

Writing and Life

(Based on conversations with Sony Labou Tansi)*

I'll say first why I write. It intrigues me, I wonder why I write. How it is that I write and why it's so important. I take this as an act of life. One thing that scares me as a writer is a Lari song "ndombi ku ndombi sadidi mukanda komanda diandi Matsoua Ndele." That can be translated as "even a black can write, hey, things are progressing." In the beginning going to school was considered an enormous act, it was civilization, it was the very center of civilization, and writing a letter for a black person, a poor black, was a grandiose thing. It was in Matsoua's time, in the forties, that people sang this song in the pool to make rubber.

A black can write, things are progressing. That scares me because for me writing can be nothing and it can be everything, and in the cultural context where I am, from my point of view, things are not progressing. It's perhaps because of that that I write, things are not progressing, we have all remained sufficiently savage and sufficiently barbarous and sufficiently unsophisticated for us today not to do things when we have every means possible to do them. So my writing can be a question: why does humankind, which has nevertheless unheard-of potentialities, which has unheard-of capabilities, not take part in the creation of something greater than the alphabet or the ABCD as one would say ndombi ku ndombi sadidi mukanda, why did we stop at ndombi ku ndombi sadidi mukanda, why? I ask myself that question.

Birth of a Language

And perhaps too the circumstances in which I started writing. My education began in the Belgian Congo – I still say Belgian Congo because one cannot eliminate history like that and I persist in believing that decolonization happened so brutally and so quickly that one can still talk about it – so there I was in the Belgian Congo. There one was taught to read and write in what

were called the regional languages and as I was with the missionaries of the SCMF, I believe, we were taught to read and write in Kikongo. We were taught the Bible, then we did arithmetic, we counted the yams, two yams then three yams, but we didn't say it in French we said it in Kikongo: kingombe kimosi plus bunda kingombe equals kingombe biolo or kingombe mosi wa mana yika kingombe tieka gombe biolo. That was how I was educated to the age of eight. But my maternal uncle, since the child belongs to his mother, my uncle who wanted to make a white man of me, a civilized man and all, came and took me with all speed to put me where people spoke French because speaking French was also considered a grandiose thing. I hope that will end one day: he who speaks French, you can't understand what he says, but you hear in the locality, "Ah lumputu kata buba kuna," that is to say "he really speaks French like that?" Sometimes, the way they will, people said silly things within this French, but what counted, what counted for a long time, was the fact of speaking French.

In this context, my uncle told me: "you have to speak French because you look like someone who will one day be able to speak French like that." I obeyed, I arrived at Mbanza-Nanga in a primary school. They put me in the second grade and I had never done any French or almost none. I was green, really green. On school premises you had to speak French even if like me you didn't know any. There was a symbol, a big box full of shit. They hung it round your neck and you were the lookout. When people had the symbol, they looked for me everywhere: where is Sony, where is Sony? And they passed me the symbol straightway because they were sure I wouldn't speak French and I would make a mistake. Throughout that year in the second grade that was how it was. It was very hard and I had to learn French a bit on the run.

I think that for us "Africans," in quotes – because I don't much like the word "African," it becomes a bit globalizing and I dislike everything that globalizes – but anyway for an African living in this country where you've had a dictatorship for twenty-two years, or perhaps twenty-five, and where language had no other possible meaning than the official meaning, where life in all its dimensions, songs, poetry, literature, and in general popular expression even within the family, even among young people, was kept under surveillance, there was such linguistic poverty that people even had to declare their love for each other via Marx. I would say to myself, I am a lookout, a writer is also a lookout. There were moments when I myself was looking for words that were able to make me laugh in

order to go on telling that truth too. If I did not laugh I was stuck, and if I was stuck I couldn't go on any more. I had to find the expression that would make me laugh myself as a writer in order to make progress.

Birth of a Writing

In the fifth year of primary school I began to talk a little, I began to write, but I had become Mister Hundred¹ Mistakes. That does not mean zero mistakes, that means I got every word in the dictation wrong. I wrote what I heard. It was very very painful. Then I went into the sixth grade, at Boko. I was put in charge of the school library – at the time there were still libraries in schools, now there aren't anymore, which is a pity – and I started reading a lot to learn a language which when you get down to it I found a complete pain in the ass, pardon the expression but that's the way it was, that language bugged me: why was it I had to pass through it?

And at last I learned and when I got into the ninth grade – first the eighth – I began to write. There we had a French teacher – perhaps all that helped, I don't know, but anyway today I'm trying to talk about it – we had a French teacher who was very nice and who was called Monsieur Sebal. He had taught in France, he put us in touch with ninth grade students in France. We exchanged letters and tapes, we attended the classes both at Boko and in France with friends. And then Monsieur Sebal left in the middle of the year for some reason and we changed French teachers.

One day the new teacher gave us an essay to write. I did it. He told me "no, you didn't write it, you copied it from a book," and I got a zero. Then the class protested a bit saying it's not possible, this boy it's his text, he is capable of writing it. The second essay, I got 35 percent. The guy said to me, "no, no, it's not true, it's not you who wrote this, you show me the book or else you'll go on getting 35 percent." That way I got a succession of fail grades at Boko until the moment came when some of the students shouted "no" and the teacher took me home, sat me down and gave me a subject and I worked for two hours at his place to prove that I was writing the texts myself.

A Grandmother's Influence

For me the most important influence was that of my grandmother who told me stories. This old lady was, I don't know, eighty, she was really

old, really old. I would stay in the village but she went to work below because she couldn't go any further and then when they beat me I cried very loud and she came running back, running back, asking me "what's going on?" Anything could become a story and that old woman, there is an important thing that Africans ought to know and that is that she was considered lazy because she spent the whole day working a patch of ground a yard square. But she said to me, "When you till the soil you must ask each plant permission to pull it up, you must call it by its name." She had a such a strong respect for nature especially when you compare it to the ecological wastefulness you see today ... If they did like my grandmother did, if people said I'm going to pull you up, I'm going to plant the bananas here to feed my child who's called Georges and he's as big as this, I tell the plant a story ... There was a respect for the plant and they called it savagery. So if there are influences, I'll look for them in the vicinity of that grandmother who throughout the day pulled up plants and spoke to plants. I would come along with the machete: "Here I am, we're late," she would reply, "No no, I've not yet said to this plant what has to be said, I've not yet said to this tree what has to be said."

At the time the guy who held a pen could not touch a hoe, it was shameful, working the land made people ashamed. I was posted in '78 to Pointe-Noire. We were not paid for months. I went fishing. Everybody laughed at me. A teacher who goes fishing, good God! What, you're hungry, the river is nearby and you can't go fishing because it is a shameful thing to do, because you hold college degrees, because you wear a necktie, what the heck, that too has to be questioned. Why? And yes, you eat the fish all right.

Writing and Life

I am a Kongo and I feel it very very profoundly. I have to say so to others, I have to say so to myself sometimes too. When that happens I go and sit at Makelekele, among the little old men drinking palm wine, and we drink palm wine and talk. There are the army veterans who speak French, it is not rough French like that, it is a much more intelligent French. I drink with those pals, the old men, I talk things over with them, there's one guy who says, "Son, take your glass," I take my glass, he tells me "Empty it because someone's coming." Thereby hangs a tale, it seems there are people who crash into the glasses and when you drink you fall ill. I empty my

glass at once. Then he says to me: "Good thing you did that because you were going to lose your glass. The man over there who just arrived, see him? He's someone I know." "Oh yes, what's he to you?" He replies: "He's the man who rolls my sister over." It's well put, instead of saying "my brother-in-law" like the French, he says "the man who rolls my sister over" and it's much more beautiful. That's why when I write my books, instead of saying my brother-in-law, I perhaps wouldn't say the man who rolls my sister over, but I would find something. If the old man found that, I who am a writer must find something too, and I ask questions, because of it I query language, I query each word, I question every little thing.

Translated from the French by John Fletcher

Notes

- * Sony Labou Tansi, *L'autre monde, écrits inédits, "Postface parlée"* (Paris, © Éditions Revue Noire, 1997). Posthumous publication. All the texts reproduced here come from this work (pages 141, 142, 143, 144, 146, 147; 9; 21, 22).
- 1. Translator's note: There is a witty but alas untranslatable pun here on the words *cent* (hundred) and *sans* (without), which are pronounced the same way in French. Tansi's point is that the reason he was so bad at French dictation when he started school was that he wrote phonetically and so failed to distinguish between words like *cent* and *sans*.