

A REVIEW OF “MUNTU: AN OUTLINE OF THE NEW AFRICAN CULTURE” BY JANHEINZ JAHN

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In his work: *Muntu: An outline of the new African culture*, Jahn observes that “Africa is adapting herself, giving up her traditions and adopting foreign ideas, methods of work, forms of government and principles of economic organization. The time of transition, whether short or long, is thought to be a time of crisis which will confront all Africans with the decision either to accept modern civilization and survive, or to perish with their own traditions” (p. 11). Jahn had cited the opinions of scholars like Jasper who argued that primitive cultures like Africa have no chance of adaptation in the face of technological civilization, but will sooner or later become extinct or become raw materials to be processed by technological civilization. If higher cultures like Mexico and Peru failed to survive this encounter, how much more African culture? Similarly, Malinowski, who had seen culture as something constantly changing, argued that “... all new objects, facts and forms of life in Africa are the results of European pressure and African resistance. Even African nationalism, which evokes and revives an African culture, is, Skokian” (p. 14). In the midst of all these changes, Jahn presents a systematic exposition of the new African culture that has emerged: what he called a neo-African culture; it is a culture born out of the encounter between European culture and African traditional culture.

Voodoo Religion

Jahn began his analysis of neo-African culture by going into the voodoo cult as an example of African religion, a religion basic to Haiti but affiliated to Dahomey in West Africa, its home. The affiliation is based on the fact that the Haitians (formerly slaves from West Africa) for the most part came from Dahomey. The name voodoo means “genius or protective spirit” (p. 29). Describing the religion further, Jahn writes, “Voodoo means a great supernatural being, a snake that knows the past and the present and, and through the medium of the high priestess and of a Negress, foretells the future” (p. 30). Their religious practices are usually at nights and secretly, may be, partly because they were forbidden to practice the religion by their colonial masters. The ceremony is a mixture of music, dances, offering of gifts and initiations. At a time when it was seen purely as a dance, Price-Mars (cited by Jahn) avers that “Voodoo is a religion because the initiated believe in the existence of spiritual beings who live partly in the universe, partly in close contact with men, whose activities they control” (p. 32). As a religion, it has a hierarchical body of priests (priests called *Houngan*, the high priest *Papalao* {a name derived from Babalao, the oracle priest of the Ifa cult of Yoruba land} and priestess *mambo*), a community of believers, temples called *Hounfort*, altars, ceremonies and an oral tradition which has come down to us with its essential parts intact.

There is the belief in a Supreme Being called Great Master, to whom is given special veneration. The gods are called Loas, but the Supreme among them is called *Bon Dieu*, the Good Lord. According to Jahn, “He is the creator of the world, but so high above man that he is not concerned with him. He is far away that he only laughs at the sufferings of men” (p. 41). In describing the other Loas, Jahn writes:

They are, like the heart of man, neither good nor bad. They like good meals, which is why one offers them sacrifices; they can be suspicious, insolent, jealous, irritable, above all if the food offered to them does not appeal to them. They can boast, swear, drink too

much, and quarrel. Yet they are good to their servants, they protect and help them, advise them when ill and appear to the hungry man in a dream saying ‘Do not loose courage, you will find work and earn money’, and then he does earn money. Every loa has his preferred seat, his *repositoir*, a tree, a plant, a spring (p. 41).

As in the divinities of the Igbo religion and Yoruba religion, the voodoo religion also has her divinities called the Loas. These divinities include:

1. **Legba:** He is the divinity of the road and streets and usually the first loa to be invoked during the voodoo ceremony. He is the protector of crossroads, doors and the herd. During voodoo ceremonies, unless the Legba arrives and mounts a dancer, usually leading to trances, the other loas cannot come to the arena.
2. **Ayizan:** This is a female divinity and is referred to as the goddess of the market, and in fact the highest goddess.
3. **Damballah:** He is the god of fertility and usually lives in springs and swamps. He is symbolized by a snake and whoever he mounts during voodoo ceremonies hisses like a snake and creeps around on the ground in a snake-like curve, climbs up the rafters and hangs with the head downward like a snake.
4. **Egwe:** It means *the rolling one*. It is also the ruler of the sea. It is thus not surprising that fish and boats are its symbols. It protects ship farers and enjoys the thunder of cannons and the salutes of ships.
5. **Zaka:** It is described as avaricious, suspicious, lover of litigation, greedy for profit, and it is not surprising that those who embody this deity are always afraid that someone will rob them. He is symbolized in lightning and thunder and could give rain when invoked.
6. **Ogou:** Unlike other deities, it is a group of deities, differentiated by their epithets. According to Jahn, “The most important are the Ogou Ferraille, the god of the smiths, to whom fire is sacred, and Ogou Badagri, the Loa of war. Both appear in military costume, wear a French cap, red robes or cloths, and are armed with sabre and machete. Whoever is possessed by either of them behaves very martially, brandishes his sabre, chews thick cigars, swears and demand rum. And while he swallows it down in huge gulps, the chorus sings... Lord Ogun is drinking, is drinking, but is never drunk” (p. 44).
7. **Erzulie-Freda-Dahomey:** She belongs to the group of sea gods. She is coquettish, sensual and extremely extravagant. In every shrine where a room is dedicated to her you find her white and rose coloured garments, a dressing table with wash basin, soap, towel, comb, lipstick and nail file kept for her use. According Jahn, “Finery and toilet articles are her attributes, her device the heart, often pierced with an arrow or a sword... she treats the women with disdain and extends to them only her little finger. It is an amusing detail that the believer who embodies her takes pains to speak French in a shrill voice, as this is considered elegant” (p. 45).
8. **Guede:** They are a group of the gods of death. Just as every voodoo ceremony begins with the invocation of *Legba*, it ends with a salutation to *Guede*. They are symbolized in black wooden cross, pickaxe, shovel, skull, crossbones or withered leaves, pointing to their roles in connection with death.

The voodoo religion, just like every other African religion, tentacles every dimension of the African life, including the political one. As the slaves danced the voodoo, they were reminded of their home lands and experienced liberty once again. The religion was a cult and those initiated into it became brothers. According to Jahn, “It needed only an efficient leader to drive their angered spirits to rebellion”. The rebellion of 14th August 1791 during a voodoo ceremony, had actually led to the freedom of Haiti.

Ntu- African Philosophy

Jahn taking from the works of five famous authors: Placid Tempels, a Franciscan missionary priest who was an active missionary in the Congo, Marcel Griaule, a French Ethnologist, who studied the Dogon people of Niger, Germaine Dieterlen, who investigated the religion of the Bambara, Maya Daren, an Afro-American who investigated the Haiti religion, and Alexis Kagame, who further discussed the thought of the Bantu people, he made an attempt to draw from them what he understood as the basic concepts of neo-African culture. Relying heavily on Kagame, he discussed the four categories of African Philosophy:

Muntu: Human being.

Kintu: Thing.

Hantu: Place and time.

Kuntu: Modality

Jahn, while interpreting Alexis Kagame, avers that “All being, all essence, in whatever form it is conceived, can be subsumed under one of these categories. Nothing can be conceived outside them” (p. 100). He further adds, “... they must be conceived not as substance but as force” (p. 100). Thus everything is a force. It is not a force independent of the other, but forces that are in a relationship. This relationship is seen when we remove the determinative there remains a stem NTU which is the same in all. He describes NTU thus, “Ntu is being itself, the cosmic universal force... that force in which being and beings coalesce” (p. 101). He further writes, “NTU expresses, not the effect of these forces, but their being. But the forces act continually, and are constantly effective. Only if one could call a halt to the whole universe, if life suddenly stood still, would NTU be revealed” (p. 101). On his discourse on God, he relied primarily on Placid Tempels and describes God as the great Muntu, the great person and the great powerful life force. Jahn citing Tempels describes God as, “the supreme wise man, who knows all things, who established at the deepest level the kind and nature of their forces. He is force itself, has made all other beings, and knows all forces...” (p. 104). The earliest ancestors are descended from God, and thus were begotten and not created by God.

He agrees with Tempels as regards his analysis of life and death, that in every essential being there is another essential being that sits within a man. This being is called the soul, which continues to exist even after death. Life and death is born from the dynamics of the weakening and strengthening of life force. Death is thus the weakening of a person’s life force.

Nommo- The Word

Jahn observes that the Word occupies a significant place in African philosophy. He avers that “All the activities of men, and all the movement in nature, rest on the word, on the productive power of the word” (p. 126). As such, “If there were no word, all forces would be frozen, there would be no procreation, no change, no life... For the word holds the course of things in train and changes and transforms them. And since the word has this power, every word is an effective word, every word is binding. There is no ‘harmless’, noncommittal word. Every word has consequences. Therefore the word binds the muntu. And the muntu is responsible for his word” (p. 133). African medicine, talisman, magic, poison etc are only effective through the word. Thus, all African medicines are ineffective without the genuine power of the word. A man is not just cured by the medicine but by the words that issue forth from the mouth of the medicine man. Thus, the stronger a medicine man, the stronger his word and the stronger will his medicine be. Generally, the African has more faith in the power of the

word than in the power of the substance given to him by the medicine man. Blessing, curse, magic, incantation, exorcism, etc are based on the power of the word. The word was with God at creation, for all things were created through the word, but with the creation of man, God has given the word to man, who unceasingly creates and procreates through the word. As God was able to say, "Let there be light and there was light", the African man is also capable of such utterance. Relying on Bantu philosophy, Jahn wrote, "The word force of one muntu is different from the word force of another: the nommo of Amma or Olorun or Bon Dieu is more powerful than the word of a living individual, or the nommo of an Orisha more powerful than that of one's death father. The hierarchy of the Bantu (men both living and dead), is ordered according to the force of each one's word. The word itself is force" (p. 133). As such, man can say 'let the moon fall down' and it would fall, unless a more powerful being by the force of its word had placed the moon there.

Africa and the Culture of Writing

Although Africa had recorded feats of civilization before her encounter with Europe, Jahn observes that two cultural achievements were absent: architecture and writing. This has further crippled the applause expected of African civilization since modern science rates writing as a basic tenets of civilization. For those who have writing are, according to Jahn, "thought to be capable of retaining past experience and so of hastening from progress to further progress, while those without writing are said to be at the mercy of historical accident" (p. 185). Citing the perspective of Levi-Strauss, Jahn gives another position on writing and cultural progress. Levi-Strauss has argued that there is no correlation between writing and cultural progress. First he believes that the greatest time in human history is not the discovery of writing but the Neolithic age which brought the cultivation of fields, domestication of animals and arts. Pointing out to the thousands of years that preceded the advent of writing in Europe, during which her civilization were still passed from one generation to another. He further argued that writing had led to the formation of castes and classes, favouring the exploitation rather than the enlightenment of men. Citing an instance, he spoke of the Egyptians who summoned thousands to work on monumental buildings through writing, and here lies the nexus between writing and architecture. Although writing is significant, John observes that the 'word' is more powerful, permanent and mightier in Africa than any writing that can be lost. He further observed that the primary purpose of writing is not to preserve information but to communicate to people and Africans ha beautiful ways of communicating. He wrote, "The African, however, did not need an alphabet to convey information; instead they developed the drum language, which is superior to writing for that purpose. It is quicker than any mounted messenger and it can convey its message to a greater number of people at one time than telegraph or telephone. Only recently has the wireless come to excel in this respect the language of the drums" (p. 187). When it was necessary to preserve the information, they were put into rhymes, alliterations and rhythms which aided memories, and were more retained than prose.

Janheinz Jahn, the German Africanist, in the contention of Anderson (1970) has been recognized in both white and black literary circles as one of the efficient and accurate experts in the realm of African, Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazillian culture. He synthesized African culture so beautifully that many Africans and foreigners take his work to be the gospel truth on black culture. It is therefore not surprising that many think that he is an African. Through his analysis, he was able to make his readers familiar with the basic concepts for the understanding of African culture. The work of Jahn contains an African perception of reality, and an attempt to identify, abstract and schematize the fundamental principles and concepts underlying traditional African culture and African reality. His influence on the

perception of African literatures in Europe, especially in Germany, between the fifties and eighties cannot be over-emphasized, this was achieved on the basis of his dedication to the dissemination of African literature in German-Speaking countries.

Going back to his impact on the development of the history of African philosophy, Oguejiofor (2008) avers that his work on *Muntu* is plausible on the ground that after Summer's works on Ethiopian philosophers, his is the second work on the history of African philosophy. He makes a difficult analysis of five works that appeared after the close of the Second World War. The first is that of Placide Tempels, a Franciscan missionary from Belgium; The second is that of a French ethnologist, Marcel Griaule, who spent so many years studying the Dogon people who live in the great bend of Niger. The third is the work of an Afro-American actress who travelled to Haiti to take films of the voodoo religion and was attracted to it and later gave an exposition of voodoo; the fourth is the work of Germaine Dieterlen who investigated the Bambara religion; The fifth is the work of Alexis Kagame, who furthered the inquiry of Tempels on Bantu philosophy.

These notwithstanding, Anderson (1970) pointed out that in the work of Jahn we encounter a danger already foreseen by Hountondji (1976). He argues that it is a danger that hunts the black history, the black present and the black future; a threat that has been evident since the 16th century Trans-Atlantic slave trade. This is the danger of dangerous dependency upon white analysis of the black man's existence and the black cultural development.

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