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The Writing of the Nation:

Expressing Identity through
Congolese Literary Texts and Films

Kasongo Mulenda Kapanga



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Introduction: When did all this Start?

In his well-known article entitled “An Image of Africa” (1978), Chinua Achebe bitterly complained about the conceptualization of the African continent as inherently lying in oddities that by default magnify Europe as the beacon of positive humanity and her agents as torch bearers tasked to initiate overdue transformations to less fortunate lands. In this order of things, the overt intention of the Berlin Conference (1885), mainly shedding needed light over the African land primarily for the sake of its inhabitants, and then for the entire humanity, resonated with the irritated writer. The following conversation between him and a passer-by on an east coast American campus summarizes in a benign way the gist of his adamant contestation:

Then he asked me if I was a student too. I said no, I was a teacher. What did I teach? African literature. Now that was funny, he said, because he knew a fellow who also taught the same thing, or perhaps it was African history, in a certain community college not far from here. It always surprised him, he went on to say, because he never had thought of Africa as having that kind of stuff, you know.

(1)

Achebe was hardly surprised at this innocent and pervasive admission, pointing as a probable reason what he would readily call “ignorance” of factual facts, only to let know his strong suspicion of an underlying desire to posit Africa as a foil of Europe’s or the Western World’s limitations, a locus of “negations” (2) meant to depict the black continent as an odd *other*, and

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thus place Europe in its most glowing lights. This controversial outburst by Achebe—it is not the only one—has some relevance to modern Congolese literary tradition. One may ask several questions. What is its genesis, the conditions of its rise, and the main phases of its development? What are its specifications beyond pure territoriality as the qualifier word *Congolese* stipulates? Two main approaches stand out in engaging these interrogations.

The consciousness of one's plight may precede any step of the expression of what is collectively experienced, as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Black Orpheus* underlines in reference to negritude writing: "These black men are addressing themselves to black men about black men; their poetry is neither satiric nor imprecatory: it is an *awakening to consciousness*." (Sartre 16, my emphasis). In an 1964 article entitled *A Defence of Negritude*, Abiola Irele further clarified Sartre's linkage between a people's literature and its predicament when he wrote: "His belief that the most valuable literature is that which is involved with a definite human situation, coincides with the concern of the negro poet to express in poetic terms the great collective experience through which the negro race was passing." (9) It is this foundational urge to express significant collective experience that steered Lilyan Kesteloot's to suggest a rationale in the setting up of African Literatures as an academic discipline. She identified the rise of consciousness of a collective plight on the part of Africans and the descendants of Africans in a context overdetermined by the colonial ideology of difference as an important marker of what she called Negro-African literatures.¹ She formulated a framework within which a body of literary writings expressing a common lot could be "legitimately" studied, researched and disseminated. Other critics adopted a similar line of highlighting collective experience as a significant determinant in the emergence of social practices and awareness of commonality. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* for example, points out that slavery, colonization, racial segregation, and in a sense all the postcolonial traumas and conditions, shaped the relationships between the almighty West and African communities across the Atlantic. Collective experience is an important factor in studying forms of expressions for a national entity such as the Congolese one.

Another approach in examining the literary and artistic expression of a people is the perspective rooted in the continued and almost seamless expressivity of one's plight irrespective of the period, the language, the political or the social situation. Whatever the side privileged, the rise of literary expressivity can hardly be the result of a spontaneous generation; it is rather built in the fabric of collective performance and experience. This is the point that Achebe wanted to bring out and engage his random interlocutor on, that is, question taxonomic impositions and hegemonic claims fed by an

unchecked Eurocentric *ethos*. Nevertheless, it is at the intersection of these two approaches that *The Writing of the Nation* situates its theoretical moorings in dealing with literary activity that occurred within the physical as well as the social/political space of what is referred to today as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and this for the past four centuries of relationships with Europe. It is fittingly legitimate to imagine the region prior to Belgium's emphatic presence. Collective experience within the framework of relationship between Europe and Africa did not start with the Berlin Conference, but it goes back at least to the watershed moment when Portuguese ships stood in the Congo estuary in search of interlocutors, an encounter whose consequences still reverberate to the present times.

Most critics in *Postcolonial* and *Cultural Studies* recognized the irrevocable impact of historicity and have examined the social conditions instead of focusing on the binarism or dichotomy built in the colonial ideology: the *becoming* takes precedence over the *being*. This is built in the main claims of society when deals are grossly betrayed. Consequently, the urge to seek means for survival pushes to action, sometimes radically. Kimpa Vita, the Kongolesse Joan of Arc who led an insurrection against the Portuguese, was an example.² Seminal texts such as Edouard Glissant's *La Poétique de la relation* (1990), Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeated Island* (1992), or even Stuart Hall's article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" recognize the relevance of historicity. These essays privilege pivotal moments of reference and their co-optation into new frameworks of identification including cultural performance. Apprehending these points in their synchronic valuation provides a richer and firmer ground in the study of new paradigms, the testing of their strengths and weaknesses, and in the weighing of their past and future conditions. That is the path (social, cultural, literary, filmic, artistic ...) *The Writing of the Nation* would like to take, that is, looking at pivotal moments even those prior to the Berlin Conference, thus stripping this ideological moment of the claim as the point of origination. This prospect allows close scrutiny of the past and leaves at the same time room for the projection to future phenomena of *nationhood*, here *Congolité*.¹

The awareness of their commonality is the result of trying occurrences rather than the conditions favorable to unification. Peoples' history of the Congo is riddled with untold brutalities and chaotic occurrence likely to tear them apart rather than unite them. In a paradoxical way, this sense of marginality at great costs and its evaluation within the framework of a new

1 This concept of *Congolité* will be used throughout the book. It refers to the values (ideological, cultural, relational, historical...) that bind the Congolese together in their claim of commonness and unity.

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redefined space did gradually lead to a collective awareness by Congolese subjects and strangely enough by outsiders as well. Those who were led to see themselves as the observed, the gazed at, the hoverers on the margins, and the non-participants in the power structure, succeeded in seeing themselves through forceful and irrevocable rejection as belonging to a unified entity. On one side were the Belgians, the Europeans, the masters, the custodians of man's natural endowment, the dwellers of fortified mansions; and on the other side, the Africans, the uncivilized, the heathens, the savages, the children-like . . . The discourse reinforced itself by creating the paradigm of opposites where the Congolese were seen *en masse* as contrary to the norms, and therefore not worth of theoretical truth apprehension unless "reformed" or handled along different yardsticks. The natives would logically interpret their own role within this new power matrix, as those toiling under loads of scorn heaped on them in relation to the power holders. This is what the writers and filmmakers attempt to express, making sense from the subsumed chaos, unhappy and happy occurrences that punctuated the common existence since the encounter with Europe.

Modern theorists converge on the understanding of a nation as an evolving project propelled in its tracts by principles and ideals supposed to foster a better common space (cultural, political, economic and idealistic) for all to draw a decent and dignified livelihood from. In this perspective, Postcolonial modern-states have also the duty to look at the past—the Kongo kingdom is an illustration—with the intention of apprehending and dissecting relevant layers of meanings for the identification of discursive elements by deploying what Mudimbe calls "radical reading" of the past (1995 120). Doing "radical reading of the past" becomes an unavoidable exercise for a future invited to scrutinize the hegemonic undertakings the colonial process unleashed to obliterate the value systems that sustained pre-colonial communities. David Van Reybrouck, the author of *Congo, the Epic History*, does that in a sense. *The Writing of the Nation* is a literary and discursive analysis of main Congolese and some filmic narratives of the Congolese consciousness grasped as a response to various discourses of denial, reorganization, and sheer deletion that punctuated the country's history since the arrival of Portuguese ships in the Congolese estuary to the times after independence.

The Writing of the Nation bases itself on several postulations of national consciousness formation as a sedimentation drawn from various elements of which the result is a new cultural and political space. In the same line of things, it also recognizes the part played by the colonial component in its modern stage that led to a growing awareness of a new reality that literature and films would later capture and problematize. Throughout the study of

literary texts and films, it focuses on the elements of national identity (political discourse, Congolese education system, history, ethnic identification) used consciously or unconsciously as expressions of a basis of belonging to an imagined and yet concrete community that feels, thinks and expresses its deepest collective emotions. That is why, contrary to most literary accounts (Kadima-Nzuzi, Ngandu-Nkashama, Silvia Riva, Tshitungu & Quaghebeur, Ndjungu-Simba), it also studies colonial and exotic texts that have played vital roles in the rise of writings on the Congo by the Congolese.³ By studying the colonial texts, one demystifies the assumption that Africa is nothing but a “potentiality,” and discovers that new paradigms needed to be “invented” once the “truth” would have been established. As a vague but long-term objective, the created sense of belonging to a newly defined entity decisively pushed these formally independent lands and peoples to homogenize or to string significantly into a new body bound to fight for its own identity contours and survival, and reformulate new ideals and ideological claims. New conditions of existence emerged, creating a commonality that would become the ground for redefinition of upcoming generations. Therefore, looking hard into the past to grasp, understand and provide constructive elements, becomes an unavoidable step to take. The study of these texts as a criticism of the present and the projection for the future makes sense.

The Writing of the Nation is influenced by Mudimbe’s thought provoking argument on the invention of social paradigms that colonization undertook, proceeding along a methodology of erasure, duplication and legitimization. Due to several social dynamics, the invented entity morphs into a society claiming its uniqueness, its legitimacies and its limitations. The study also relies on the notion of power of the *imaginary* as theorized by Benedict Anderson (1991) and the collective investment in the ideals to propel society forward.

The first chapter, “The Invention of a Literary Framework,” deals with the main theories of nation building and consciousness formation. First, the African hinterland has always proved an impenetrable entity to the outside eye. For several centuries, historians, geographers, and traders who attempted to penetrate deep into the area failed to master and open it to the outside in a decisively permanent way. The region continued to defy and resist domestication, allowing the outside gaze only scanty glimpses that could hardly reveal the interior’s true contours. As a consequence, the hinterland came to be associated with specific characteristics (no man’s land, threat to human reason, chaos) descriptive of an unfathomable abyss that swallowed life. Second, experts conceived the formation of a nation as coalescing around claims of territorial control, of shared ascendancy, of linguistic commonality, of

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religious solidarity, and even of racial markedness. Colonization ushered the pre-colonial situation into a new framework with a Western power symbol at the center. Along this setup, a new epistemological order was established with the Western educational system as the engine pushing for social mobility. There was also the transformation of the urban space and the generation of new culture that is multiethnic, multilingual and self-referential. All these collective experiences (political submission, new regulations, treatment, and new order) that the Congolese natives underwent as a group separate from the colonizers (race, religion, space, economics) fostered progressively a consciousness of commonness that ultimately was based on some obvious factors, hence the impulse for solidarity to ensure survival.

The second chapter “The Gaze and Writing back: Early Literary Landscape” focuses on the main early literary figures and the modes of expression of this consciousness. It analyzes the foundation of colonial and exotic novels and the first involvement in literary writing by Congolese natives (*La Voix du Congolais*, Bolamba etc.) Starting its reflections from the colonial times, the study scrutinizes the epistemic foundations that underlie literary and filmic texts at different stages of Congolese history originating from the serious presence of Europe and extending up to the times of the Third millennium. Steered by a colonial framework rooted in a dualistic center-periphery foundation, these spokespersons’ main task consisted in evaluating and establishing the value of their new artistic creations in their old recreated space as if to subvert the darkness paradigm.

The third chapter will deal with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the short story *An Outpost of Progress*. Of all the colonial fictional writings, none has matched the influence on the public discourse in relation to the Congo as Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*. Whether in journalistic reports or fictional works, the darkness *topos* has become the main building block of explaining doom, monstrosities, marginality accounting for the region’s propensity to self-destruction. The novella has not only kept the Western imagination riveted on its own self-worth as explanation of its centrality, but it has also in contrast emphasized discursively or performatively the otherness within which lies the region. It would only be natural that any look at the trajectory the nation-state traveled requires scrutiny, not necessarily as a step to re-evaluate the colonial rationale like Achebe suggests, but as a duty to understand the master narrative that has as the main object the Congolese subjectivity.

The fourth chapter “Orature and Modern Writings: Bolamba, Faik-Nzujji, Kama Kamanda” deals with the primary role that orality has played in the rise of Congolese modern letters of what I call the mainstream. A heightened

interest in oral traditions happened almost at the same time when the second wave of the afore-mentioned writers occurred, that is, within the framework of l' *Université Lovanium*. Instead of clashing as earlier expectations would have it as Achebe's interlocutor indicates, orature and writing function in this post-independence context of re-evaluation towards one goal: the expression of literariness irrespective of the linguistic medium used.

The fifth chapter "National Imaginary in a Decolonized Space" focuses on the way the consciousness of belonging to the Congolese nation has been expressed by the mainstream writers with a focus on V. Y. Mudimbe, Pius Ngandu Nkashama and Georges Ngal. These writers examine the Congolese's plight as a response to earlier colonial claims while scrutinizing the failure by the new leadership to live up to their pledges of pushing the new nation forward. Underlying postcolonial conditions dealt with include the epistemological question, the impact of civil turmoil, and the indictment triggered by the lack of good governance. Among other new collective values are the role of Kinshasa as a political allegory of the new urban culture, multiethnicity, multilingualism, and the emergence of a new urban sense of identity.

The sixth chapter "Cinematic Representation of the Congolese Subject" deals with the ideological as well as historical elements of identity in cinema by Congolese filmmakers. Mweze Ngangura's films *La Vie est Belle* (1987), *Pièces d'identité* (1998), and *Les Habits Neufs du Gouverneur* (2004), Balufu Kanyinka's (*Juju Factory*) and Raoul Peck's two films on Lumumba, will be studied as illustrations of instances of agency in the task of creating and presenting the image of the modern Congolese subject. As the invention of cinema and colonization overlapped, the use of this new art in the colonial system is worth exploring to uncover the underlying claims in projecting Congolese subjectivity. The production and the control of someone's image is the latest element used in the establishment or enhancement of one's hegemony by a process of marginalization or *alterization*. The Belgian Congo was the best equipped colony in film technology. Its success and the sharp decline are worth examining.

The Writing of the Nation closes the study by interrogating the directions that the awareness of togetherness and the expression of *Congolité* are taking new generations. The way the Congolese space has evolved these last four hundred years foreshadows further radical transformations that the global space will undergo. In that sense, *Congolité* is bound to adjust first by its inclusion of *diasporic* actors whose works rely on its very existence and their ethos on its projected future. By looking outside, the issue of expressing one's nationhood within or without the traditional borders is up for re-eval-

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uation and adjustments.

Notes:

- 1 Her 1962 doctoral thesis from *Université Libre* of Brussels (ULB) entitled *Les écrivains noirs de langue française : naissance d'une littérature* (Black writers of French Expression : the Birth of a Literature) speaks volumes of her concept and the way she theorized the historical appearance of African letters. As far as Congolese literature is concerned, Ngandu Nkashama makes a similar argument in positioning the commonness of togetherness as the initial step to study the writings underlying a collective awareness of the plight.
- 2 For more information, see John K. Thornton *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Doña Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*. London: CUP, 1998.
- 3 Pierre Halen's books and articles on Congolese (Belgian) colonial writings have been extremely useful in this study. See the bibliography for details.