

"The African Child": A Vibration of the Soul

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Think what a life would be that was to be finished by death! Think what a vast swindle our life and all its activity would be! Is such a swindle conceivable?

I refuse to believe it. Our soul refuses to believe it. And so, it is in all the rest that I prefer to believe, however surprising it may seem to us when we happen to think of it in our worsser moments, when we are no longer ourselves, when our soul ceases to vibrate, and our whole being becomes sluggish, or is animated by some unreasoning or overreasoning logic.¹

IN a talk entitled "The Soul of Africa in Guinea" that Camara Laye gave to the Dakar Conference in 1963 he stated that there were several impetuses behind his desire to jot down his childhood memories. Initially, he claimed, he wished to commit his recollections to paper before time faded their sharpness, and to write for the pleasure which the evocation of his childhood gave him during his lonely self-exile in Paris.

I would sit down to write and, in my thoughts, I was back again with my friends and family beside our great river, the Niger. That was all I needed. I felt inexpressibly happy and I no longer felt alone, I felt as though I was with my father and mother as though we were talking to each other. I felt their warmth all around me once more. (p. 157)

But these initial aims were rendered far more complex by Laye's wish to reveal the love and mystery, and the mystical link between these two and the soul which he considered informed all aspects of traditional Malinké life: "When writing my childhood memories I wanted them to lead me on to the ineffable, to the minute and patient search for the ineffable which is the concern of all of us" (p. 160). His concern with the ineffable and mystical brings Laye to the concern, central to all his writings, about the destiny of all

human beings — a destiny which he sees as indissolubly linked to the fact that everyone is no more than a traveller in this world, that life is a journey which inevitably involves individuals in separation from the people and home they love, and which may involve them in return and reunion, but that such a union will be of a different kind from that which existed before. And it is the nature of this different kind of union which Laye, through his writing, wishes to discover and explore, to see whether it is possible to achieve once again that state of soul-harmony with his people and with the divine which he recollects experiencing when he was a child. In *The African Child*² Laye fails in his attempt to vicariously aspire to that point where the soul is lifted into communion with the ineffable. Though there certainly are moments when he trembles close to the brink of the mystical the recollection is always dampened by Laye's deep sense of regret and pain at the loss of a life he once led.

When the book opens Laye is an innocent child playing on the verandahs of his father's hut safely enclosed within the compound walls. The reader soon becomes aware that Laye will not follow his parents' pattern of life but will become separated from his family and people as knowledge, or at least uncertainty, gradually takes the place of innocence and that this separation will cut Laye off from the mysteries which he considers fundamentally important to the soul. Describing his father's nightly ritual of smearing his body with liquids imbued with magic charms, Laye claims he never learned what properties these liquids possessed: "I left my father's house too soon" (p. 12).

The reader's awareness of this sense of separateness is reinforced by the dual and sometimes triple perspective used by Laye to present his material. The primary viewpoint is that of the young child and adolescent boy but it is constantly being modified and qualified by the viewpoints of the mature Laye reflecting on his childhood and of Laye, the detached observer, attempting to view the traditional life of Guinea from the position of an outsider. By using this technique Laye is able to distance himself from the narrative, moving one or

even two steps back from the viewpoint of the involved personal narrator to comment or digress without straining his story or appearing to force his autobiographical material. Such a technique inevitably serves to enhance the separation and loss that Laye so keenly feels. It also erects a double barrier between him and the experiences of the mysterious and the mystical. Having described the ordeal of an initiation ceremony, Laye reveals what he, as an adult, discovered later about the event, and then attempts to see the custom from an outsider's point of view. The process whereby he explores the event and seeks to find a rational explanation for the mysteries associated with it — the roar of the Kondén Diara and the presence of the threads of white cotton high up in the bombax trees — is indicative of Laye's distance from the possibility of a communion with his people and with the mysteries, for his rationalising is the antithesis of the unstrained, intuitive response so crucial to participation in the mystical experience.³

A similar process of distancing and rationalising is evident in Laye's account of his stays in Tindican. He makes it quite clear that he is a town boy and though linked to the countryside through his mother's family he is not a part of the country's rituals and rhythms. Hence Laye's description is that of an onlooker or observer, not that of a participant. He sees mysticism in the eyes of reapers but cannot share in the experience. That state of self-abnegation, of inner harmony and communion with a world of grace and union so vital to the mystical experience is denied to Laye because he has become divorced from his people, and although he does rediscover previous joy, warmth and love as he recounts his childhood memoirs he seems to be denied access to the ineffable. This denial is constantly underlined in the *African Child* by Laye's inability to recall, by his admissions that at the stage when knowledge might have been revealed to him he was either at school or had left Kouroussa altogether, by the variations in mood between remembered joy and present sorrow, and by Laye's constant wondering and questioning.

The process of remembering and the interchange of a

chronological narration of the young child's actual existence with the adult writer's reflections on his childhood is primarily effected through the use of specific questions or vague unanswered wonderings, which contribute towards the nostalgic tone of the book. The process of simultaneous recreation and recollection which Laye achieves is further evidence of his distance from the mystical, for the process of recalling the past contains within it an awareness of the present which in turn serves to temper remembrance. The traditional life Laye recreates of his Malinké childhood is, save for one occasion, darkened by the shadow of his present awareness of his separation from his tribe. Only in the description of the night of the Kondén Diara does that past actually become the present — the change from recollection to actuality being achieved stylistically by changing the imperfect to the present tense.

Keeping in mind Laye's account of the night of the Kondén Diara I would make the further point that Laye's willingness to talk at length about certain incidents in his childhood, and his reluctance to discuss others, is connected with his proximity to or distance from the incidents at the time of their occurrence. Where Laye is sure of his ability to recreate the events of his past his descriptions are full and confident, as in his account of the relationship between his father and a black snake, the activities of his father while making a gold trinket, the night of the Kondén Diara and the initiation rites. These accounts are vivid in their recreation of the physical and emotional aspects of each event, but they falter when Laye approaches the delicate topic of the mysteries pertaining to them. This hesitancy and uncertainty are revealed in the questions he asks — questions which indicate the extent to which intellectual development has separated him from his people and their customs.

In the narrative sections of the book the questions posed by the young Laye highlight the inner confusion of the boy during the actual period of his childhood. Should he remain at school and thereby separate himself from traditional family life, or should he stay in his father's compound? Should he put

his hand on the snake? If he did would the snake have anything to tell him? Such queries reveal the emotional and spiritual distancing that was already taking place in the young Laye long before he was physically separated from his family, and also emphasize one of the underlying themes of the book — that each stage in an individual's development occasions a separation from an earlier stage. Thus Laye's schooling took him away from his father's compound and his father's forge and his circumcision separated him from his mother. Each separation is also a tearing away from the warmth, love and mystical union offered by traditional Africa to her sons. Laye experienced such a union most fully in childhood. He suggests that the mature person may also experience this union through a total surrender to the loving and mystical power of Africa — as in Clarence's union with the king in *The Radiance of the King*. Laye also hopes that such a mystical union can be experienced by a "return" through the process of recollection, but whereas Clarence does become as a little child again the narrative movement in *The African Child* reveals how Laye himself grew increasingly worldly.

When the viewpoint changes to that of the mature Laye looking back over his childhood and adolescence then the questions assume a rhetorical, reflective quality indicative of the adult Laye's uncertainty about his past life. That Laye's recall is imperfect he himself admits, and I would suggest that his frequent use of rhetorical questions on these occasions keeps in front of the reader the sense of loss and regret, and more importantly reveals Laye's unwillingness to persist too forcefully with his enquiry. He feels that a too-persistent hammering on the doors of the mysterious creates further separation and reduces its beauty and power. In addition he has a respect for the sensitivities and beliefs of his parents who had to large extent led traditional lives and whose commitment to the tribe and its rites was still strong; and he also respects those aspects of Malinké life which were not talked about because they were mysteries which tradition insisted should remain so.

I also think it possible that at times Laye's recall is deliberately imperfect, partly because he wishes to re-create that sense of timelessness which goes hand-in-hand with an idyllic childhood:

How old would I have been at the time? I cannot remember exactly. I still must have been very young: five, maybe six years old. (p. 11)⁴

Imperfect recall also serves to intensify the sense of mystery and awe and to make the present temper the ecstatic remembrance of the past:

It was the best time of the year, the summer and all it stands for, all it holds and cannot hold — for how could it contain so much profusion? — and it made my heart leap with joy. (p. 47)

There are perhaps a few occasions when Laye's taking up the position of a detached observer does not sit easily with him, when his queries are superimposed too self-consciously and also somewhat naively on the basic structure of the narrative and tend to intrude and therefore alienate the reader. But generally this shifting point of view works well and exemplifies Laye's belief that:

... the world rolls on, the world changes, my own world perhaps more rapidly than anyone's; so that it appears as if we are ceasing to be what we were, and that truly we are no longer what we were, and that we were not exactly ourselves even at the time when these miracles took place before our eyes. (pp. 62-63)

The shifting viewpoint is also crucial to Laye's process of recollection, for it enables the past to be recreated for its own sake. It sharpens and clarifies the influence the past has on the present, and it reveals what it has to offer to the future.

It is quite clear from statements in "The Soul of Africa in Guinea" that for Laye, travelling his weary paths of exile first in France and then in Senegal, the recreation of his past in *The African Child* offers him the possibility of a spiritual rebirth in which his soul may once again roam free and experience the love and mystery of union with the sublime. So much of *The African Child* is concerned with revealing forms of love, and with suggesting the essential linking of love to the sense of mystery whereby love is transformed into a union with the divine. So the goldmaking episode is transformed into a communal ritual during which Laye's love for his father and his awe at his father's mystical powers are caught up and reflected in the praise-singer's chants, in the woman's breathless anticipation as she watches her trinket developing, in the hush of expectancy and reverence which emanates from

the apprentices and other onlookers gathered in the forge, and in the goldsmith's state of purity which signifies not only his excellence as a craftsman and his love of his craft, but also his mystical communion with the guiding spirits of his race (embodied in the little black snake) and with the very elements of creation themselves: "Were they not the spirits of fire and gold, of fire and air, air breathed through the earthen pipes, of fire born of air, of gold married with fire — were not these the spirits he was invoking?" (p. 26). It is during moments such as these that, as Laye claims, his soul vibrates. Such moments vitalise and sustain him. "My whole being cries out for wonders, for prodigies, and when I recognize their presence I know it is the better part of myself awakening, my whole self."⁵ But it is not only the rarer events of Malinké life that are suffused with "mystery indissolubly linked to the soul"⁶: the mystical also hovers very close to daily life. The black snake, the guiding spirit of Laye's father and of the Malinké is frequently to be found in the workshop. The harvesting of the corn at Tindican, the night of the Kondén Diara and the initiation rites are annual happenings, but they are also the outward manifestation of the love, mystery and corporateness of the Malinké tribe, for in cutting the harvest, braving the roaring of Kondén Diara and most particularly in the act of circumcision a Malinké bonds himself to his ancestors and to his descendants and sinks his individuality into the identity of the tribe. And it is precisely this oneness of life, this mystic unity within the Malinké tribe from which Laye, in his exile in Paris, feels himself cut off. He cannot experience the rhythms which endow life with meaning and which convert each individual into an archetype, and though in *The African Child* he is able to graphically recreate many of the scenes and emotional experiences of his childhood, though he is able to recreate a sense of the atmosphere of mystery pervading his early life, the actual "door in the wall" to the mystical experience remains closed to him.

This sense of exclusion is also reinforced by the recurring use of the term "paths" which inexorably lead a "traveller" into

exile and consequently into a state of disunion. There is a constant physical reminder of these 'paths' running alongside the Laye compound in the form of the railway which, while it seems to co-exist quite peacefully beside the compound, can be considered as both a symbol and an agent of separation. It takes Laye away from Kouroussa to Conakry and therefore serves to break up the traditional system of community existence. But there were also abstract paths with which Laye had to deal. "Ah what was the right path for me? Did I know yet where that path lay?" (p. 20).

The paths he has to travel may not be clear to the young Laye, but what does become clear is that separation is an inevitable feature of his life. The different values of the traditional and the modern, the tribal and the individual, the old and the new are placed side by side and Laye is propelled towards the new making conflict with and a breaking away from the old unavoidable. "Now I was ambitious," he says in chapter nine. And that a separation occurs should not, I think, be at all surprising for it is surely foreshadowed in the distancing which has already taken place between the harmonious, communal, pastoral life led by the inhabitants of Tindican and the more specialised, individual nature of life in Kouroussa. Laye's father is an excellent example of an individualist who, by his own resources, has reached an outstanding position as a craftsman in a country rich in craft aristocracies, and he urges his son along the same individualistic path that he pursued: "Seize your opportunity!" (p. 117).

It has been argued that the values of Laye's mother "maternal, traditional and authoritarian"⁷ are the ones Laye did not choose. That she is more traditional than her husband cannot be denied, but I would also suggest that she was not completely immersed in the values of tribal tradition, that she could stand back and review certain customs and rites with an anxious and even scathing eye. She is quite outspoken in her criticism of the night of the Kondén Diara, and mistrustful of goldsmithing since it involved the craftsman in keeping for himself the gold left over after alloys were added.

I think it quite possible that the young Laye would have absorbed some of these maternal attitudes, both because he loved his mother and spent so much of his early life with her, and because he recognised the deep respect in which she was held by her husband and by the other members of the compound. His mother's critical views of Malinké life seem reflected in the young Laye's own comment after he has been circumcised and initiated into Malinké manhood. Even at this stage in his life he seems distanced from the traditional attitudes of his people, and he speaks of the physical pain and of the separation from his family. "Men! Yes, we were men at last, but what a price to pay!" (p. 105). This distancing from the mystical experience of the initiation has already begun to inhabit the power to recall.

It is perhaps Laye's own sense of separateness from his people even when he was a child that is the most significant factor in his inability to share in the mysticism of his tribe. His separation began with his first entry into school. He was marked out, as the words of his father later indicate (p. 153), for something different, and this sense of difference, intuitive and unarticulated rather than conscious and verbalised, may well have both protected Laye and set him apart from his contemporaries. He was the eldest and favourite son of his parents and came from a relatively wealthy family. Wherever he went, whether it was to his maternal home in Tindican, to his father's relatives in Conakry or to his own home in Kouroussa, he was treated as a favoured child. Even at his circumcision he was protected by the skills of his family, for the circumcisor was a relative (of his mother's family) and an expert operator, whose skills helped to reduce the anxiety and pain.

It is education which serves as the strongest barrier preventing Laye's union with his people — not the informal community and family system of education which takes place when Laye is instructed into the mystery-spirit world of his father, or when he is instructed in rural community ways by his uncle Lansana, but the formal Koranic and French education he receives in Kouroussa and Conakry. On the

surface Laye's schooling seems to have been a harmonious experience, indicating that perhaps the fact of formal education had been quite easily integrated into the traditional way of life in Guinea. But it is education in *The African Child* which precipitates the conflict between the new and old, the modern and the tribal, the coloniser and the colonised. School is presented as cutting Laye off from his traditional environment; his wearing of school clothes at Tindican sets him apart from the other boys there; his schooling prevents him from making the social rounds and giving his labour as a thank-offering to his healer after the circumcision rites. Education prevents him from believing in the powers of the witchdoctors and it causes physical separation from his home and family — a separation which is projected as a kind of amputation, which in turn produces a vehement and tearful protest from traditional Africa (symbolised by Laye's mother) at her severance from one of her sons. Most of all, schooling cuts the umbilical cord tying Laye to his mother Africa.

However, I think that Laye's evaluation of the experience of the night of the Kondén Diara may well serve as the guiding principle to his belief in a purpose behind his own exile, his mother's fierce grief and pain and his father's quieter sadness. It is possible to see each of these painful and frightening experiences as "a test, a training in hardship, a rite" (p. 72). They are inevitable happenings, which by being faced and endured enable the individual to come to terms with his baser nature thereby purging himself of those "worser moments when we are no longer ourselves, when our soul ceases to vibrate and our whole being becomes sluggish, or is animated by some unreasoning or over-reasoning logic."⁸ And it is this revitalising of the soul, effected either within the rituals and customs of the tribe or striven for imaginatively through the process of recollection, that Laye strives to accomplish in the writing of his childhood memoirs. But I consider that in *The African Child* Laye remains cut off from the mysteries and consequent mystical union which he so longs to experience. It is not until two years later, in the writing of *The Radiance of*

the King that he imaginatively regains the state when the soul is untrammelled, vibrates and is fit to join in mystic communion with the ineffable.

NOTES

- ¹Camara Laye, "The Soul of Africa in Guinea" in *African Writers on African Writing*, ed. G. D. Killam (London, 1973), p. 161.
- ²Camara Laye, *The African Child*, transl. James Kirkup (London, 1959).
- ³That Laye believed in the necessity of an unstrained, intuitive response to the mystical is evident in *The Radiance of the King*, the basic theme of which reveals that Clarence can aspire to communion with the black boy king — symbol of love, mystery and the sublime — only when he has ceased striving towards such a goal and is in that state of grace where his love and will surrenders to the love and will of the ineffable.
- ⁴Compare Dylan Thomas, "A Child's Christmas in Wales" where a similar kind of timelessness is presented: "I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve, or whether it snowed for twelve days and nights when I was six." *The Norton Reader*. (3rd. ed.) ed. A. M. Eastman (New York, 1973), p. 1.
- ⁵"The Soul of Africa in Guinea", p. 161.
- ⁶Ibid, p. 160.
- ⁷David Carroll, "Camara Laye's *The African Child*: A Reply", *African Literature Today*, No. 5, 1971, p. 130.
- ⁸"The Soul of Africa in Guinea", p. 161.