

# The Price of Freedom by two African Writers: Tchicaya U Tam'si and Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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## Introduction

The Congolese Tchicaya U Tam'si (1931-1988) and the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1938-) both occupy an interesting place in the Francophone and Anglophone African literatures. Although Ngugi has theorized his Marxist conception in *Decolonizing the mind*, we will use more his novel *Devil on the Cross* and compare it to Tchicaya's *Bal de N'dinga*. Both books are about the paths Africans use to celebrate their liberation or symbolize their freedom. We will try to interpret the attempts by these writers to explore the ways by which simple Africans escape the daily existential challenges. The aim of this paper is to draw some philosophical reflections from these two plots.

### 1. Biographical and Ideological Similarities:

Tchicaya U Tam'si and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are two main figures of Europhone African literature, the first one is Anglophone and the second one is Francophone. The Congolese Tchicaya and the Kenyan Ngugi share so many similarities that I have decided to undertake a study on a part of their works. Both share a similar inspiration although their writing languages are different.

Tchicaya and Ngugi form a special case in African literature in European languages. Many points of similarity gather them, starting by their names to their sources of inspiration. Ideologically they conduct the same fight for the African authenticity, denouncing African dictatorships and eventually the same dream of a liberated Africa free from Western cultural hegemony.

Proud to be Africans, they both try to be themselves in a world that is intensely influenced by the Western patterns of ideas and behaviours. By so doing, Tchicaya and Ngugi defend African values and traditions. Their attempt can be summarized by a title of Ngugi: « Decolonizing the Mind » Why should Africans act like their former colonizers when they have a great history and a rich cultural background to rely on.

There are many studies on both writers that can help us to get a balanced idea of their impact on African literature and on the modern African culture as well. They both are authentic defenders of African identity. Just an example: Although they were baptized in Christian churches, they prefer to sign their works under an African penname: Tchicaya U Tam'si – the little leaf which narrates on its country – and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o – Ngugi Son of Thiong'o -. Note that James Ngugi became legally Ngugi wa Thiong'o on September 21, 1977 (Sicherman 11) The resemblance is not only phonetic or graphic; it is more an ontological attitude because negating the Christian penname represents for both a state of mind, a refusal of the colonial power, an emotional and sensitive inscription of the writer in his creative work.

They tried to live according to their true convictions. Literature gives them the opportunity to express their freedom, i.e. the freedom of using the language or of manipulating the standard European language in an African way. Tchicaya uses a lot of Kikongo proverbs in his texts, sometimes without translating them; he also uses a lot of Lingala songs in his novels. By choosing to first write in Gikuyu instead of English, Ngugi makes a unique strong statement of revalorizing his natural language.

Why should African use European languages to express their inner feelings or to communicate with other Africans? This question, which at first seems easy to address, at least for a good number of African writers, seems critical for these two writers. Ngugi: "Writing in Gikuyu does not cut me off from other language communities because there are always opportunities for translation" (*On Writing*: 155).

Tchicaya and Ngugi share a similar political tendency, a so called "politique de gauche". They were Marxists. During the independence time, Tchicaya worked as a Secretary for Patrice Lumumba, the national hero of the DR Congo. He directed the editorial board of the journal *Congo* which was the official tribune for the MNC, Lumumba's party. His poetry, his theatre and his novels are full of Lumumba's remembrances. After the death of Lumumba, he went back to Paris and worked with the UNESCO for twenty years. He retired in 1980.

The main differences between Tchicaya and Ngugi remain their education background and their personal lifestyle and curriculum. In terms of education, Tchicaya is an autodidact; he did not even finish secondary school, his writing skills stemmed from direct contacts with French writers in literary clubs. Ngugi on the contrary is a University graduate, a scholar educated at Makerere University, Uganda. Beside his activities as a member of various journal editorial boards, Ngugi lectured at Nairobi University, and fought for the replacement of the English Department by a Department of African Language (see C. Sicherman)

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is more a scholar and an activist. He was imprisoned many times by Kenyatta's regime and left Kenya in the 80s. A specialist of West Indian literature, Ngugi has thoroughly studied George Lamming's work, has invited Lamming and Kamau Brathwaite to Nairobi University in the 70s. By the way the name Kamau was given to Edward Lawson Brathwaite by Ngugi's mother. Forced into exile by Arap Moi's regime after the publication of *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi spent seven years in Britain (1982-1989) before moving to the U.S. (1989-2002). From 1992 to 2003 professor of comparative literature and performance studies at New York University. Then he became distinguished professor at the University of California at Irvine and director of the International Center for Writing and Translation.

## **2. Tchicaya U Tam'si: *Le Bal de Ndinga***

### *2.1 A narrative based on a mythical background*

*Le Bal de Ndinga* was published in 1987 in a journal *L'Atelier imaginaire (Nouvelles)*, of Lausanne (p.169-185). It deals with the event of the Congolese independence on June 30, 1960. Ndinga was a humble servant at the Regina Hotel, he was shot dead whereas he was celebrating the coming freedom of his country. He can be called a "hero" or "martyr of independence".

Subtitled as "complaints" the play retraces the death of a Hotel Regina worker shot dead at the Place des Beaux-Arts in Leopoldville, during the turmoil that was linked to the meeting organized by MONACOLU party. At the mourning ceremony, his colleague Jean-Pierre Mpende and his cousin Angelique Nkoba tell the last moments of his life. The play is exposed as a flashback, a detailed account of the death, although Ndinga is seen on the scene without dealing with the other characters.

Mpende tells that Ndinga fell in an indomitable euphoria since the independence has been announced for June 30, 1960. Since April, he has been saving money to celebrate that great day. His aim was to seduce Sabina, a whore who used to spend her time with the customers of Regina Hotel. From that time on he used to continuously sing "Indepanda Cha Cha", a song written by a brilliant musician Kabasele to immortalize the event. For this reason, the boss of the Hotel, M. Van Bilsen and Sergeant Outouboma were angry at him but nothing could stop him singing. Ndinga could finally consider himself as a human being like the white man the oppressor he hates. Amid troubles related to the meeting, Ndinga who is fleeing with Mpendje, stop, dances a Cha Cha Cha at Place des Beaux-Arts before being hit by a weapon from Outouboma's militia.

Angélique evokes a dance that she performed with Ndinga; during the dance Ndinga called her by the name of Sabina. The play relates to the Bantu tradition of mourning. Through her mourning songs, Angélique seeks to join her cousin Ndinga in an ecstatic dance of eternal happiness. On the other hand, the official radio speaks of one victim killed by anonymous stray bullets, late after the departure of Sergeant Outouboma's militia.

Tchicaya uses many devices to show the innocence of Ndinga and the cruelty of the military. Despite the fact that the text is delivered as a novella, it has been transposed into a theatrical performance by director Gabriel Goran who reorganized it into scenes without altering its thematic unity. One can easily identify what R. Jouanny calls a "circular structure in twelve plans" (Jouanny 51-60).

The drama essentially comprises the story told by Mpendje, but this story is interrupted by a long digression – when Van Bilsen, Outouboma, Angélique and Ndinga enter the scene. At the end there is the radio message as an epilog to the play. The play is performed both as a tale (by Mpendje) and as a present event as well (by Nkoba).

## *2.2 Characters*

Van Bilsen, a caricature of the colonizer. Because of him, Regina Hotel appears to be the last resort of colonialism. A rude colonizer, a paternalist and an unforgivable exploiter, an arrogant oppressor, Van Bilsen considers Blacks as "monkeys" who cannot attain a step of civilization nor can they enjoy economic or cultural development. A black person is only good to be a domestic servant or a white man's slave.

"On verra bien ce que tu vas gagner avec des macaques comme patrons. Est-ce que tu as déjà vu un macaque construire dans la jungle hein? Non, hein! Ce n'est pas demain qu'on le verra." (172-173) [One will see how much you will earn with monkeys as bosses. Have you ever seen monkeys build in the jungle, hein? No, hein! It is not tomorrow that one will witness that.]

"Il y aura toujours des boys, et le Congo aura toujours besoin de nous, les Blancs. Indépendance ou pas, rien ne change" (173) [There will always be boys, and the Congo will always need us, Whites. Independence or not, nothing changes]

For this extremist colonizer, the only relationship possible between a Black and a White is that of colonial exploitation. It is even a historic necessity like a racial destiny. Van Bilsen called "King Baudouin" by the call-girls manages the Regina Hotel

with powerful hands, inspiring terror and a spirit of forced works to his workers. He symbolizes the colonial order, but despite his rudeness he receives support from Sergeant Outouboma.

Outouboma, the heir of colonial power. A new bourgeois who openly shows his wealth, Outouboma or better written "A-Moboutou" has acquaintances with the Belgians. He protects Van Bilsen, even threatens the Regina Hotel workers to continue serving their masters without complaining. "Il ne faut pas se montrer ingrats. Faut pas se montrer insolents" (175) [Do not be ungrateful. Do not be insolent] Moved by his personal interest and his ambition, he collaborates with the oppressors to steal the riches of the country, he represents the traitors of the new African nations.

Jean Pierre Mpendje, the friend, storyteller and the last witness of Ndinga's death. He is the double of the hero, the one who tries to calm him down although unsuccessfully. Mpendje is the opposite of Ndinga, he rebels against the colonial order but does not show as does the latter. He roughly criticizes the intervention of the Public Force led by Outouboma. Ironically, he is the one to report his friend's comic madness: "Oui, patron, on est des sales nègres. Sales nègres pour toujours. Faut pas couper la semaine, patron." [Yes, we are dirty niggers. Yesterday, today, tomorrow! Dirty niggers for ever! Do not shorten the week please, boss.]

Modeste Ndinga, the martyr of independence. First of all Ndinga is a passionate character burnt by the euphoria of the independence. Rebellious, hot blood, he is the victim of his own reluctance against the colonial order and his indomitable exaltation for the political independence of this country. He hates Van Bilsen, who represents all the plights endured by the black inhabitants of Leopoldville. He can no longer uphold to be treated as a monkey so that he considers independence as his personal victory over Van Bilsen and over the colonial system: "Moi, Ndinga Modeste, j'ai cette intuition qu'avec le temps-indépenda tout m'appartiendra tout autant qu'aux autres" (176) [I, Ndinga Modeste, have the intuition that with independence time everything will belong to me as well as to others] Thus, the song *Indépenda Cha Cha* serves a momentum for his journey towards the realization of his dream. He was fascinated by Sabina's shoulders, charmed by her eyes, and wished to death to possess her on the Independence Day. To be equal to white people means to enjoy life like them, therefore having sexual intercourse with Sabina will fully mark his emancipation. It is a process of re-conquering his original values lost or destroyed by the colonial order; a process of renaissance and reinvigorating vital forces.

The dance with Sabina, prefigured by Angélique, is the highest moment of his life. One can deem him blind in his dream but Ndinga is coherent in his inner universe. He idealizes Sabina so much that he is killed by a stray bullet from Sergeant Outouboma's militia. Moved by the dizziness of music and the frenzy of the dance with Sabina, he dies at the paramount of his transfiguration. Like his hero Lumumba, Ndinga dies totally conscious of his integrity towards his people and race, passionate for the national cause, betrayed and killed by his blood brothers. Ndinga who dies is a free man.

Like Caliban, Ndinga shouts: "Uhuru", a Shwahili word meaning freedom. This word is more than a simple slogan of liberty, it challenges every opponent, it is an existential claim for one's real identity. Therefore, independence marks a radical rupture with the colonial past: "Desormais on n'entendra plus de menaces, passé le

temps des coups. Dieu merci, ca va être fini" (177). [From now no threats will be heard, the times of blows is over. Thanks God, that will stop.]

### 2.3 *The Mukamba ceremony*

In the Suku tradition, the eve of a males' initiation is celebrated in a frenetic mood: all laws ruling the community are suspended. One can do whatever one wants. Mukamba is a kind of general carnival foolishness. Sukus are Bantu people in the West of the DRC and in Angola. On that night before the Mukanda ceremony, one can insult whoever you meet; one can act as the most shameful clown in the world without being punished. Everything is allowed. Till to a certain extent. Mukamba symbolizes the fall of the world to its deepest level. It's a kind of Mardi gras. No moral, no ethics, no rules. Just live to the extreme. For Ndinga, live to death. In Tchicaya's mythical universe death and freedom are linked; for dying means to free oneself of historical constraints and to enjoy an extemporal essence. Ndinga has reached his aim: he dies just at the gate of happiness. The gate is too narrow to contain his overflowing happiness. Why should he survive if the objective has been symbolically attained? His death is a party of hope and no despotic ruler will overcome... According to R. Jouanny, *Le Bal de Ndinga* displays the state of mind of a fabulous character with the purpose to spread Tchicaya's mythical reading of the African independences (Jouanny 61). The struggle for freedom is never over as Ngugi will show it.

## 3. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: *Devil on the Cross*

*Devil on the Cross* was written on sheets of toilet paper carefully hidden within his cell during the author's one-year detention in prison in 1977 when he was held without trial after the performance by peasants and workers of his play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*. The novel was first published in 1982 by Heinemann Publishers. *Devil on the Cross* attacks modern Kenyan society and the alienation of its people.

### 3.1 *A Struggle for survival*

The novel is about the struggle for survival of young character, Jacinta Wariinga whose drama has been her decision to live decently amidst of a materialistic and criminal universe that rose with event of Kenyan independence. In fact, after independence Kenya gave birth to an arrogant, violent and powerful bourgeoisie.

Wariinga unfortunately loses on the same day her job, her boyfriend and her apartment. Boss Kihara wanted her to become his mistress. Her boyfriend refuses to believe her allegations and quits her. Her landlord expels her from the apartment she rents because she discusses the increasing of the monthly rent. One among the soldiers who evacuate their belongings secretly gives an invitation to attend a Competition of thieves and robbers organized by the Devil. She decides to travel to Ilmorog. She catches a taxi: "Matatu Matata Matamu Modèle T registration number Ford MMM 333" driven by a buffoon owner Robin Mwaura.

By coincidence all the passengers are going to the competition. One of the passengers is Mwireri wa Mukiraai. He intends to participate in the competition. He distributes the real invitations to the co-passengers, explaining the real reasons of the initiative: « For the Kingdom of Heaven is as a man travelling into a far country,

who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one... » (81). The same parable will be used by the Master of Ceremonies, speaking of in terms of 500.000, 200.000 and 100.000 Shillings.

Once in Ilmorog, the travellers gather in the conference hall where a cave is built in the residential headquarter of Golden Heights. Seven representatives from overseas are present. The opening is held the M. Chairman, the Master of Ceremonies, commenting on the parable of talent and concluding with: "Long live stability for progress! Long live progress for profit! Long live foreigners and expatriate experts!"(86) The meeting's purpose is to avoid that workers rebel against their bosses, and subsequently to keep them in the links of slavery to which they are submitted. Here is the official advertisement of the tremendous and unusual ceremony:

« A Big Fest!

Come and See for Yourself a Competition to Select Seven Experts in Modern Theft and Robbery. Prizes Consist of Bank Loans and Directorships of Several Finance Houses. Try Your Skills! Try Your Luck! You Might Take Home The Crown of Modern Theft and Robbery! Etc... Hell's Angels Band in Attendance!  
Signed: Master of Ceremonies c/o Thieves' and Robbers' Den  
Ilmorog Golden Heights » (76).

Wa Gataanguru's speech is in summary: Learn from the whites, and you'll never go wrong. The white man believes that there's no business to beat that of the theft and robbery... The white came to this country holding the Bible in his left hand and a gun in his right. He stole the people's fertile lands. He stole the people's cattle and goats under the cover of fines and taxes. He robbed people of the labour of their hands » (102) He finished his speech with the following prayer: « Cunning, be ye my guide / And lead me all the time / Walking and sleeping. » (p.103).

The narrator then takes the opportunity to expose the childhood of Wariinga. Her parents were arrested in 1954 because of their involvement in the anti-colonial fight. Born in 1953 Jacinta was brought up by her aunt and her uncle. Towards the end of her secondary school at Nakuru, she was introduced by her uncle to Mr Gitahi, an Old Rich Man who abused her and abandoned her when she got pregnant. A bastard girl named Wambui was born. In the meantime her parents were freed and acquired a property in Ilmorog.

Jacinta then attends a school for accounting and secretariat. She gets a job under the supervision of Boss Kihara. The job will finish after she has refused to be Kihara's mistress. The competition of thieves and robbers finishes in chaos. Wangari in reality came to arrest the thieves and robbers of Kenya. In their temerity; students will dare to attack them in their repairs.

Two years after the competition, Wariinga becomes Gatuiria's fiancée. In the meantime she has learns mechanics at the Polytechnics, whereas she joined a Judo and Karate Club. They first pay a visit to Wariinga's parents in Ilmorog but when they visit her fiancé's parents in their sumptuous property, an incident occurs: she discovered that Gatuiria's father is Mr Gitahi, the very Old Rich Man who had abandoned her pregnant. Embarrassed and confused, the Old Man asks everybody to leave the room so that he can have a private conversation with his daughter-in-law:

- You want the love between me and Gaturia to end, don't you?
- Yes, I do.
- All right. Do you want to marry me? That is, do you want to go through a wedding ceremony so that I become your second wife?
- Please, Jacinta, stop pretending that you don't understand. I am a man of the Church. I just want you to be mine. I will find my own ways of coming to visit you. Just like the old times. [...] Please, save me! Save the honour of my name! (253)

A few minutes later Wariinga kills the Old Rich Man with the gun she had received from Muturi. On her way out she shoots at both Kihahu and Gitutu, high members of the thieves and robbers association. "But she knew with all her heart that the hardest struggles of her life's journey lay ahead" (254).

#### 4. Philosophical Reflections

##### 4.1. Fiction and self-discovery.

The advantage of using literary fictions or literary creative writings for philosophical purposes is that it provides a range of topics related to fundamental issues intrinsic to philosophy. As we all know Plato, Soren Kierkegaard, M. Heidegger, JP Sartre, A. Camus or L. Lavelle, etc., based on myths, narrative plots, legends, or language to illustrate their systematic reflections on various notions such as self, other, faith, liberty, existence. In the same way with *le Bal de Ndinga* and *Devil on the Cross* we come across a variety of topics such as: Races, Racism, Classes, Proletarian and Capitalist dialectics, Slave Master relationship, Women Men tensions, Slavery Emancipation, Reason or Rationality and Responsibility, and other categories. These topics open ways to many kinds of interpretation varying from colonial to postcolonial theories, from feministic to structuralistic approach, from existentialist to humanist perspective, from political to socio-globalized model, from self reliance to state law. Philosophy – i.e. metaphysics, logic and ethics – is totally involved until one chooses his/her point of view in addressing the topic one finds to be the most important. That is where ideology starts.

In my view Ndinga's plot is a typical process of the discovery of self as presented by philosophers of existentialism. According to Louis Lavelle's *La Conscience de soi*, the Self or Ego first discovers its passive condition before conquering its active possibilities. The body reflects sensitivity, weakness, sufferance, passive reception of the world's impact of the human being, submission to natural or historical environments. What Lavelle means by active assumption of self is the discovery of self, free of all chains of subjectivity, responsible, able to decide and take initiatives on its own destiny. The active Ego is the one that can responsibly "move the little finger." In his inner world, Ndinga has already passed the bridge to independence and freedom.

The case of Wariinga posits the question of self in terms of ontological responsibility. Wariinga is violently pushed to murder by men's abuse. It seems as if it was written in her fate if she could not avoid killing the Old Man because he was an obstacle on her path to self-achievement. At all corners he was there to ruin all her attempts to last a decent life. And the last scene was the most decisive. One of them had to die. The old philosophy used to reflect on the relationship between freedom and

determinism, between effect and cause. Does the notion of causality contradict freedom? Or how can violence lead to freedom? How can one resist violence?

#### 4.2 A Human Crisis.

Both works have in common a violent situation of crisis. That crisis starts with the breakdown of colonialism but continues as a form of imperialism in the post-colonial African society. The freed individual shows his limitedness to manage his ontological status as a human being, whereas the effort of imperialist is to impose a vision of the world to the former colonized.

"In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi satirizes the worship, by the new middle class, of all that is foreign and their revulsion for all that is local. He portrays the new ruling class as reluctant to embrace the revolutionary culture of the masses because they have developed into an exploitative comprador class who want to remain unchanged. This artistic portrayal coincides with Cabral's objective analysis that the class character of cultures gives National Liberation a positive or negative appeal to each class" (F-K Omoregie, "Rodney, Cabral and Ngugi as Guides to African Postcolonial Literature").

#### 4.3 Freedom, Religion and Gender.

Moral philosophers usually define freedom as the capacity to attain self determination, self realization. One enjoys the opportunity to act in a sense according to one's will or preference. Freedom does not mean to perform whatever one has in mind, but to act according to certain ethic principles of life. This has to be taken in a subversive and provocative perspective. Freedom in the texts we have analyzed means either transcending the limitations for a better state of mind or getting rid of all obstacles on the path to self achievement. Ndinga is a free man because he dies whereas he symbolically dances with Sabina. Wariinga is or is believed to be a free woman once she has overcome all the difficulties of her past by killing the Old Rich Man.

Religion as a path to freedom? The colonial order, neo-colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism are all based on strict (mis)interpretations of the Bible. The materialistic search for wealth and power needs a solid fundament from the Holy Scriptures. If the parable of the talents remains the best one to exploit the workers, the Beatitudes are evoked in order to counterattack any revolution. Sentences like "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"... "Blessed are the ones who suffer for justice's sake" will be used to justify the exploitation of the weak. As Marx would say religion is used as the opium of the people.

Gender issue. Feminist critics like Florence Stratton and Elleke Boehmer have seen in this novel a masculinization of Wariinga in a very patriarchal society where being a woman obviously implies inferiority to man. In fact, Wariinga lives in a circle of men that she cannot escape. She challenges men everyday. Even her job or hobby choices do not seem to be natural. Polytechnic, mechanics, judo and karate are all men's natural areas of performance, although one cannot assert that it was Ngugi's intention to demonstrate it. (See Williams 104-105). *Decolonizing the Mind* is a pace towards liberation. The patriarchal society in which Wariinga lives is not yet ready to accept a woman perform "male" activities. To become credible Wariinga has to show her abilities acquired by her training. She has to defeat men in the areas they pretend to master better than women. Therefore a revolution has to be made.

## 5. Conclusion

Ndinga is the murdered, while Wariinga is the murderer. Two world views are in balance. Tchicaya's hero is a martyr, whereas Ngugi's protagonist is a woman who intends to stop her sufferance caused by the selfishness of an immoral criminal and abusive Old Man. Tchicaya's protagonist is an idealist, artist who marvelously transcends the realities of the earth to reach an ecstatic level whereas Ngugi's protagonist solves realistically her problem by unmercifully killing the representative of the patriarchal order or the servant of the white financial robbers. Whereas Ndinga shows the political weakness of a blind military ruling system, Wariinga symbolically ruins the bases of capitalism, male-centered society, and neo-colonialism. Both works are allegories: they posit the questions of Justice. Who is entitled to sentence for life or to condemn to death? Is death the only alternative to law's transgressions? Are there enough reasons to kill somebody?

Finally, Ndinga and Wariinga have one thing in common: the passion for Resistance to "the fatalistic logic" of violence and Imperialism. If the first kind of resistance belongs to the marvelous world, the second one incarnates self made justice against the forces of Evil. It is how two African writers Tchicaya and Ngugi allegorically illustrate the incoherencies that characterize for Africa the path towards Freedom.

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