

Mbongi and the Practice of the Communalist Palaver

Excerpted and rewritten from *Silences in African History*:¹

One of the problems with defining the *Mbongi* is that it is difficult to do so without, at the same time, distorting what it is all about.—for an in-depth analysis, see Ernest Wamba dia Wamba's 1985 article in *Philosophy and Social Action*.²

Mbongi is the Kongo's word for what could be described as a generic palaver. In the DR Congo itself and in Africa, different words are used to describe the same process/phenomenon.

In today's DR Congo, where political leaders' sense of ethical, moral and political leadership has been severely atrophied, most Congolese are eager for ways of rerooting themselves so that they can be full participants in a process of re-orientation of self and, at the same time, of the larger community. In a country where citizens have been treated as cannon fodder or worse by politicians, it is re-invigorating to hear and see in practice the principle--central to the *Mbongi*--that "everyone thinks, everyone counts, no one counts less or more than one."

Mbongi can be very simple, informal or very complex, formal affairs. In the latter case, the *Nzonzi* play a crucial role. A good *Nzonzi*—a shepherd—is one who knows how "to listen attentively and tirelessly, to rapidly pick up the essence of each word spoken, to attentively observe every look, every gesture, every silence, and to grasp their respective significance (their target) and at the same time to elaborate, in conformity with the axiomatics of popular wisdom (ideology) arguments to counter these unjust positions and/or to re-affirm or reinforce correct positions...The role of the *Nzonzi* is not to openly take sides with a thesis of a member of the community but to assure that the criticism and self-criticism are carried out according to the ancestral procedure of mass democracy." (WDW, 1985:17)

Properly conducted, a *Mbongi* is not a ritual, nor a way of replacing the modern parliament, nor a romantic exercise of a past practice: "Besides being an ideological and philosophical struggle organized and carried out communitarily (sic), it is also above all a process of very intense generalized mass education." (WDW, 1985:31) It is more like how to use processes and procedures culturally embedded, in a language spoken by every member of the community, and used for bringing forth new ideas.

In summary, it can be looked at as a democratic way of reviving, redefining politics which puts everyone at the center of the process of understanding and resolving problems for the benefit of all and not just of a small minority. As such, it is a powerful method of echoing civic, democratic and scientific cultures which could be emancipatory in a massive, non-elitist way.

It is not difficult to see in the *Mbongi* a sort of pedagogy of the oppressed, but one which was invented long before people became disconnected from their own inner source of renewal. Contemporaneously one could see parallels (and they are not the only ones) with Bob Moses' *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*, of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *Healers*. In all of these cases, the

principle is that the best teacher, the best source for understanding and resolving any problems can be found within those confronted with the problems.

¹Depelchin, Jacques. *Silences in African History*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers; North American Distributor: Michigan State University Press, 2005.

²Wamba dia Wamba. "Experience of Democracy in Africa: Reflections on the Practice of Communalist Palaver as a Method of Solving Contradictions Among People." *Philosophy and Social Action*, Vol. XII, No. 3, 1985.