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Essay: The Concept of Play In Congolese/Western Cultures

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Like any other concept, play is an abstraction. It represents as such, a thought, an idea, an activity entertained in the mind. It is, more specifically, a generalized belief or notion, a non-material concern held in common or experienced to similar degrees by peoples of the world.

It, however, loses this universal bent as it is translated by different groups of people throughout the world. It acquires, in the process, certain cultural strings which are inextricably linked to the thought patterns of these different groups of people. Indeed, different peoples of the world organize similar cosmic phenomena in different ways.

One such practical activity is the coining of words to express thoughts, ideas, generalized notions. Thus, in English the word "play" is used, in French the word "jeu" and in Lingala the word "bosakani." Although these three words refer basically to a similar general (universal) phenomenon, each contains, however, connotational variations that may not be found in the others.

In this way, for instance, the word play is defined in the *American Grosset Dictionary* as follows: 1) to amuse oneself; sport; 2) to trifle; toy: 3) to perform upon a musical instrument; 4) to act in a stage of production; be staged; 5) to take part in a game; 6) to focus upon; aim at.

On the other hand, the word "jeu" is defined in the *Nouveau Larousse Classique* as follows: 1) l'action de jouer (the action of playing); 2) recreation, plaisir (recreation, pleasure); 3) Ce qui sert a jouer (whatever is used to play); 4) divertissement public compose d'exercises sportifs (public entertainment made up of sport activities); 5) maniere de toucher les instruments de musique (the way of touching or playing musical instruments); 6) maniere dont un acteur interprete un role (the way in which an actor interprets a role —stage performance).

Finally, the Lingala noun "bosakani" can be defined solely as "the action or state of playing." The other noun close to the word "bosakani" is lisano. The latter strictly conveys the meaning of "game" as played by children and as used in sports events.

In looking closely at these three definitions, one becomes aware of two things. First, the English and French definitions are more elaborate, reflecting varied connotational meanings.

Second, the English and French definitions reflect a greater similarity of understanding about the meaning and role of "play." Both languages are products of a closer cultural universe than Lingala.

I

One cannot provide a full understanding of the concept of play in Western culture without giving some insight into the Western cosmological system.

Deriving its roots from the Greek philosophical thought as it is best reflected in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the Western cosmological system seeks to explain its universe in a dualistic manner. On the one hand, there is what the Western philosopher refers to as "matter," and on the other what he refers to as "form."

While matter incarnates the physical and sensible world, form (or idea) incarnates the non-physical, immaterial or intellectual world. The relationship between these two separate, yet complementary, entities is determined by a process of creative thinking. This is to say that matter is essentially shapeless and plastic, becoming transformed however, by man's creative capacity.

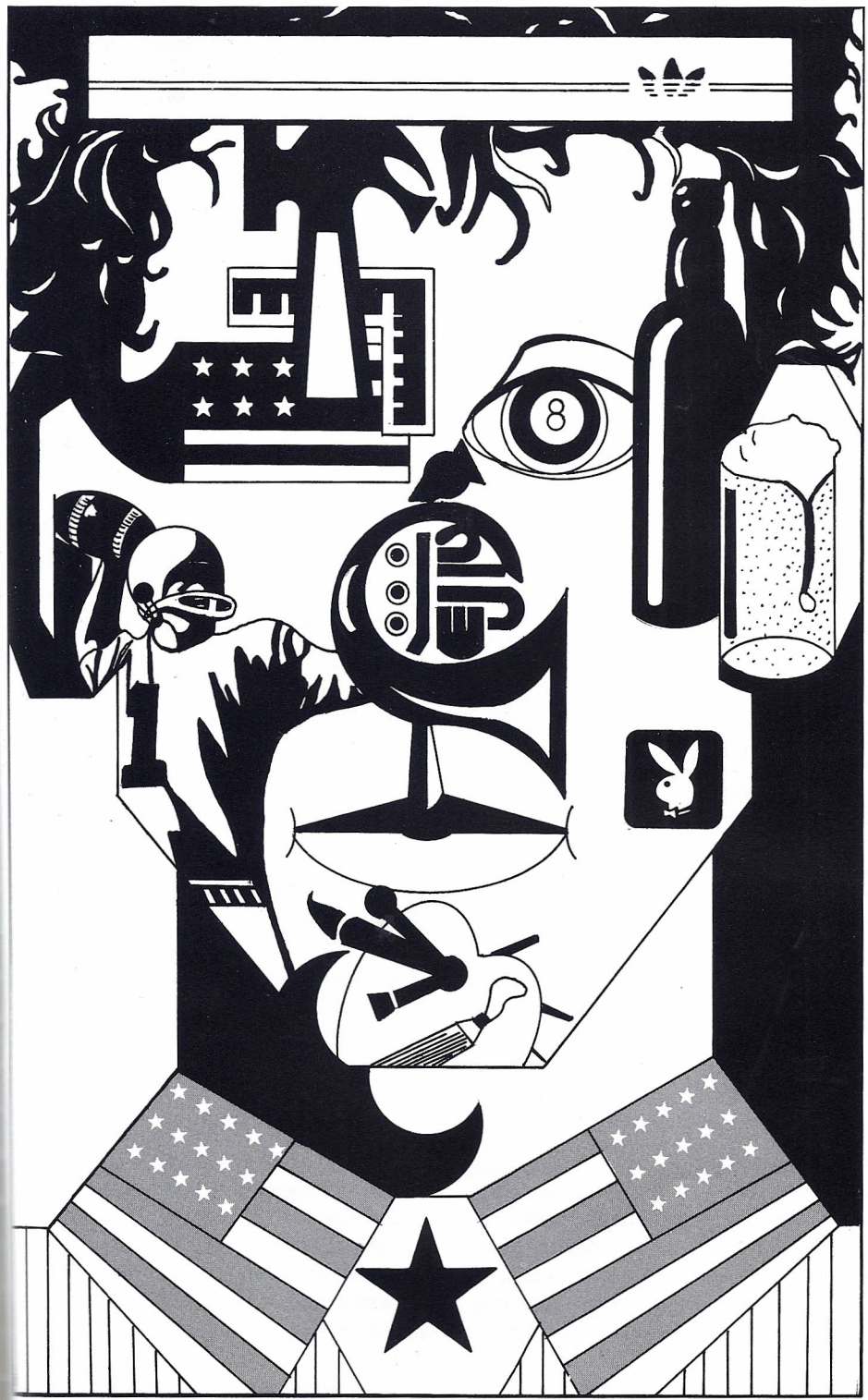
Here, also, two important processes are involved. One is the process of conceptualization (the conceiving of forms or ideas). The other is the process of transplantation of these forms or ideas into physical or sensible shapes. As Alexis Kagame points out in his work, *La Philosophie Bantoue de l'Etre* (The Bantu Philosophy of Being), the Western universe is a priori, a static universe, given the fact that matter in this case becomes energized (vitalized) only when given shapely trappings through the process of creative engineering.[1]

This dichotomy which is further set off by the Christian theological thought (body vs. soul, body vs. mind, body vs. spirit) transpires greatly, along with this high degree of statism, in the debate opposing idealists to materialists. The former argue that the physical or sensible world does not exist independently of man's mind.

In other words, man's thinking capacity creates the physical or sensible world. The latter rather take the view that the physical world exists in its own right and that man becomes conscious of it through his power of sensory and intellectual perception. Which of these two positions is the correct one remains an unsettled philosophical issue. However, both schools of thought agree somewhat that man's activities are geared toward the fulfillment of either his physical (bodily) or intellectual (spiritual) needs.

Western Concept of Play

"Play" in the Western universe is usually considered as an activity intrinsically separated from the other activity so-properly called "work." Although it is realized mostly through physical



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(bodily) undertakings such as dancing, singing, drinking, sports, stage performance, paintings and sculpture, play remains essentially an activity for the ultimate satisfaction of man's psychological (soul) needs (leisure and relaxation).

"Work," on the other hand, is generally looked upon as an activity for the satisfaction of bodily needs (food, money for the purchase of clothing and other necessities). Exception is made in the cases of the puritans and sometimes the artists. The puritans coated the concept of "work" with a religious mystique, equating it with salvation of the soul. The artist, more often than not, has an ambivalent conception of "work." He uses his work primarily to attend to his bodily needs. For example, he creates objects of art and sells them for monetary gains. In other circumstances, however, he chooses to work (or create) in order to express his personality, his state of mind, his soul.

This distinction is implicitly discernible in Johan Huizinga's work, *Homo Ludens*. As a Westerner, he defines play as a concept of enjoyment, as something done at leisure-time and on a purely voluntary basis. It represents then a temporary activity satisfying in itself. It is stepping out of real life and is distinct from real life as to locality and duration. In other words, it is carried on within specific limits of time and space.

Further contrasting play in both Western and so-called primitive cultures, Huizinga posits the view that play as it exists in the West represents an end in itself. By this, he means that "play" in the Western world has more of a psychological than a purely physical role.[2]

At the height of the Roman Empire, for instance, recreational activities had indeed become ends in themselves. Marathon dinner parties during which members of the ruling class used to vomit to

make room for other awaiting dishes became the rule. Accompanying these parties were sex orgies. Moreover, members of the ruling and non-ruling classes (the Roman citizens) packed stadiums to enjoy gladiators' fights. In the meantime, the bulk of physical work was left to both the slaves and coloni (serfs). This amounts to saying that while play was an integral part of Roman culture, work was somewhat disassociated from it.

Equally, in *Man, Play and Games*, the French sociologist Roger Callois defines play as free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, yet regulated and make-believe activity.[3] The stress in this definition is, without any doubt, on the psychological dimension of man's existence. Today, apart from the professional artist who turns such elements as dancing, singing and sports into representational activities of physical work, the Westerner in general considers play as a device for freeing the mind from the psychological tensions caused by work and social needs.

Using the political arena as his frame of reference, Hans Morgenthau argued on the other hand, that among members of older generations play elements such as sports had become highly valued recreational activities largely because they help in repressing tensions triggered by probable fears of violence at both the domestic and international levels.[4]

Play in the Western culture denotes then two things. First, it is a form of behavior organized in a certain way. Second, it is a social reality constructed purely to appeal to the mind or soul, and thus existing outside of social consciousness. As such, it reflects a different value dimension from that associated with such forms of behavior and social realities as work.[5]

II

In the same way that one could not provide a meaningful picture of play in the Western culture without some insight into the Western cosmological thought pattern, so too, one cannot get at the heart of the concept of play in the Congolese culture without some understanding of the Bantu cosmological system.

In diametrical opposition to the Westerners who think of the universe in dualistic terms, the Bantu people have rather a unitary and holistic conception of the universe. In his classic work, *Bantu Philosophy*, Father Placid Tempels argues, indeed, that the universe of the Bantu is a unidimensional universe. The underlying basis of this thesis is what he calls "the vital force." This vital force remains the symbol of the energy which permeates every being, every object and which can be transferred from one being to another being, from one object to another object. In his own words, "everything in the Bantu universe is energy; every being is energy and every activity is the expression of this energy." [6]

This leads him to two important conclusions. First is that in contrast to the Western universe which is, ontologically speaking, a static universe, the Bantu universe is a dynamic universe. Second is that in the Bantu world there is no duality as is the case in the Western world, say between idea and object, form and matter, or even between play and work. For example, among the Westerners, conception usually leads to a perceptual becoming. There is, as such, a linear progression from one step to another.

Among the Bantu people, on the contrary, both the conceptual and perceptual worlds are one single phenomenon. They are both the expression of the "vital force," of that energy which permeates everything. This is the same thing as saying that conceiving an idea and interpreting this idea physically or through the senses are an unilinear activity. It is one form of energy meeting another form of energy. In concrete terms, music, singing, dancing, and art as activities in the mind are but the expression of an existing form of energy. In this way, all of man's activities become intertwined, insofar as they have one common goal: the expression of the vital force.

Basing himself upon Tempels' main argument, Leopold Sedar Senghor, during an address at the University of Zaire, advanced the view that in the African ontological thought, every being, every object stands in complete solidarity and communion with everything else. Likewise, the world of the dead and the world of the living operate like communicating vases, becoming practically inseparable.[7]

Play in Congolese Bantu Culture

In his work, *Kulturgeschite Afrikas*, the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius posited the thesis that play in African culture could not be interpreted in terms of the leisure-time framework. To him, play in African culture carried a deep mystico-symbolic meaning, which was imbedded in the ontological thought pattern of the African. Play in Africa served to represent a "cosmic" event, as a means of expressing the vital force.[8]

Huizinga is, however, at odds with Frobenius' thesis. It is his view that this "ritual" play was no different than regular child's play, and that like child's play, "ritual" play has no origin in cosmic emotion struggling for expression.[9]

In *Leo Frobenius, 1873-1973, An Anthology*, Senghor came to the defense of the German scholar. According to Senghor, "Frobenius understood that emotion, art and myth are all intertwined in African life. Africans are moved by the sense of phenomenon—not by the fact that gives rise to them. Contrasts between the real and the fact,

the sense and the sign are clearly defined by rational thought in Western culture." Frobenius stated that this was not so in Black African culture. Here, the essence of facts, their significance, are perceived symbolically in intangible qualities of things underlying these facts. Intuitive reasoning is one of these qualities; something that is felt, an expression of the spirit, the language of the spirit. Frobenius also saw art as the essence of African life. He understood the mystical aspects of the African cosmos." [10]

All in all, Frobenius' thesis boils down to this. The meaning and purpose of play in any Black African culture cannot be understood away from the mystical nature of its universe. This will be demonstrated in the study of play elements such as music, dancing, and art in the Congolese Bantu culture.

Music in the Congolese Culture

Music in the traditional Congolese culture was a sacred art. Special persons anointed by the gods were entitled to play certain instruments.

The player of the "nsambi" (Congolese version of the fiddle) was one. He usually came from a selected family recognized as such by the priest of the village. As a rule, he underwent a rigorous training during which he learned with dexterity the various songs designed to celebrate life, ancestors and other deities. However, he played a double role in the community: one religious and one social.

At the religious ceremonies, he generally played tunes designed to invoke the spirit of the ancestors and the other deities. His act was associated with a high degree of mystical power insofar as it was identified as a means of either helping the inhabitants of the village to avert physical calamities or generating greater amounts of vital force in humans, livestock and plants.

By virtue of his religious role, he could hardly play the role of a pure entertainer. In the daytime, for instance, he trudged the fields, playing tunes to the men and women tilling the land so as to bring out in them those revitalizing feelings and emotions such as the sense of rhythm or what Senghor calls in the forward to the Frobenius anthology: the capacity for being possessed and for being moved.[11] As such, his social role was using music as a vehicle for inciting great work efforts among members in the fields.

Then there was the "sansi" player. (The "sansi" or African piano is an instrument having strips of metal of different lengths suspended over a resonator in such a way that each, as its end is pressed and released by the thumb, gives off a different tone).[12] The religious role of the player of this instrument was less pronounced than that of the "nsambi" player. His social role, however, had the same basic impact.

In fact, the "sansi" player was usually associated with the caravans of men and women heading toward the marketplace. He generally took the lead, striking his fingers against the metal strings of his "sansi" and producing, in the process, a sound which was matched by a song, repeated in chorus form by members of the caravan.

The music produced by the "sansi," along with the choral song, had as its primary purpose to stimulate a great flow of that vital force in the caravan's members. This great flow of energy was badly needed to assist the members in either maintaining or accelerating the pace of the march. The long distance to be covered—40 miles both ways at least—and the heavy loads people carried on their heads required a great use of energy.

In addition to the music produced by the "nsambi" and "sansi" players, there was the music echoing from doubleskin kettle drums, friction drums and horns. The doubleskin kettle drums are the equivalent of what Melville Herskovits describes as "African hollow log drums." [13]

In his study of "Kongo music" Charles Duvelle described the friction drum as "an open, cylindrical drum to which one skin is nailed; a wooden stick hidden inside the body is firmly attached at one end to the center of the membrane." [14] He described the horns this way: "Each horn is carved from one piece of wood; the air-column is inside the part representing the body and the mouth piece is found in the back, between the two arms.[15]

These three types of instruments were used to produce music at three important occasions. First—at the beginning of the field clearing season, a religious ceremony was organized during which libations were poured on the graves surrounding the village, accompanied by beating the kettle drum, pulling the friction drum and blowing horns. The purpose of the ceremony was to sing incantations to the spirits of the dead so as to invite them to fertilize the soil for an abundant harvest.

Second—at the end of harvest gathering season, a semi-religious ceremony was habitually maintained. There was a lot of palm wine, a lot of food and a lot of dance songs. Before the start of the celebration, the village priest poured libations in the village sanctuary, and left some food for the spirits of the ancestors. This was a way of thanking these ancestors for a good harvest.

Third—at the "matanga" or "malaki" celebrations, generally considered profane ceremonies although the religious flavor was often present. The matanga or malaki are still very important ceremonies, closing the three-year period of

mourning. This is a time of confinement and seclusion for the family members of the dead person. Men and women of the family of the deceased refrain from such activities as dancing, drinking and combing hair. As such, this is a period of symbolic death for them. The malaki or mantanga ceremonies represent the idea of rebirth, of purification symbolized by the wearing of brand new clothes. They were ordinarily preceded by series of libations designed to placate the spirits of the ancestors.

At this point, it can be argued that, music in the traditional Congolese culture had a certain purposefulness which was hardly met in Western culture. It was an artistic activity for different and specific occasions. It was, in addition, a collective artistic process to the extent that it required the participation of the entire village or community. It was, indeed, a communal property with spiritual qualities shared and experienced by all. It was used to express life in all of its aspects.

In the words of the French ethnomusicologist, Herbert Pepper, who spent 11 years in the Equatorial forest, "in the Congolese Bantu culture, what matters is not the quality of the music, but its ability to render emotions, desires and needs as naturally as possible." [16]

Dance in the Congolese Culture

In his now classic work, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits assailed European missionaries for their lack of understanding of, and respect for, the traditional ways of life of the African peoples. As he noted, the missionaries tended to look at the African dances as promiscuous activities, largely because these dances emphasized bodily movements around the pelvis, hips and trunks. Where the missionaries failed, according to him, was to have centered their attention upon the physical performance of the dancers, without attempting to understand the psychological, spiritual and mystical purposefulness of these dances. In addition to being means to help the African express his sense of rhythm, the dances acted as unifying forces among participants in various ceremonies.[17]

Like music and songs, dance ceremonies in traditional Congolese culture were special tools for celebrating life and adding to the vital force by invoking the assistance of the ancestors and other deities. Like them, they were of two kinds. One was the purely religious and the other semi-religious and semi-profane.

While the former was primarily conceived as a device for adding to one's spiritual vital force, the other was identified as an instrument for adding proportionately to the bodily and psychological vital force.

As in many other African societies, there existed in Congolese society what can be termed "the warrior class," the equivalent of the fighting knights of feudal society in Europe. As its name implies, this special group had as its primary mission the defense of the village, the clan or the greater ethnic community against potential enemies. Fighting battles and wars reflected this group's social understanding of work. Before going to the battlefield, this group was routinely blessed by a war dance ceremony during which both the dancers and the priests asked the ancestors to grant physical and spiritual vital force to the warriors.

In the previous section it was shown that special ritual ceremonies were organized at the beginning and end of the harvest season. The arrival of the village priest, accompanied by children carrying corn ears, cassava branches, peanuts and other crops which had been blessed at the village sanctuary served as the starting signal.

In addition to these fecundity ceremonial dances geared toward agricultural concerns, there were among the Mbochi peoples of the northern parts of the Congo fecundity ritual dances geared toward increasing the fishing output.

Of all these ritual ceremonies, be they religious or semi-profane, perhaps the "malaki" or "mantanga" dance parties were the closest to approximating the Western leisuretime. Besides the members of the family of the deceased to whom the "malaki" represented a disengagement from the three years of mourning, the ritual festival was attended by members of the surrounding villages.

At these occasions, professional dancers (male and female), also appeared to exhibit their rhythmic bodily skills and compete at such popular dances as the Wala, the Kimbua (the dog dance), and the Madinga. It should be noted that wine makers and collectors usually looked upon these "malaki" parties as important events, intended to assist them in establishing good reputations for their products.

In the end, as Senghor makes it clear, all these varied ritual dances, be they religious or semi-profane, had a common denominator: the rhythm which is the medium for expressing and increasing the vital force. Rhythm is the architecture of being of the internal dynamism which confers shape and organizational purposefulness.[18]

Sport in the Congolese Culture

Organized sports events as we know them (joust and fencing tournaments in the Middle Ages, football, boxing, racing, jumping, wrestling etc. . . .) were less prevalent in the Congolese society. Whatever sports activities existed were left to the warrior class. On the whole,

there were two predominant types: wrestling and racing.

Wrestling was essentially an exercise for building strong bodies and for ensuring greater protective and offensive skills in the young warrior. Racing, on the other hand, was an intricate part of the overall training of the young warrior, in that it served to endow him with great speed in pursuit of the enemy or during moments of retreat. The young man who failed to successfully complete his training in these two activities was automatically dropped from the "warrior" class. To his family, he became, concomitantly, a figure of shame and disgrace.

III

The object of this essay has been to present a comparative view of "play" in both the Western and Congolese culture. This approach was inspired by a strong desire to show how a universally experienced abstraction such as "play" acquires different cultural trappings in different social settings.

Thus, in the Western culture, play as an "abstraction" became translated in terms of a "leisure-time" or "tension reliever" framework, completely separated from the idea of work, which is associated fundamentally with the notion of physical hardships. This meaning cannot be fully grasped without an understanding of the Western cosmological system which lays the stress on two dimensions: the spiritual and the physical.

In the Congolese culture, on the other hand, this same abstraction was translated in terms of an intricate association between the ideas of play and work. The oneness between these ideas was a clear reflection of the Bantu cosmological system which is intrinsically unitary. Essentially, play was realized through ritual artistic activities conceived as instruments for entering in communication with the world of the beyond (the world of spirits and ancestors). Play, then, was neither a tension-reliever activity nor did it have a leisure time dimension. Rather, it was a medium for maintaining or adding to one's vital force. In this way, music, dance, and sports were not in the strict sense of the term play elements. They were, as such, cosmic events replete with a rejuvenating mystical force appealing to the collective conscience. At the same time they served to seal the social ties in the community by unleashing a greater sense of communion. □

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