

Abstract

In this paper, I take the time-space of post-independence Conakry as an important site in the history of articulations and rearticulations of culture and politics that have rightly sustained critical interest in the conjuncture of decolonization. Such a manoeuvre might lead us to challenge the centripetal tendencies of postcolonial studies. In this article, though, I ask only this: how does taking Conakry at this time seriously as a site of cultural production modulate understandings of cultural production in the conjuncture of decolonization? My answer to that question centres on dissidence, through a discussion of the work of Maryse Condé and Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara. The conjuncture of post-independence Conakry can help us configure the place of literary and artistic non-conformism in the context of authoritarianism. It supposes moving from an aesthetics of independence to an aesthetics of dissent.

Stepping out of line in independent Conakry

*I remember being in Conakry in 1968
[...] Those were, in their way, golden
days (Johnson 3)*

*S. T. spoke at maximum volume for over
an hour, his speech punctuated by
cheers. The woman next to me got a bit
bored and began to tuck into a huge bag
of nuts (Nkrumah and Milne 220)*

Conakry is not typically taken as a “significant geography” (Laachir et al. 290) in twentieth-century literary or cultural history,¹ and 1960s Conakry is not typically seen as an important site in the ideational and material changes gestured to by the concept of the “global 1960s” (Shih). Certainly, Conakry was not associated with the production of the negritude thinking that has become so central – sometimes distortingly so (Dave 456; Miller 2) – to conceptions of the black, African and anti-colonial francophone twentieth century. Existing studies of Guinean writers such as Fodéba Keïta or Camara Laye, or of the linguistic (Oyler; Tinsley), musical (Counsel; Hashachar), dance (Cohen; Kringelbach), dramatic (Straker) and even cinematic work (Cousin; Andrade-Watkins) produced in the decades after Guinean independence, have not consolidated for Conakry a secure place in postcolonial studies’ historical geographies of cultural significance, even in its francophone declinations.

Yet for all that this period, as Mohammed Camara puts it, is “becoming increasingly difficult to remember” (Camara et al. ix), in the late 1950s and 1960s Guinea was a locus of huge political optimism and cultural production after the country became the first to wrest independence from the gritted teeth of the de Gaulle regime.² The procession of writers, artists and activists from Europe, America, Cuba and all over Africa who converged on the city between 1958 and 1970 to visit or live include many now established cultural figures of the francophone postcolonial canon: Maryse Condé, Aimé Césaire (Césaire, ‘La pensée politique de Sékou Touré’) and David Diop (Parekh and Jagne 130; M. Diop 32). Frantz Fanon met the editor of *Présence Africaine*, Alioune Diop, in Conakry (Fanon 687). *Présence Africaine* set up a Franco-Guinée association (*Alioune Diop Files*). Alioune Diop wrote enthusiastic articles about the place (A. Diop, ‘*Impressions*’) and, French police records note, agreed to be Sékou Touré’s education advisor (*Alioune Diop Files*).

From other parts of Africa and the tricontinental world, political and cultural figures travelled to the city: Jeanne Martin Cissé, the secretary general of the Pan-African Women’s Organization in the 1960s, and her comrades Pauline Clark, Awa Keita and Virginie Camara (Martin Cissé 100). Nelson Mandela visited in 1962 to gather support for the armed struggle in South Africa (Mandela 419). Che Guevara went in 1962 (Gleijeses 187). Fidel Castro followed a decade later (Agence France-Presse). The deposed Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah lived there for several years, a period recounted in his assistant June Milne’s collection *The Conakry Years*. So too did African Americans such as the actor Harry Belafonte (Cohen 12), the Black Panther Kwame Ture (aka Stokely Carmichael), and the Grammy-award winning South African singer Miriam Makeba (Hashachar 259). Conakry assumed a particular place in the struggle against the Portuguese empire, because the Guinea-Bissauan and Angolan liberation fronts, the PAIGC and the MPLA, set up representations in the city.

Conakry also became an important site of film production, not least because of the establishment of a state production company, *Sily-Cinema*, in the early 1960s (Cousin 27–8; Camara 124–32). Comparing film-making in post-independence Africa, Claire Andrade argues that only “Guinea Conakry in French-speaking Africa came close to” (Andrade-Watkins 135) Mozambique, whose cinematic history critics have acknowledged and extensively discussed. More recently, works such as Filipa César’s *Conakry* (2013) and Manthia Diawara’s *Conakry Kas* (2004) have drawn on Conakry’s place in post-independence cinematic history as a way of thinking about the evolution and afterlives of the anti-colonial political-cultural moment.⁴

All of this to say that Conakry was undoubtedly part of the history of articulations and rearticulations of culture and politics that have rightly sustained critical interest in the conjuncture of decolonization.³ Remembering this history might lead us to ask questions about why it has been partially forgotten, and by extension, to challenge the centripetal tendencies of postcolonial studies.⁵ For the moment, though, I ask only this: how does taking Conakry at this time seriously as a site of cultural production modulate understandings of cultural production in the conjuncture of decolonization? My answer to that question centres on dissidence. The conjuncture of post-independence Conakry can help us configure the role of literary and artistic non-conformism in the context of authoritarianism. It supposes moving from an aesthetics of independence to an aesthetics of dissent. My argument here proceeds as follows. First, I discuss the official story of culture and politics in post-independence Guinea articulated by Sékou Touré and argue that a more promising sense of the politico-cultural significance of independence comes from poets who travelled to the country out of solidarity and excitement. To take forward the conception of active, critical citizens these poets begin to sketch, I discuss Maryse Condé’s representation of a non-conforming woman in her novel *Heremakhonon*, a

novel she describes as “inspiré par ma vie en Guinée” (*La Vie* 73) (“inspired by my life in Guinea”). Then I consider the Guinean writer Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara’s treatment of absurdity and interpretation in his play *Continent-Afrique*. Finally I argue that these texts’ treatment of different moods of dissent – boredom, laughter, disengagement – offer wider methodological pistes to bring into view more densely populated histories of the connections between politics and culture in the anti- and postcolonial context.

Interpretation and initiative

It is important at this point to acknowledge the overbearing presence of Sékou Touré, Guinea’s first president, as a character in existing accounts of that period in Guinean history, sometimes characterised as ‘Sékou Touré’s Guinea’ (Tinsley; Hashachar; Dave). Touré was first a celebrated independence leader (Césaire, ‘La pensée politique de Sékou Touré’) – he was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1960 – and later pilloried (Kaba) for the repressiveness of his regime, which put down strikes, including by teachers, and then disappeared, imprisoned and executed critics and suspected critics.

Touré himself offered one influential and instrumental vision of culture and politics during those years, seeing culture as a pedagogic and political tool: “Culture is a more effective weapon than guns for the purpose of domination” (Touré, *A Dialectical Approach to Culture* 11). Touré saw clearly how colonial authorities had used cultural supremacism to consolidate their power, and rightly sought to reassert the existence and value of African cultures and artworks beyond the bourgeoisie. Under his presidency there were nation-wide campaigns to revivify local cultures, including the organisation of theatre competitions at a district, regional and national level. The best performances were restaged at biannual cultural festivals (Unesco, *Cultural Policy* 73–75). Straker argues that “no African post-independence regime took the

importance of indigenous performance arts more seriously than Guinea's revolutionary leadership did over the 1960s and 1970s" (211). Especially given the depleted vocabularies for articulating literary and cultural value today, the significance attached to cultural work in that place and at that time remains seductive. As John Berger points out in a discussion of Soviet painting, "the principal and obvious result of [...] [the] emphasis on the *use* of art is that it is really taken seriously." (Berger 152).

There were, however, many contradictions in Touré's cultural policies, not least the stigmatisation of the *Forestière* cultures in the south east of the country, the main subject of a "brutally iconoclastic 'demystification campaign' waged throughout local communities from 1959-1961" (Straker 216). Fundamentally, Touré's regime constrained space for interpretation, critique and dissent. Indeed, one of the features of Touré's vision of culture was that it rested on a desire to marshal interpretation in ways that today seem irrevocably tied up with his autocracy. For example, Touré favoured theatre, because "ses qualités didactiques sont très supérieures à la production littéraire [...] [et] la marge d'interprétation laissée au spectateur et, par la suite, les possibilités d'erreur d'interprétation sont, elles, infiniment moindres pour le spectateur que pour le lecteur" ("Its didactic qualities are much superior to literary production [...] [and] the margin of interpretation left to the spectator and, consequently, the possibilities of misinterpretation are infinitely less for the spectator than for the reader") (Touré, *L'action Politique* 74–75; Straker 213). The problem with Touré's suggestion that artworks can play a causal role in ensuring people arrive at a prescribed political position is not just the mechanistic idea of an 'error in interpretation,' which reflects an implausibly smooth vision of transmission of authorial intent. More alarming is the passivity Touré's idea of interpretation accords to audiences. To figure these new audiences as passive receivers of ideas reflects a striking disregard for their independence of thought from a man who professes commitment to their

emancipation. The Guinean historian Lansiné Kaba characterises Touré's dictatorship in terms that help us see the connections between authoritarianism and his passive and unpeopled conception of cultural reception, arguing that Touré became "the sole interpreter of [Guinean] national realities" (Kaba 202; Dave 465): "this situation has made Guinea a one-man show, in which Touré serves as the only director and actor, while others must dance, applaud or sing for him, according to his whim" (Kaba 212). In Kaba's interpretation, we find this fixed dyad of performance-interpretation reincarnated in the performative power of the autocrat.

A more active idea of the cultural significance of Guinean independence and the promise of Touré in the early days is available to us through the writing of two poets, Aimé Césaire and David Diop. In the aftermath of the independence referendum in 1958, French officials looted Conakry, stripping the light bulbs (Nugent 49) from the administrative buildings, destroying documents and damaging the railway lines before they left. "The French administrators," Walter Rodney writes, "literally went crazy and behaved like wild pigs before sailing from Guinea"(Rodney 278). Following this performance of bureaucratic vengeance, Touré issued a call for allies and teachers to come and assist in building the country's new future (M. Diop 32). Diop responded to this call, moving to Guinea to work as a school teacher in Kindia (M. Diop 33), a market town about a hundred kilometres east of Conakry. Césaire travelled to Conakry soon after independence and wrote about Touré's political thought for the Paris-based journal *Présence Africaine*. Both, separately, connect the significance of Guinean independence to the concept of "initiative" ("Initiative")(Césaire, 'La pensée politique de Sékou Touré' 71; D. M. Diop 106). Césaire writes admiringly that in Guinea, democracy will not follow the European definition of "le contrôle par le peuple,"("Control by the people") (Césaire, 'La pensée politique de Sékou Touré' 71) but rather follow "the spirit of "l'initiative accordée au peuple" ("Initiative handed over to the people") (Césaire, 'La pensée politique de

Sékou Touré' 71). Diop argues that political sovereignty can “en libérant les initiatives, hâter l'évolution générale de l'Afrique” (“by liberating initiative, hasten the general evolution of Africa” (Trans. from D. M. Diop, *Hammer Blows* 54)(D. M. Diop 106).

In deploying this concept of “initiative,” Diop and Césaire draw on political-poetic debates in which they both participated earlier in the 1950s. In 1955, intervening in a debate with Haitian poet René Depestre about whether black poets should use the *Alexandrin*, Césaire rejected official Communist Party ideas that only some forms of writing were politically progressive. Césaire insisted that poets must be allowed “le droit à l'initiative y compris notre droit à l'erreur.” (“The right to initiative, including our right to make mistakes”) (Césaire, ‘Sur la poésie nationale’ 223). He used the same phrase in his resignation letter to the French Communist Party the following year. There, he connects the idea of initiative to a certain inhabitation of critical thought: “nous ne puissions donner à personne délégation pour penser pour nous [...] [ce que se ramène] à un seul postulat: le droit à l'initiative” (“We cannot delegate anyone to do our thinking for us [...] [which leads to] one fundamental premise: the right to initiative”) (Césaire, ‘Lettre à Maurice Thorez’ 1504). Diop, writing the same year, also opposes prescribing the aesthetics in which any given poet should write. He echoes the defence of “ce que Césaire appelle le droit à l'initiative, c'est-à-dire la liberté de choix et d'action.” (“What Césaire calls the right to initiative, that is to say, freedom of choice and action”)(D. M. Diop, ‘Contribution au débat sur la poésie nationale’ 114).

The recurrence of the idea of “initiative” in relation to post-independence Guinea helps us locate that space-time as a moment in a wider history of anti-colonial discussions of politics and culture. In defending “initiative” in the mid 1950s, the dissident Marxists Diop and Césaire lent a libertarian streak to Soviet-influenced debates about militant aesthetics. This position

was informed by an anticonsequentialist understanding of the nature of freedom. For Césaire and Diop, freedom was not something that could be achieved in the future by means of deferring it in the present. This was certainly true in the case of writerly freedom (Césaire, ‘Sur la poésie nationale’ 223) but also applied to political practice more broadly. As Césaire wrote in his letter to Thorez, “si le but de toute politique progressiste est de rendre un jour leur liberté aux peuples colonisés, au moins faut-il que l’action quotidienne des partis progressistes n’entre pas en contradiction avec la fin recherchée.” (“If the goal of all progressive politics is one day to win freedom for colonized peoples, it is necessary at least that the day-to-day actions of the progressive parties do not contradict this desired end”). (Césaire, ‘Lettre à Maurice Thorez’ 1504). Césaire insists that means and ends must be aligned.

Those debates were about production, but Diop and Césaire’s hope that decolonizing Guinea would prove an incubator of “initiative” was also about reception: that Guinean independence would create the conditions for the production of free, active, critical citizens. This is markedly different from Touré’s idea of dictated interpretation. Their idea of the promise of independence and initiative reminds us that to see Guinea as an important site in the history of articulations of culture and politics does not rely on rehabilitating Touré or on a state-sponsored view of the importance of culture. The state does not have a monopoly on politics and to understand the history of Conakry only in terms of the regime’s agenda writes out contestation from below, and the role of the creative arts as forms of dissent. In contrast to Touré’s theories of cultural production, then, one place to look for how Conakry in the 1960s functioned as a locus for rearticulating culture and politics is in the work of dissenting writers who interrogated questions of non-conformism and interpretation.

There is a wider point to be made here about regimentation. A rising body of recent work is orienting the anti-colonial gaze away from the official stories and towards questions of non-conformism and dissidence. Priyamvada Gopal argues for the importance of dissent rather than “an emphasis on the official mind, often made inevitable by the slant of the archives themselves”(Gopal 17).⁶ Saidiya Hartman has set out the political charge of waywardness in her study of women in a New York State Correctional Facility in the early twentieth century (S. Hartman; S. V. Hartman). It is hard any longer to be impressed by the elements of anti-colonial regimentation which registered gendered forms of coercion, even as we recover and reinstate the complex – often militarized – agency of women in the anti-colonial struggle.⁷

In the case of the time-space of post-independence Guinea, we should reject the possessive and patrilineal logics of ‘Sékou Touré’s Guinea.’ The phrase suggests a narrow and unpeopled conception of where politics and thinking happens. Rather than seeing the anti-colonial project as incarnated by political leaders such as Touré, I suggest in this article we emphasise the limits of the official story in trying to think past what Jean Allman calls “the smothering, of postcolonial ‘freedom dreams,’ dreams untethered to the nation-state formation” (Allman 731). Doing so moves us away from frameworks of success, failure or tragedy in discussing independence (Jones). I seek to bring into view not the disappearance of the contestatory cultures and practices of the 1940s and 1950s down a neo-colonial hole, but rather how an active, positive tradition of dissent, contestation and critique of power continued and changed shape after national independence.

Maryse Condé: writing a non-conformist woman

The Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé, who lived in Conakry between 1960 and 1964, (Pfaff 20–23), describes the city *La Vie Sans Fards* – her autobiographical account of her years living

in Africa – as “ la plus cher à mon cœur” (“the dearest to my heart” (Condé, *La Vie* 56) of anywhere she has lived. Nevertheless she emphasises the syncopation between Touré’s revolutionary rhetoric and the reality of the city she experiences. Her 1976 novel, *Heremakhonon* – a Malinké word meaning ‘waiting for happiness’ – takes up this question of the lived scale of revolutionary life. In particular, the novel examines possibilities for dissent, freedom of conscience and individual responsibility under political pressure. Set in the fictionalised city ‘La Pointe’ against the backdrop of a dictatorial president, the novel is an allegory of the Guinean situation, and particularly of the shrinking space for contestation and opposition that Touré’s (recast as the dictator Mwalimwana) regime produced. Condé herself corroborates this reading, writing in her autobiography: “le mythe entourant Sékou Touré était tel que les opposants étaient uniformément assimilés à des contre-révolutionnaires et peu écoutés. L’accueil réservé à mon *Heremakhonon* paru en 1976 en est la preuve. Que j’ose peindre Sékou sous les traits du dictateur Mwalimwana offusqua journalistes et lecteurs à la fois.” (“Such was the myth surrounding Sékou Touré that opponents were uniformly considered counter-revolutionaries and barely listened to. The reception of my 1976 *Heremakhonon* proves this. That I dared to portray Sékou as the dictator Mwalimwana offended both journalists and readers alike”) (Condé 112).

In the novel, characters are disappeared for wavering from government edict, and opponents of the regime are constantly on their guard. In this context, the contrarian protagonist, Véronica, a philosophy teacher newly arrived from Paris on a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm, struggles to know who to trust and who to believe. Gayatri Spivak has written that the novel stages “a timing which is in conflict with a time that belongs to the mental theatre of the protagonist” (Spivak 88). She notes the disjuncture between Véronica’s personal life-world and the social world she lives in. It is important to emphasise, however, that the novel’s temporal

syncopations are often also ethical syncopations. The novel's non-linear form also reflects the difficulty Véronica experiences in positioning herself in a changing landscape of rumour, new friends, and fast-moving politics. Her fixed ideas, and pre-fabricated support for the revolution, are out of kilter with the progression of events. For all that she teaches philosophy, she struggles to navigate right and wrong.

Indeed, Véronica is slow to notice and understand the importance of the worsening political situation that surrounds her. In her autobiography, Condé describes the consolidation of the official in Conakry, registered in descriptions of the official buildings that dominate the Conakry cityscape (*La Vie* 55) and of how school students are forced to march in military style (*La Vie* 143). In the novel, the radio is deployed to symbolise the encroachment of the official into everyday life. In her car and at home, Véronica listens as the radio broadcasts military music and the president's "phrases creuses" ("hollow sentences") (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 218). At the end of the story, Véronica hears a broadcast informing the public that her friend Saliou has killed himself in prison, which is clearly untrue; he has been killed. Ibrahima Sory, a government minister with whom she is conducting an affair, comes in and turns off the radio (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 235). His action represents the disappearance of expressive space, which has contracted from official information, to official lies, to silence. This scene is the moment Véronica realises too late that she has misread Ibrahima and the gravity of the political situation, which she had earlier dismissed as the necessary tribulations of a revolutionary trajectory.

Indeed, Véronica's relationship with Ibrahima – a man one of her friends describes as "un assassin. Les mains rouges du sang du peuple!" ("An assassin! Hands red with the peoples' blood!") (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 47) – is a central focus of the novel. It becomes increasingly

clear that Ibrahima is involved in the arrest and later killing of a close friend and one of her students, but this does not stop Véronica from pursuing the relationship, despite her friend's warnings. Véronica's individualistic pursuit of her own desire is often unsettling, even appalling. For example, she responds to one night of particular political violence with delight that the unrest forces Ibrahima to stay at home and spend the night with her: "les soulèvements politiques d'un pays ont leurs bons côtés." ("political uprisings of a country have their silver linings") (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 221). At another moment, she thinks to herself: "Ibrahima Sory, assassin du peuple. Je veux tout ignorer." ("Ibrahima Sory, assassin of the people. I don't want to know") (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 76). In important ways, Condé represents Véronica's decisions as myopic and inadmissibly individualistic.

At the same time, in Condé's narrative, written from Véronica's perspective, there are gendered stakes to disobedience and non-compliance. Véronica's self-interest is also a response to paternalism and controlling behaviour from men on both sides. Ibrahima is clearly controlling, but so too is Véronica's good friend, the anti-government militant Saliou. Confronting her about her affair, about which he is disgusted, he declares:

Tant d'hommes dans ce pays! Des copains de lutte, solides, sérieux! Il fallait précisément que vous choisissiez celui-là!

Il me paraît soudain qu'il a un fier toupet. Qu'il veut m'enrégimenter, m'embrigader. Jusqu'à l'amour que je ne dois faire qu'avec celui qui lui convient ("So many men in this country! Solid, serious comrades! Of course you had to choose that one! / All of a sudden he seems to me just a proud man with a nerve. He wants to enlist me, to enrol me. Right up to only sleeping with people he OKs") (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 105)

Here, Véronica experiences Saliou's censure as a patriarchal attempt to marshal her behaviour and sexuality. Her students, too, who hear rumours of her affair, leave misogynist notes on the blackboard of her classroom. She responds, in her head: "Putain de ministre? Moi? De quel droit me jugent-ils? Me rasent-ils la tête?" ("Minister's prostitute? Me? What right do they have to judge me? Are they going to shave my head?") (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 106). These two exchanges reflect the critical distance between Véronica and the other characters that the novel's first-person speaker establishes. Véronica is frequently parsing, expounding, disagreeing with her interlocutors, to whose thoughts we are not party. As such, the character Véronica, for all that she is sometimes misguided, represents an active, critical voice.

In *La Vie Sans Fards*, Condé characterises friendships with militants as sites of micro-coercion. For example, she discusses her friendships with Amílcar Cabral and Mário Pinto de Andrade, militants fighting against the Portuguese empire. In some ways she characterises these militants warmly, but she also presents them as controlling. Notably, where in *Heremakhonon* it is Ibrahima who sends cars to pick her up at his whim, in her autobiography it is Cabral who sends cars for her, angering her (also controlling) husband: "ma femme n'est pas une call-girl", hurlait-il" ("My wife is not a call-girl", he would shout") (Condé, *La Vie* 94). Again, Condé highlights the personal and gendered pressures she experiences to step into line with others' ideas of acceptable (women's) behaviour. Referring to Cabral and Andrade, she writes:

mes nouveaux amis profitaient de ces moments de détente pour me prodiguer des conseils [...] : apprendre à parler les langues nationales, remplacer mon afro par des tresses [...] On ne te demande pas de te déguiser en Africaine ! plaisantait Hamilcar [sic]. On te demande d'essayer de t'intégrer [...] Moi, je commençais à

détester ce mot ‘intégrer’ (“my new friends took advantage of these moments of relaxation to give me advice [...] learn to speak the national languages, replace my afro with braids [...] We are not asking you to disguise yourself as an African woman! joked Hamilcar. [sic] We are asking you to try to integrate [...] I began to detest that word ‘integrate’”). (*La Vie* 87–88)

Condé does not present the militants and the president as equally repressive. Her representation of the different scales of power is more fine-tuned. Nevertheless, Condé emphasises similarities between the marshalling dynamics of the authoritarian government, who want people to follow the party line, and her progressive friends, who also want her to do as they say. Condé’s understanding of the coercive underpinnings of ‘integration’ has parallels with Véronica’s experience of Saliou’s disapproval of her affair.

Véronica is a flawed character, but Condé’s novel values her insubordination. Véronica’s insistence on prioritising her own interpretation is a frictive personal posture towards patriarchal power that comes from different directions. In this sense, we admire her *initiative* despite her mistakes. In *La Vie Sans Fards*, Condé describes friends whose contestatory temperament she values highly: “Olga et Seyni désacralisèrent la vie politique et m’apprirent à la considérer une perpétuelle source de dérision” (“Olga and Seyni desacralized political life and taught me to view it as a constant source of derision”) (*La Vie* 86). Here Condé gestures to the importance of a sceptical distance towards the state, an attitude that, in *Heremakhonon*, is most powerfully displayed by the young student Birame III.

Early in the narrative, Birame III is arrested for his part in a school satire of the president. The authorities demand he participate in an official ceremony of repentance. When he walks on

stage, he refuses to repent, instead shouting: “Jamais, jamais. Ils trahissent la révolution. Jamais, jamais” (“Never, never. They are betraying the revolution. Never, never”) (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 79). Birame III is disappeared. In contrast to his martyr’s principle, Véronica wavers and prevaricates, reluctant to take a position on the government’s treatment of students. She dismisses the situation as the president encouraging “ces enfants” “these children” (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 74) to undertake “une autocritique [...] à chaque pays ses méthodes” (“self-critique [...] each country has their own methods”) (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 74). Birame III never returns and is presumed dead. In the end, Condé’s narrative shows the inadequacy of Véronica’s analysis and failure to desacralize the revolutionary government. At the same time, the novel celebrates the character prepared to pay the personal price for undermining autocratic state authority. It is to this idea of desacralizing the official that I turn next, through a reading of the Guinean writer Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara’s *Continent-Afrique*.

Continent Afrique: *Aha Haaiaa* !

Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara (1930-72) was a Guinean writer who in his youth wrote for the journals *Souffles* and *Présence Africaine* and in 1956 published a volume of poetry in France entitled *Lagunes* (1956). His name also appears on the reconstituted editorial board of *Présence Africaine* after the magazine relaunched with an anti-colonial editorial line in 1955. Because in his later life he served in Touré’s government (Djamilah Condétto-Camara), critics have often read Nénékhaly-Camara as synonymous with the regime. In discussing his play *Amazonloulou*, for example, Thomas O’Toole describes it as an example of “government-approved artistic work” (O’Toole 150). Another critic describes Nénékhaly-Camara as “un proche collaborateur et un admirateur inconditionnel du leader guinéen” (“A close collaborator and unconditional admirer of the Guinean leader”) (Tcheho 49). Certainly outside Guinea, he appeared as a supporter of the regime. In *Souffles* and at the Havana Cultural Congress, he

wrote about the alternative to negritude that was being established. His two plays, *Continent-Afrique* and *Amazoulou* are dedicated to the Guinean people and Sékou Touré respectively. In closely reading his work, however, and in interviews with his family (Youla 2013), a different picture emerges of a writer negotiating plural and conflicted commitments to contributing to the project of building a new Guinea and also to contesting the consolidating dictatorship. Indeed, in *La Vie Sans Fards*, Condé describes Nénékhaly-Camara as a friend for whom contestation of Touré's regime was "violente et passionnée" (fierce and passionate) (*La Vie*, 86). Here I argue that his play, *Continent-Afrique*, published by the French publisher Jean-Pierre Oswald in 1970, with a preface by Mário Pinto de Andrade, should be read as an indictment both of European imperialism *and* of Touré's autocracy. I then ask how this can help us think about what critique looks like in contexts where people cannot say exactly that they mean.

Continent-Afrique opens with the news that an old poet is dead, and the play mainly comprises two visions that follow this announcement. The wounded messenger offers two visions of the future before he dies. The first and most important vision has a whirling, chaotic aesthetic that relies on literalised metaphor. Five elderly "pseudo-savants" ("Pseudo-wisemen") wearing angelic masks try and arbitrate whom to include in "le bilan de l'oeuvre humaine" ("the assessment of human endeavour") (Nénékhaly-Camara 22) they seek to compile:

Cinq pseudo- savants vieux et souffreteux, portant des masques angéliques, discutent. Le premier est français, le second belge, le troisième allemand, le quatrième britannique et le cinquième portugais. (Nénékhaly-Camara 21) "Five old and sickly pseudo-wisemen, wearing angelic masks, are talking. The first is

French, the second Belgian, the third German, the fourth British and the fifth Portuguese”.

To audition for, or make their case for inclusion, characters representing different cultures and knowledge traditions are introduced to the book-lined room by a “huissier” (“usher”). Important events often happen offstage in this play, and here the real energy is outside the book-lined room, where the usher struggles to control a growing crowd. The off-stage chaos disrupts the smooth veneer of the self-appointed arbitration onstage. At the end, the chummy complicity between the *pseudo-savants* dissolves into a fistfight. Their masks come off, and the old men are revealed as hideous and fragile.

Three dynamics establish themselves. The first is a dynamic of confirmation: the *pseudo-savants* only hear things they already think, and candidates with whom they disagree are thrown down “la trappe” (“the hatch”) or poisoned. The second is a dynamic of racism: characters who bring forward the value of African history and cultures are silenced. The third is a dynamic of compression. The scribe, the Belgian *pseudo-savant*, repeatedly entreats the auditioning subjects to say less, to compress their histories to the point of absurdity. “Nous vous prions d'abrégier,” (“We ask you to cut short [your comments]”) (Nénékhaly-Camara 35) the scribe quickly interjects to the characters who appear. Clearly, part of the play’s charge is a critique of self-styled European intellectuals – “nous sommes des savants, c'est-à-dire des serviteurs désintéressés de la science” (“We are wisemen, that is to say disinterested servants of science”) (Nénékhaly-Camara 21) – who want to arbitrate the cultural value of the rest of the world in racist terms under the guise of objectivity. Nénékhaly-Camara’s play is an indictment of European gatekeeping, of the violence underpinning genteel intellectualism, and of telegraphic impressions of foreign cultures. The camaraderie of the English, Belgian,

French, English and Portuguese *pseudo-savants* invites us to see the connections between European colonial logics. These postures seem legible as part of an aesthetics of anti-colonialism that I have above called an aesthetics of independence, that appears to direct its critical gaze towards Europe rather than towards a domestic political situation.

Yet this reading does not exhaust the critical charge of Nénékhaly-Camara's drama, nor attend sufficiently to its weird and carnivalesque character. The play's absurdist aesthetic is increasingly palpable. The European *pseudo-savants* grow more anti-dissident, throwing people down the hatch, killing people, setting books alight and shouting "vive l'autodafé !" ("Long live auto da fé!") (Nénékhaly-Camara 39). The chorus of socially committed women in the opening sequence is transposed with a grotesque yet darkly comic vision of angel-masked old men chanting "Dans la trappe ! Dans la trappe! " ("Down the hatch! Down the hatch!") (Nénékhaly-Camara 30)

In this world of flux, where everything is moving and masses of unseen people are jostling beyond the door, the chorus' slogans are both ridiculous and dangerous. Nénékhaly-Camara's portrayal invites us to critique the *pseudo-savants*' attempts to control, to crush dissent, and to impose their will by dispensing with perceived heretics. As such, it is implausible not to read the play as a critique of Touré's regime, that in 1970 was throwing its own dissidents into prison.

The second vision – whose relationship to the first is oblique – plays three scenes at once: of the anti-colonial militant Patrice Lumumba in prison; his wife and children waiting for him to come back; and bankers in Brussels. This vision draws on Césaire's 1966 *Une Saison au Congo*, widely seen as a critique of post-independence autocracy, embodied by Mobutu's neo-

colonial regime in Zaire (Bush 82). Nénékhaly-Camara's retelling of Lumumba's story emphasises the price Lumumba's family pay for his militancy. "Viva!", writes Lumumba in a letter home. Lumumba's children are resolutely dissatisfied with Lumumba's hackneyed platitudes, and ask when they will get their father back. This is left unresolved. Again, Nénékhaly-Camara's play is dissatisfied with the lexicon of the party faithful.

Indeed, several moments in *Continent-Afrique* strongly allude to Touré's attitude towards dissidents, to the place of an Official Story in Guinea and reflect on the place of interpretation and freedom in that context. For example, at one moment in the first vision, a 'savant anglais' ("English wiseman") (not a "pseudo"-savant) remarks that "Shakespeare a raison qui faisait dire par Hamlet à son ami: 'Il y a tant de choses sur la terre et dans le ciel, Horatio, que ne peuvent expliquer toutes nos philosophies.'" ("Shakespeare is right when he said, through Hamlet to his friend: 'There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy'") (Nénékhaly-Camara 34–35) (Shakespeare et al. 255). Why call up Hamlet here? This well-known line from a character in a political situation that is out of joint is a statement of the limits of doctrinaire thinking and of the importance of being open to things that seem, as Horatio puts it, "wondrous strange" (Shakespeare et al. 255). Moreover, *Hamlet* is precisely a play about the difficulties of dissent in a new autocracy. It stages dissembling and apparent collaboration and the use of drama as a means of challenging power: "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King"(Shakespeare et al. 309). Furthermore, *Hamlet* emphasises the importance not only of performance but of reaction and interpretation. In preparing for 'The Mousetrap' which will represent Claudius's murder of Hamlet's father, Hamlet directs Horatio to look not at the players but at those who watch them: "observe my uncle [...] mine eyes will rivet to his face" (Shakespeare et al. 331–32). Nénékhaly-Camara's

reference to *Hamlet*, then, turns our attention to active interpretation as a significant process in the production of art.

Indeed, Nénékhaly-Camara's play repeatedly calls on its audience actively to interpret what they see. For example, at the beginning of the second vision, narrators address the audience directly as critics, asking them to evaluate images projected onto a screen onstage. The ensuing proliferation of images evades distillation into simple conclusions (Nénékhaly-Camara 42). In this sense, the play situates interpretation not as an act of correctly understanding clear messages, but as a recursive effort of navigating unresolved and complex juxtapositions. More broadly, we might say, the play hinges on a constant movement between performance and response, presenting us with numerous scenes of people responding to things they have read or seen. In particular the play stages many moments of official misinterpretation, when the *pseudo-savants* misread the characters that appear onstage. If Touré liked the theatre because it left, he thought, pleasingly little space for misinterpretation, *Continent-Afrique* is thematically interested in plurality of interpretation, and indeed its enigmatic aesthetic leaves space for many different readings: the events we see on stage are confusing, out of control, hard to read.

The only character the *pseudo-savants* want to accept in their universal assessment of human achievement is Galileo, the celebrated seventeenth-century scientist who challenged Vatican astronomical doctrine, later withdrawing his scientific arguments after being found guilty of heresy, imprisoned and tortured. In Nénékhaly-Camara's play, Galileo is a principled figure, full of regret for denying his ideas under political pressure, who refuses to accept the place inside the book-lined room the *pseudo-savants* offer him. Galileo also appears in *Heremakhonon*. In making her misguided argument that Birame III should repent as the

government demands, Véronica reflects that “Galilée a renié et juré qu’elle ne tournait pas. Et puis l’avenir lui a donné raison.” (“Galileo recanted and swore the world didn’t turn. And the future proved he was right to do so”) (Condé, *Heremakhonon* 74). For Condé’s Véronica, Galileo is an example of the honour of recanting. In Nénékhaly-Camara’s play, Galileo is an example of someone who remains committed to his vocation – and to his scientific project – despite publicly conforming to the imposition of the state: “Sous la torture, j’ai dû avouer un crime qui n’existait pas. O! Faiblesse d’un corps” (“Under torture, I had to confess to a crime that did not exist. O! The weakness of the body”) (Nénékhaly-Camara 31).

Nénékhaly-Camara’s play alludes to Brecht’s *The Life of Galileo*.⁸ When Nénékhaly-Camara’s Galileo refers to the weakness of the flesh, we hear the echo of Brecht’s Galileo who explains his recantation on the grounds “I was afraid of physical pain” (Brecht and Willett 107). Brecht’s play portrays Galileo as a figure who even his own apprentices read as having surrendered to the anti-scientific state and as having renounced the project to which he dedicated his early life. At the end of the play, we find a half-blind Galileo has in secret been crafting his masterwork, the *Discorsi* under the very noses of his prisoners and has sacrificed his eyesight in order to do so by moonlight. Galileo appears to have betrayed the scientific cause and stepped into line with power, but in the end we realise he has not. Rather, as his one-time apprentice Andrea exclaims, “You were hiding the truth. From the enemy” (Brecht and Willett 106). As Andrea leaves with the *Discorsi* manuscript to publish it abroad, Galileo reminds him to hide “the truth under your coat” (Brecht and Willett 109).

Brecht’s play reminds us that dissent in a context of acute political repression is sometimes delivered in terms that deliberately obscure it to certain audiences. Given the subject of *Continent-Afrique*, as well as Maryse Condé’s characterisation of Nénékhaly-Camara as a keen critic of Touré’s, and based on his later wife’s statements about coerced collaboration with the

government (Youla) it seems important at least to entertain the possibility that Nénékhaly-Camara felt there was no option other than to be seen to collaborate with the regime, about which his writing is in fact bitterly critical. It is as such tempting to speculate that an element of autobiography informs Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara's representation of Galileo. My suggestion, then, is that we read Nénékhaly-Camara as one of many writers in different contexts of political repression who have been obliged to harness a dissembling aesthetic and to work within the constraints of not being able to publish everything they wanted to say.

In a poem that appeared in the collection *Au Fil de la Liberté*, published by *Présence Africaine* in 1966, the Guinean poet Saidou Conté muses on the question of constrained speech. Entitled *Paroles Sans Fins* ("Words without ends"), an imagined state of endless expression, the poetic voice is notably oblique:

Parce que tu ne peux dire ce que tu penses

Alors

Alors creuse un trou profond

Dans le roc du ciel (Conté 38)

"Because you can't say what you think / So / So dig a deep hole / In the rock of the sky".

The hint of hesitation in Conté's repeated 'alors' gestures to the difficulty of finding solutions to the problem of not being able to speak freely in the poem's topsy-turvy world where the sky is made of rock. The image of digging into the sky figures the coextension of breaking free and of hiding. If we accept that Nénékhaly-Camara's play might also be read as a critique of the regime he has been taken to be part of, what can it tell us of the evolving relationships between

politics and culture in the post-independence period? First, this observation illustrates a coerced intertwining of critique and collaboration.⁹ Second, it illustrates a methodological point: that if, as critics, we follow the party line and read Nénékhaly-Camara's writing as coextensive with the regime, we cannot see the critique it enfolds.

A final word here on the dark comedy of Nénékhaly-Camara's work. If Nénékhaly-Camara's play is indeed a critique of Touré's regime, it is best understood as a satire shrouded in allusion and suggestion. The absurdist comedy does not point to clear conclusions. At one point, the *récitant*'s mocking laughter echoes across the stage:

L'on a dit de nous que nous sommes des sorciers ! Aha Haaiaa ! (il ricane et son rire amplifié par l'écho retentit aux différents coins de la scène, par stéréophonie, puis meurt)(Nénékhaly-Camara 41–42) “People say that we are wizards! Aha Haaiaa! (he snickers and his laughter amplified by the echo resounds in the various corners of the stage, by stereophony, then dies)”.

The mocking laughter that fills the stage is enigmatic, and reminds the audience there are things it does not understand. At the same time, the self-assurance in Nénékhaly-Camara's refusal to explain away this moment of strangeness appeals to the audience to notice. Laughter here is a protean signifier, whose energy and intractability is itself subversive in the context of official expectations of artistic clarity.

Boredom , laughter and the anti-colonial

Maryse Condé and Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara's texts represent partial and in context relatively privileged forms of undermining political authority. But reading their work alongside one another reminds us of limits of official stories and of the place of humour as a response to power. A tonal attitude connects *Aha Haaiaa!* and Condé's description of her friends who "desacralized political life and taught her to view it as a constant source of derision"(Condé, *La Vie* 86). Laughter is not just passive reception, it can be also a form of active interpretation in the sense of drawing out the meaning of what is being said without speaking. We see this in Condé's memory of "pouffer de rire quand Sékou Touré récitait interminablement ses mauvais poèmes à la radio" ("bursting out laughing when Sékou Touré interminably recited his bad poems on the radio") (Condé, *La Vie* 91).

To illustrate this further, consider this vignette from a piece of anthropological work discussing the place of militant theatre in post-independence Guinea. Touré's government encouraged performance at a local, regional and national level. Jay Straker writes: "An evening of militant theatre [...] typically began with declamations of selected revolutionary poetry, memorized and pitched loudly to the crowd by local students. Though not an official competition genre, state authorities considered such 'recitation' (*récital*) a crucial accompaniment of militant theatre" (Straker 224–25). The form, then, was imposed by authorities. The tone, however, was not. Straker continues:

Many accounts of récital ended in outbursts of satirical laughter. An individual would often affirm that he had recited, then voice a few verses of one of Touré's poems with increasingly ironic tone or posture, before finally stopping to laugh. The comic character ascribed to récital mocked [...] the didacticism of revolutionary ideology (Straker 225).

This is another example of audiences interpreting and critiquing the impositions of the state without having to say anything. Kwame Nkrumah's assistant June Milne's comment in her notebook is also illustrative: "S. T. spoke at maximum volume for over an hour, his speech punctuated by cheers. The woman next to me got a bit bored and began to tuck into a huge bag of nuts" (Nkrumah and Milne 220). This image attests to critical heterogeneity: the whole audience did not feel the same way.

Attending to the ways state cultural policies were parsed, laughed at, rejected, half-attended to and re-written can point us to a more peopled understanding of the articulations of culture and politics in post-independence Guinea. This is not the whole of anti-colonial history – Condé specifically says that laughter alone was not an adequate response once "des choses plus graves commençaient de se passer" ("More serious things were starting to happen") (*La Vie* 91). But focussing on moments of laughter and boredom as ciphers for dissidence from the official story is one way of beginning to notice and piece together the obscured histories of dissent and contestation that continued in the post-independence period in Guinea. It also takes us away from the fixation on conformism and earnestness towards an attention to the lived dimensions of anti-colonialism in peoples' lives.

To close, let me sketch some methodological implications of this discussion of Condé and Nénékhaly-Camara. The *Arsenal Institut* in Berlin holds an archive of uncut footage shot in Conakry at the PAIGC flight school. The camera's gaze brushes over some of the Official Story – a smiling Sékou Touré resplendent in white; Amílcar Cabral walking round the *Palais du Peuple*, the public shouting 'Viva!' at a rally. In her film *Conakry*, which revisits the history of PAIGC in Conakry in the 1960s and 1970s, the filmmaker Filipa César draws on these

images of political leadership and of cohesive, supporting audiences. As the Angolan writer Grada Kilomba, who narrates the images in César's film, points out, these startling images represent a visual lexicon that rupture colonial-supremacist histories of independence and post-independence.

But there are also more diffuse scenes in this uncut archival footage that Cesar's *Conakry* did not use; scenes that might have been cut should the footage ever have been edited into a more official documentary. There is a scene about women having a picnic, staged under a tree after filming a scene of women working in the fields. The women look at the camera, static, passive, serious. The camera rolls on. Then the oldest woman calls for something – some salt? – and a camera man runs on with it, everyone laughs, and the import of the scene changes from documentary to set. The power dynamics switch too. The salt-bringer is a young man; she is an old woman. The scene of the young man rushing to bring salt as the women laugh at their friend's demand registers a whole other hinterland of power and desire than the footage shot for the Official Story gestured towards.

There are also the women looking bored and talking to one another at official functions. There is the woman who is being filmed alone at a desk, writing, the vision of the new literate woman. She is trying not to laugh. Her suppressed laughter registers a self-consciousness about the pose she is being put into by the film maker who wants to film a Woman in the Revolution in a serious key. We have a sense that the official story does not map neatly onto their day-to-day lives.

Finally, there are posed images of the children in the PAIGC flight school, in formation, in uniform. But the archive also holds more intractable images of young women laughing together

in the playground (about what? We do not know. It is not part of the official story), and of children playing games with such concentration that they glare at the camera that appears to creep up and disturb them. Are these brief images of indiscipline and response not also part of anti-colonial history? These moments remind us of the place of active reading, interpretation, and critique in histories of anti-colonial praxis. They remind us that it is not a question of a temporal shift from an aesthetics of independence to an aesthetics of dissent, but that dissidence was part of independence. These laughing children and unmarshalled women testify to the anti-colonial at the human scale, and gesture towards the lived histories of an unorthodox anti-colonialism.

NOTES

- 1 (Laachir et al.) Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini propose the term “significant geography” as a corrective to “world” in world literature, a category they argue is “insufficiently probed and theorized [...] by ‘significant geographies’ we mean the wider conceptual, imaginative and real geographies that texts, authors and language communities inhabit, produce and reach out to” (p.290).
- 2 For politico-historical accounts of Guinean independence see (Schmidt) and (Gerits).
- 3 For a discussion of conjunctural analysis, see (Hall and Massey); or (Gilbert).
- 4 See also Manthia Diawara, *In Search of Africa* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- 5 Work is underway in that direction. Examples include the Warwick Research Collective’s discussion of peripheral realism and argument for treating experiences on both sides of the international division of labour as connected and coeval. See also Shu-Mei Shih’s discussions of ‘the south of the south’ (Shih 141) and Orsini’s conceptualization of the ‘multilingual local’ in (*The Multilingual Local* 345–52).

6 This is a pertinent observation in the case of Guinea, whose national archives' collection from that period focusses on Touré's writings and speeches as well as editions of the state newspaper *Horoya*.

7 There is a substantial literature on the gendered blind spots of mid-century anti-colonial movements. As an example of this particular point about discipline, see Phillip Rothwell's discussion of the tests of commitment Amílcar Cabral set Carmen Pereira (Rothwell).

8 Though this is not explicit, it is a reasonable suggestion given Nénékhaly-Camara's subject and obvious deployment of distancing strategies. Nénékhaly-Camara studied in Paris where he would definitely have had access to Brecht's writing. He also read German.

9 PIDE documents note, for example, that Mário Pinto de Andrade, a prominent member of the MPLA who enjoyed Touré's support in Conakry, was anxious to keep a critical distance from president. (Anonymous, 'Informação secreta entregue pelo Embaixador de França').

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