan of some tens of thousands of people and dozens of camels, each carrying 136 kilograms (300 pounds) of gold caused quite a stir while passing through every city on their way to and back from Mecca. It is said that while in Cairo, Mansa Musa and his entourage met with the Sultan of Egypt, and because he dispensed so much gold, he devalued the worth of Gold in Egypt for 12 years. Not only Mansa Musa’s stupendous wealth drew attention, but also because upon his return from Mecca, he brought with him architects, philosophers, scientists and others to his kingdom. This, one must argue, was an epistemic and cultural bridge that was built between West Africa and the Gulf, and that has had a long-lasting impact on both regions, until date. It is this, too, that made cities like Gao become an important cultural centre, and Timbuktu become one of the most important Islamic centres in the 14th century. Musa is remembered for his investment, dedication and patronage of culture, his support for the Islamic faith, and efforts to promote scholarship. Mansa Musa (Musa I of Mali) took over power of the kingdom of Mali in 1312 C.E. from Abu Bakr II, who had disappeared at sea upon an expedition with a large fleet of ships to explore the Atlantic Ocean. He ruled until 1337 C.E.

Since this edition of the biennale is about storytelling by and large, artists that are linked to the path taken by Mansa Musa from Mali to Mecca will be invited to narrate, to

synthesize or distil something from this history, this myth, this geopolitical, spiritual, economic, cultural relation.

“For all my selves who have not yet danced/ my selves with no gesture/ no chosen appetite/ no throat to scream/ I must grow them out.”

Ntozake Shange in intro to “Dance we do”

Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung (born in 1977 in Yaoundé, Cameroon), is an independent curator, author and biotechnologist. He is founder and artistic director of SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin and the artistic director of sonsbeek20–24, a quadrennial contemporary art exhibition in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Ndikung was the curator-at-large for Documenta 14 in Athens, Greece and Kassel, Germany in 2017; a guest curator of the Dak’Art biennale in Dakar, Senegal, in 2018; and the artistic director of the 12th Bamako Encounters photography biennial in Mali in 2019. Together with the Miracle Workers Collective, he curated the Finland Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2019 and was a guest professor in curatorial studies and sound art at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. He is currently a professor in the Spatial Strategies MA program at the Weissensee Academy of Art in Berlin and is also a recipient of the first OCAD University International Curators Residency fellowship in Toronto in 2020.