

Sangha – 45.51.36.08

“There is more poetry in a
grain of reality than in all
the brains of all the
poets.”
M. Mauss

Sitting on a sisal mat, out of the midday sun, Ana was meticulously arranging the various small items he kept in his leather bag when I arrived at his house. He was a notable from Ogol-du-Haut – a totemic priest - who was due to be enthroned as a *Hogon* within the next few months. My approach the previous week, when I had submitted my request for permission to film, had therefore been imbued with proper respect.

The courtyard was so tiny that I had to move a large mortar stored in a corner before I could sit down. Once we were both settled, we exchanged the customary greetings and Ana gave his answer. “Thank them, thank them, they ran the race for the father’s children. Because of them, we speak as one. Now, they have sent someone to see if we really have managed to speak as one. Thank them. Tell them that Griaule dammed up the water and that before then, Sangha was not here. Today, Sangha is established. We cannot see. They are the ones who can see. Water is fishes’ eyes. Without water, fish cannot live. They are the water, we are the fish. Thank them...”

During her final stay in Sangha, in July 1998, Germaine had been saddened to discover that it was impossible to organize the sowing ceremony, or *bulu*, due to rivalry between different families. Her knowledge of Dogon country and her advanced age earned her a very special place in Sangha and the elders always greeted her with great respect. During an interview with Ana, she had expressed her support for him, but also her sorrow that these conflicts could cause such disruption in the village’s ritual organization. Ana was particularly touched by her action, as he had been encountering hostility from a section of the village for many months.

On my return, I showed Germaine the transcript of Ana’s reply. She continued to gaze upwards for a moment, then thrust her head back, pursed her lips and told me how much the words meant to her, as they reflected the Dogon rhetoric she appreciated so greatly. After this brief moment of emotion, she fired a volley of questions at me about the role and place of totemic priests during this ritual devoted to sowing which, quite exceptionally, had taken place in the middle of November. Ana’s words had deeply moved me and I was delighted to be able to share them with Germaine. The work commenced under the aegis of Marcel Mauss has been carried on by several successive generations of researchers now, and for a brief instant, I felt as though I were one of the links in that chain.

Germaine Dieterlen was profoundly marked by Marcel Mauss' teachings. She often referred to his rigor of observation, inquiring mind and daring ideas. From these, she derived a method of working which was to enable her to apprehend societies in their most manifold aspects, thereby perpetuating the "mission of astronomer of the human constellations" which Mauss assigned the ethnographer.

She used to recall most movingly the day in 1937 when Marcel Mauss had accompanied her to the Gare d'Austerlitz, to see her off on her first mission with Solange de Ganay. It was under his supervision, in 1941, that she prepared her thesis at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes on *Les âmes des Dogon*, a key text for anyone interested in Dogon religion.

One of her favorite stories was how her first job at the Musée Ethnographique at the Trocadéro had been to stick stamps on invitations to the museum's inauguration. She often recounted this anecdote to students as a lesson not only in humility but also in tenacity.

Lucid, uncompromising and passionate, she devoted her life to research in Black Africa, and more particularly to Dogon country.

After Marcel Griaule's death in 1956, she decided to carry on the work they had begun among the Dogon, and 1965 saw the publication of *The Pale Fox*. The fruit of her collaboration with Marcel Griaule, this book presents one of the richest cosmogonic myths in West Africa.

As the years went by, she gradually came to represent a different age and a different world - a role she enjoyed playing - and we still have many tender, funny and surprising images by which to remember her.

A compact would snap shut, leaving a few faint wisps of powder behind. Then, after a swift pat of her hair, to emphasize the discreetly elegant movement of her coiffure, she would be ready to enter a meeting or climb down from the Land Rover, her faithful driver Ibrahima Guindo at the wheel. She never went anywhere without that compact. As time went on, this gesture became increasingly outmoded - and increasingly endearing. Young researchers were astonished, friends were moved. I often associate this gesture with the sight of Jean Rouch winding his camera up to prepare for a fresh shot. Germaine preparing her entrance. A few seconds spent outside our time in order to take her place more fully within in.

She never failed to recall the barbarity of the French Revolution, which had decimated her ancestors, the Tessiers du Cros. For the space of a few seconds, the sense of historical right and wrong they had been taught at school would desert her listeners. She would smile at their confusion and then, being far too passionate to opt for the easy way out, inevitably set about explaining the difference.

I first met Germaine in 1976. She had already left her chair at the EPHE to her successor, Michel Cartry. As soon as I told her the subject of my research, she tried to talk me out of it, as she always did when students came to her for advice before setting off on a field trip to Dogon country. Her reaction, which became something of a legend, was part of the implicit rules we had to obey. Students would prepare for this encounter beforehand, listen attentively to the arguments she put forward and then, in some cases, defy her with a pleasurable anxiety. This absence of encouragement certainly did not signify any lack of interest, but rather a very personal restraint which actually inspired students to persevere. This was a veritable

discipline for young researchers, as she thereby instilled in them the strength and determination they would need to carry out what can sometimes be very unrewarding work. Characterized by control, it was a relationship which never failed to surprise those who considered that intellectual and emotional osmosis subtends all forms of cooperation.

My collaboration with Germaine was based on the *mangu*-type, joking relationship which unites grandchildren and grandparents. We also shared an interest in cinema, a parallel field which complements written research. Her curiosity had been aroused by my very first Super 8-mm documents, as they showed details of the performance of a ritual she had never had an opportunity to attend. Over the following years, our dialogue gradually developed with each fresh set of images I brought back from a constantly-changing Dogon country.

True to the ideas put forward by M. Griaule, in his *Méthode de l'ethnographie*, Germaine Dieterlen adopted film as a method of research at a very early stage. With Jean Rouch, she travelled to Dogon country for seven years in a row, in order to film and analyze Dogon funeral rituals, as well as the *sigui* ceremony, held once every sixty years. Together, they produced documents of exceptional wealth and quality on the major Dogon ceremonies and established archives that could be accessed by the population they were studying.

The cinema had indeed become one of her passions. A sophisticated movie buff, director and partner with Jean Rouch, she had chaired the Ethnographic Film Committee since 1966 and presided the panel of judges at the Panorama of Ethnographic Film since its inception. When the lights came back on after a screening, Mauss' pupil would rise to her feet, seize the microphone and, in a thin, slightly raspy voice, open the debate by questioning the projected images in the light of a different culture. The stimulating originality of her comments never failed to charm the capacity audiences. As Jean Rouch liked to recall, at each new Panorama of Ethnographic Film, her Nigerian friends had affectionately nicknamed her "Madame Eternelle". Doubtless in order to fire our imagination and to believe in it themselves.

Many people drew strength from her apparent severity and optimistic rigor down the years. There was never any room for weakness, discouragement or complacency. "What are you doing at the moment? What are you working on?" Only a few hours before the death she fully accepted, she was still advising me, directing my future research with lucidity and perceptiveness. During those creative and competitive years, marked by Jean's utopian projects, Germaine cultivated a unique family spirit. The university year was accompanied and punctuated by a series of dinners and receptions. Invitations would always go out at the end of a symposium, to celebrate the Panorama of Ethnographic Film or mark the end of the university year. These informal encounters and exchanges, accompanied by much laughter, created or rather reinforced the feeling of belonging to a family, a team. The material details she found so "intensely irritating" were never allowed to interfere in the passionate debates and discussions. Germaine would always greet us with the same impeccable manners - vestiges of a period most of us had never known.

Even so, the fear of the future would occasionally emerge from an apparently innocuous phrase: “When you go to Sangha, plant a baobab near the house”. A small book of prayers, slipped into one of the compartments of her handbag sustained the exemplary courage which led her to refuse treatment even though she knew full well what the consequences would be.

Penning a tribute to Germaine means accepting her irrevocable departure. The act of writing seals the separation. As we oscillate between the continuation of memory and the realization of absence, a dull, pernicious pain ache sets in. The solace of writing is counteracted by the torment of finality, the prolonging of the images which clothe our memory by words which plunge us into absence.

A few drops of whisky poured out for the ancestors accompany the prayers of her Dogon friends: “May the earth lie light upon her!”

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