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# CHÉRI SAMBA AND THE POSTCOLONIAL REINVENTION OF MODERNITY

By Bogumil Jewsiewicki

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly, at least from a chronological point of view, Chéri Samba's art is postcolonial. Who then could mediate the interpretation of the postcolonial better than the colonial? In order to deconstruct the invention of the modern, one should first look at the invention of the primitive as art category. In my opinion, Paul Gauguin's project is the best way to understand Chéri Samba's project, since the latter, at least from an interpretive point of view, is not possible without the former.

### *a) On the postcolonial*

Inventing what no longer is, and perhaps never was, but must be in order to legitimize our presence, to give it a meaning that ensures the link between what no longer is and is not yet, constitutes the most important feature of postmodern invention of the present.

Nowadays, our postcolonial world only seems so because the colonial project has ceased to lend a narrative meaning to both the present and the future. It disappeared with the last empire, it became a trace of the past which was indeed colonial, but which no longer is, neither as a substantive nor as an adjective. From the relative ease of being in referential terms, we have shifted to the reality of being that indeed exists, but which, for want of self-expression and self-invention, is likely to miss its own existence without even noticing it. The postmodern fear of being ill-conceived in the representation that the other could make of us made it so important for us to have the self-representation that circulates in the image market, that ensures our existence, no more after death, but in real life and the here and now. And so, the failure to have one's self-image in circulation means, nowadays, non-existence.

### *b) On postcolonial aesthetics*

Pareyson (1992) provides a methodological basis for comparing Paul Gauguin's and Chéri Samba's projects. Whereas the art work may seem to be an object, one discovers a whole world in it. The facts of a material object open onto what previously seemed to be the impenetrability of a spiritual universe. According to Pareyson, the finished work is both the finishing point of a movement, since the work can only be determined when finished, and a constant plea for interpretation. Every work demands an active reappropriation, not for what it is, but for what its objective was.

It is therefore useful and even necessary to examine the artist's project without actually postulating that it be identical to the work's project. The work that systematically feeds on, indeed constructs itself from other works, whether they are the artist's own former or prospective works, or of other artists, is original. As a project within a

dynamic sum total of other projects—each being a finished project in its immediate relation to the subject, and a project liable to be appropriated by the spectator and differently interpreted by the author himself/herself and other authors—a work of art is thus quartered between exemplarity and congeniality. Thus, “one can resemble others while remaining oneself, and be oneself while resembling others” (Pareyson 4).

### Colonizing as Knowledge: Gauguin’s Invention of the Primitive

He is always poaching on another’s fields; today he is robbing from  
the savages of the South Sea Islands!

—Camille Pissarro, commenting on  
Gauguin’s 1893 exhibition (126)

Leaving the impressionists to join the symbolists, Gauguin was in search of a unitary representation of the world of which the primitive was the principal component. Gauguin’s pictorial work, his writings and correspondence clearly demonstrate the importance of this concept<sup>2</sup> in his quest for aesthetic knowledge. For the symbolists as well as for Gauguin himself, art was a global knowledge. In 1885 Gauguin wrote: “In my opinion, the great artist is the formula for the highest intelligence...” (Field 198). This statement should be understood in light of Charles Morice’s exhortation that “art must be brought back to its principle—to thought...” (Field 199).

Gauguin tries to reproduce the fundamental truth of the world, that is in the form that compels relentless search (Riconda). One of the ways of this quest was Gauguin himself, his thought, his memory. Thus, he rejects models and geometric perspective; he refuses to copy nature. To devote himself to painting alone, he concentrated on a mediated approach, and as much as possible, he saw the world only through already existing images, through interpretations/appropriations of images produced by other artists. Gauguin literally steals images. Buisine describes his painting as a “particularly vast and varied collection of other artists’ paintings” (115). Gauguin himself wrote to Odilon Redon about his departure for Tahiti: “I am taking with me pictures, drawings, indeed a small world of friends...” (65, letter dated 1891).

Gauguin hoped to discover liberty and truth by getting to the heart of origins: “his own, which he longs to have as ‘savage’ and indian, and humanity’s which he imagines as idyllic” (Cachin, *Gauguin* 223). Steeped in Japanese, Indonesian, Peruvian, and Egyptian arts, in Epinal’s images, stained glass church windows, and in christian art of Brittany, he invented Tahiti idols. Buisine suggests that these idols are indeed images of Gauguin himself reborn primitive (112). Pissarro said that he was collecting curios (Cachin, *Gauguin* 230) and it is worth remembering that many of his fellow painters did the same without leaving Paris.

To paint “La orana Maria,” Gauguin drew his inspiration from the frieze in the Borobudur buddhist temple at Java, from which he had photographs (Fezzi 32-427). Octave Mirabeau describes this picture as a “disquieting and racy mixture of barbaric

splendour, catholic liturgy, hindou reverie, gothic imagery..." (126). Gauguin's dream of a spiritual communion with the primitive, which the woman best represents, translates a truly carnal union which does not seem to distinguish clearly between the spiritual and the erotic.

a) *Endless painting and endless book*

By (re)painting Manet's Olympia in 1890, he was rewriting *Don Quixote de la Mancha* three quarters of a century before Jorge Luis Borges. Gauguin's writing—through the lines and colors he draws—announces his project, which is his desire to part with the linear passage of time, with progress. It isolates him from his old friends, among them Pissarro, who accuses him of being antisocial. The act of writing, in its broader sense of drawing a chain of arbitrary signs to indicate the world that has meaning, is for him—as it will later be for Borges—a rearrangement of the library or the infinite museography of all times and cultures. The Olympia—just as other images—dwells in him. He repaints it, among others, in "The Loss of Virginity" (1891), in "Manao tupapau" (1892), in "Te arii vahine" (1896), and in "Nevermore O Taiti" (1897). For Gauguin, his works are part of the museology in the making; he often quotes himself (Buisine lists such instances, 114) somewhat as a scholar—a writer of reality—uses virtual quotations to make visible his relationship with the "tribe" of those who know. To produce the "effect of reality" (Barthes's *l'effet de réel*), he anchors the act of painting in the world around him. He hangs up his own paintings on the walls he paints, as in the case of the 1893-94 "Self-portrait with a Hat" (Fezzi 48-187) featuring in the background "Mamao tupapau." He revisits the same images as in the case of the "Self-portrait with Yellow Christ" and the "Yellow Christ," both from 1889.

Let us note another way of revisiting an image which takes him through a spiral movement to a global painting. A single painting is only a word of the formula, an attempt to establish the representation as global knowledge. In 1892, he paints the "Self-portrait with an Idol" (Fezzi 38-452) by revisiting the idea of a "Self-portrait with Yellow Christ," yet switching from religious symbolism to the primitive. The latter passes from Brittany christian folklore to the primordial primitive. Gauguin presents himself with the idol implying the very purpose of his travel—the search for primitive Gauguin. Three years earlier, in the middle-ground of yet another Brittany painting ("The Beautiful Angela" of 1889), the image of Gauguin's own hand-made pottery prefigures his first idol.

Like an ethnographer of his time, Gauguin collected documentary evidence (Buisine 116), thanks to regular visits to the Paris 1889 Universal Exhibition, an abundant visual documentation: pictures cut out from illustrated magazines, photos from the frieze's bas reliefs in Borobudur buddhist temple at Java, a fresco drawn from the tomb of the 18th century Theban dynasty conserved in the British Musueum, and travel accounts. His limited knowledge of the language and culture indeed significantly affects his construction of the primitive. For instance, he did not seem to be aware that "ta matete"—the title given to one of his Tahiti paintings—comes directly from English, "the market" (Daniels-son 81, 102, 105). While at Papete, he visited the small museum of the catholic mission which then held some writing-tablets of Easter Islands, of which he incorporated hieroglyphic signs in the "Merahi metua no Teha'amana." This painting constitutes a

kind of anthology of images: Teha'amana assumes a sitting posture typical of a Tahiti woman at the photographer's studio, but the composition is influenced by a hindu-inspired fresco. The title, which means "Teha'amana has a lot of relatives" (Danielsson 143), lends it an ethnologic significance and initiates a kind of dialogue with the image: as the primitive woman Teha'amana, this painting, which tells the very essence of the primitive in modernity, has also a lot of kins.

Travel is only a pretext, a way of giving rise to the primitive. The pictures he owed to Egypt, Indochina, Brittany, and the Tahiti, words he appropriated shamelessly, are only a way of calling forth the primitive from the depths of his innermost being. In his way of inscribing the Tahiti words, without paying any attention to the integrity of the language, there is indeed a colonial attitude of deliberate disregard. The recourse to the exotic written word has two essential functions in Gauguin's project. First, it authenticates his expertise—the Tahiti words and phrases inscribed on those paintings correspond to a list of words that many travelers incorporated in their narratives. Second, this writing of which he is both the inventor and the translator gives him the chance to consider himself as an expert, the master of the word, the demiurge who recreates the world. The polyphony that results would open a space where everything would henceforth be possible and dared.

Often interpreted in anecdotal terms, the painting "Aita tamari vahine Judith te parari" (1893-94) constitutes the most elaborate example<sup>3</sup> of Gauguin's research that presents the primitive as embodied into the modern, the place elsewhere hidden under the place here; it contrasts the desire supposedly free elsewhere with the norm here, the spiritual with the erotic. The monkey at Annah's feet makes us think of the crucifix of Brittany self-portrait or of the idol of the Tahiti one. The colors of this monkey bring to mind some of Gauguin's self-portraits, and let us remember that, for Gauguin, "color is, to the same degree, music, polyphony, symphony..." (Gauguin 27, undated text). The little monkey—Annah had the monkey mascot—prefigures "Oviri" (savage), a ceramic, strange, barbaric and androgynous sculpture Gauguin wanted to have erected on his tomb (Gauguin 10). It is Gauguin himself as savage exiled in Paris, while Annah's portrait carries the caption "Judith is still a virgin." She was the daughter of his Parisian neighbors at the time, of the same age as Annah and his Tahiti vahines, all minors and all objects of his desire.

The play between the inscription in Tahitian and the image, or rather Gauguin's conducting of two musical lines—one drawn solely with the help of letters and the other with lines and colors—introduced innovative changes but was not unprecedented in his painting. In "The Vision According to the Sermon or Jacob's Struggle with the Angel" (1888), Gauguin already proceeded in the same manner: the composition is inspired by a Japanese engraving, yet the neighborhood of both scenes—Brittany women coming out of church, which is stylistically inspired by a folkloric imagery, and Jacob's struggle with the angel, also stylistically derived from christian imagery—creates a counterpoint between what is before our eyes and what our culture teaches us.

Gauguin does not despise using "mechanic" images; photographs, especially those of Charles Gustave Spitz (Danielsson 81), are used in his paintings like his 1893 "Pape moe" or the 1899 "Tahiti Women" (Walther 80).<sup>4</sup> He also uses them to paint portraits as much of models that are inaccessible because they are dead, like the case of his mother in "Exotic Eve," as of those in his immediate environment, such as his 1902 Tohotana portrait. It is

possible to interpret this recourse to photography as an affirmation of his willingness to paint only images mediated by others. Gauguin pursues his search for a polyphonic construction of painting and of knowledge through which he hopes to build the space of liberty. In his unending painting, models and sources of inspiration are implicit instead of being hidden.

Before Teha'amana's portrait, Gauguin painted "The Loss of Virginity" and his self-portraits—especially "The Wretched," which he sent to Van Gogh, and the other one entitled "Christ in the Garden of Olives," which corresponds to a poem by Aurier (Cachin, *Gauguin* 127). The most synthetic of his paintings, "What Is Our Origin..." (1897), which closely resembles Wagner's aesthetic program and Verdi's *Aida*, was called "a great immemorial opera of humanity" (Cachin, *Gauguin* 235).

*b) The Primitive: Anthropophagous colonialism*

It seems Gauguin loved playing with identities; suffice to recall his 1890 painting "Exotic Eve" (Fezzi 16-390), with his mother's face (Danielsson 37-38; Dorra). Eve, plucking a red fruit absentmindedly from a paradisiac tree, looks like a direct reproduction from a painting by Douanier Rousseau or from a Persian tapestry. Since his Brittany experience, Gauguin returns frequently to Eve, giving her multiple faces; he said to Eugene Tardieu: "The Eve I have chosen is almost an animal; that is why she is chaste, though nude" (Danielsson 202). Eve is for Gauguin the primitive woman since she is primeval; this is why he gave his first Eve his mother's face. Indeed, she is plucking a red fruit, a christian symbol of sin, but the entire painting is calm and serene while red fruit can also mean blood and therefore birth, the coming into this world, the passage from the paradisiac security of his mother's womb to this world which is only sin. The nude woman holding a fruit in her hand, indeed symbolizing new life and fecundity, is often repeated in Tahiti paintings (e.g., see his 1892 "Te aa no te areois," which is very "Egyptian" in outlook [Fezzi 34-439]). It is therefore possible that "Exotic Eve" represents Gauguin's phantasm of leaving for an exotic and primitive island (that is almost all he knew about Tahiti before his departure, according to Danielsson), the phantasm of his return to his origin, his mother's lap. Shouldn't we therefore see in his invention of the primitive a move of absolution from the original sin? Painted two years later, the 1892 Tahiti Eve of "Te nave nave fenua" (Fezzi 36-446), which evokes an oriental divinity, plucks a white flower. Does he mean that at the end of the journey and attainment of the primitive, the paradise (the country, which he looked for throughout his life, where living is cheap and love is free) was to remain for good?

Comparing the spouse of a French policeman and a Tahiti woman, Gauguin wrote: "It was total decay and new bloom, law and faith, artifice and nature..." (quoted by Walther 39). We must also remember Théo Van Gogh's remark about "The Beautiful Angela," that she resembles a young and beautiful cow (Cachin, *Gauguin* 115). Gauguin sees the female nude as an ideal mediator between nature—its closest in resemblance—and civilization. More primitive and animal than man her begetter, woman's body opens onto the primitive; it is by steeping himself in it that Gauguin hoped to find not only pleasure, but also the truth about himself. Annah the Javanese is another of the many, sometimes laughable but more often tragic mistakes made by the painter in search of the true primitive. Annah, whom the painting represents, or Judith, whom the inscription calls prohibited desire, and why not a nude Tahiti woman symbolizing wanton pleasure

as in the primitive land—aren't all these multiple figures of the artist's desire to dissolve himself in the pure primitiveness? Thinking of himself as both monkey/spirit, alluding to "Oviri," and pure desire would eventually free him from the identity of civilized person.

Gauguin's project has been colonial since its Brittany period, insofar as it only reserves for the other a generic identity signifying and representing what the essence of the traveller no longer is, a "virgin land," a "primitive race," he said to Eugene Tardieu (Danielsson 202). Thus, the haunting presence of his face and of the nude female's body may mean, especially, the desire to redeem civilization through the colonization of the most primitive human body, the naked body of the native woman. Isn't that the essence of the first "Exotic Eve," the return to the maternal lap? "What is our origin? Who are we? And what is our destination?" inquires one of his paintings.

Gauguin is both colonial and modern, but he is neither colonialist nor modernist. Walther is mistaken to say that "he came as a colonizer, not with the intent to enslave politically the indigenous people, but to steal from their culture what he thought the old world lacked" (39), just as Pissarro was wrong to blame him, after the Brussels exhibition of the "XXs," "for not applying his synthesis to our modern philosophy which is absolutely social, anti-authoritative and anti-mythical..." (29). Gauguin is rather a lay missionary (like the present day Africanist, Wallerstein suggests) "who might have meddled his life with the Maoris' so much that he accepts all this past as his own. All he has to do is to translate it into a work" (Octave Mirabeau in 1893, quoted in Danielsson 165). Gauguin thus becomes like the anthropologist, both assuming their knowledge is more authentic than the knowledge the savage can have about her or himself. Gauguin might be conscious of it; Buisine suggests that the idols that are arbitrarily positioned in his paintings "constitute as much hieratic and immemorial figures of the primitive artist" (112).

The colonial essence of Gauguin's aesthetic project underlines the authoritarian and mythic character of bourgeois modernity, especially its anthropophagous character. It is in the name of this project dividing the world among us, the Westerners, and among them, the primitives, that Gauguin imposed his search for the primitive on women and on the whole of Tahiti society. His life on the island, his painting and writings—especially Noa-Noa—are buried in the colonial binomial of ourselves and the other, of the primitive and the West that Appiah (1992) denounces. Gauguin wanted to be a savage among the civilized and the civilized among the savages, which is the paradox of every anthropologist. It is an essentialist binomial where only failure of the colonial project of modernization is possible. As Barbara Fields precisely notes, the Westerner believes that a white woman can give birth to a black child whereas a black woman can only bring forth a black one (149). In the colonial culture which still is ours, the only quest for identity open to the mulatto is the ancestry of his non-western parent. The young Alex Haley's claim (1976) to the Irish half of his ancestry (Hollinger 80) provoked laughter whereas his "Roots" claim of the African half of it seemed perfectly natural (Reed 227).

### *c) The trap of authenticity*

Gauguin has no successors in the West, since meantime the primitive disembarked as African idols and other works of primitive art thought to be more authentic than cultures of colonized peoples. The primitive art was and still is considered as the expression of

a timeless tribal genius corrupted forever by civilization brought through colonialism. Gauguin himself found it very difficult to hide from the public his Tahiti disappointments, the fact that his Tahiti women were often Christians, dressed like Westerners, ignorant of the traditional culture that Gauguin would only find in ethnography books, and museums. For Matisse, Picasso, Braque, a generic primitive art provides a mechanism for going back to origins of Western civilization without necessarily leaving Paris. This art has no individual author, no concrete cultural attachments to an existing society—Matisse who bought a “negro” object presented it as Egyptian (Cachin, *Gauguin* 109).

Gauguin made his own identity as a compromise between his imagination and Western representations. Savage by his Peruvian mother, living in Brittany as a peasant he endowed himself with this inimitable “in-spite-of-my-savagery” (Gauguin 11). The desire to be seen like “Oviri” (the savage)—this is what he called his self-portrait in gypsum (Gauguin 10)—and to enjoy the advantages of a savage/civilized had a double price. Gauguin’s returns to civilization became possible only on pain of destroying the “inimitable” he had created for himself. In 1903, while Gauguin was thinking of returning because of his illness, Daniel de Monfreid wrote to him: “It is feared that your coming will disrupt some work and an incubation that occurred in the public opinion about you. You are currently the extraordinary artist who sends from the depth of Oceania his disconcerting and matchless works...you enjoy the immunity of great deaths, you have gone down to art history” (Danielsson 309). A critic of the 1893 exhibition wrote: “We are awaiting in Paris the arrival of a Tahiti painter who will stay at “Jardin d’Acclimatation” (the Zoo in the Bois de Boulogne, near Paris), while his work will be at Duran-Ruel or elsewhere. I mean a true Maori” (quoted in Danielsson 163).

### Chéri Samba and the Invention of the Modern

*a) I mean a true Maori!*

A century later, a “true Maori,” “His Eminence The Artist Samba” (this is the title of one of his self-portraits) disembarked in Paris in the 1989 “The magicians of the earth” exhibition van. There is however a distortion of the prophetic vow of the modernist adventure in painting. The “primitive” of the end of the 20th century did not go to lodge at the Jardin d’Acclimatation, and his art tracks down modernity instead of the primitive.

Mrs. Mitterrand inaugurated Chéri Samba’s 1989 individual exhibition, but the doors of the Louvre remain closed for both the contemporary African artist and the African “primitive” art. Does Chéri Samba’s presence in Paris and New York really inaugurate the end of the monopoly of Western bourgeois taste? Paradoxically, Gauguin had announced a century ago its absolute rule, thus preparing the ground for the coming of the aestheticized primitive, encapsulated in the concept of art with no relation to the society other than a tribal style, under the custody of a recognized interpreter, a professional of primitivism, anthropologist or African art museum curator. Stendhal clearly announced the new trend: “My opinions about painting are those of the extreme left” (6). *Madame Bovary* was received as, and, rightly so, regardless of its author’s denials insisting on having only aesthetic purposes, as an ideological crime (LaCapra). Since the

mid-19th century, art has been more and more conservative, bourgeois or proletarian particularly when it bears on the definition of collective identities which have meanwhile become the monopoly of the State. And so, the fact remains that aesthetics and ethics are truly political subjects.

Chéri Samba is aware of it, even if he avoids discussing the topic, unlike a writer like Yambo Ouologuem who plays in literature a comparable role of a provocator turning against the colonial master the scorn of norms he does not consider to be his own. Pierre Alexandre has laconically expressed the view about the ethics that, as aesthetics, has always been eminently political: "Africans were nude and Europeans were shocked; today it is the other way round" (127). This is not the first time that transfer of knowledge has surprised the colonizer who cannot distinguish between provocation and revolution. The western university, in its institutional as well as human components, finds it difficult to admit that it is as much the object as the subject of a primitive Oedipus Complex (its ex-object). The "primitive" has been imposing itself for the last quarter of this century as the subject of knowledge. It is the triumphant western bourgeois culture that has set up the Oedipus complex as an initiatory rite of political and cultural modernity; today the ritual murder still seems to be the only access to the heritage, up to now the sole monopoly of the jealous father.

*b) The postcolonial dislodges the primitive*

It seems Chéri Samba is the one who succeeded—the claim could also be made that his recognition was made by a few critics and a small number of collectors like Jean Pigozi—in introducing into contemporary art museums the painting of self-taught artists living in Africa. André Magnin wrote, "it is a fact that African art has always been absent from the large international exhibitions and museums of contemporary art. What was involved was a failure to recognize, or worse, ignorance or contempt" (15).

It is not an accident that institutions like Georges-Pompidou Center, the Museum for African Art, and individuals like André Magnin and Susan Vogel have undertaken, at the risk of their professional reputations and credibility, to overturn the canons for judgment, the norm of recognition and evaluation. Confident of his experience of contemporary music in international circles, the owner of a small Parisian gallery, Jean-Marc Patras, made himself the painter's agent, taking his promotion in hand and forcing on it a discipline needed for elaborating the public personality of a star. There is nothing wrong with it, much to the contrary. For which principle, if not the old tenacious racist ideas about Africa, a reservoir of old forms, would an African artist not be entitled to the services of a western agent? The promotion deal is necessary for parting with the myth of primitivity and works produced by an abstract tribal genius. Chéri Samba comments on this in the painting entitled "The contract, why did I sign a contract?" which gives an excellent example of the interview he grants himself before a public whose questions he anticipates. He ends the imaginary interview saying: "I will remain Chéri Samba..." and signs it "Chéri Samba in Paris June-July 90 (acrylic)".

Chéri Samba had been the ideal man to become an international star. For 15 years, he applied himself to constructing and cultivating his own public image, a step which is part of his temperament and culture as a Kinshasa man. "The artist Samba & the siren" of 1978, a painting of which he made at least ten versions, and which dominates his work of the late 1970s, is explicit on this subject. In this painting, "Mami wata"—which he is

always careful to call by its French name, the siren—holds a magic book in the left hand and a snake, a symbol of sin, in the right. Chéri Samba appears through the clouds, flanked by two angels, one of whom holds a Bible. The other promises him that he will become a great artist with the help of God. Yet, the siren—who gives her lovers power and wealth, according to Kinshasa popular culture—haunts Chéri Samba so much that he paints himself dreaming of an imminent consummation of his love with her, though he is fully aware of the fact that she destroys mercilessly those who fail to keep her commandments. She is for Chéri Samba, as for Moke, the prototype of a prostitute, a barren woman, of physical love who deviates from her social procreative role. She is the one who inspires the woman in “The fiancées in the wind and fire” (1989), “Effects ya masanga” [masanga means beer] (1988) or “Pity! the prostitute” (1980).

Like many men of Kinshasa, Chéri Samba is egocentric, a man who cares about his clothes and looks, a self-acclaimed master of the impossible, the one who, in Kinshasa parlance, would like to eat the chicken as well as its egg—an allusion to rumors in Kinshasa accusing, with a hint of admiration, the privileged personalities of the regime for pushing their defiance of social norms to the verge of incest. Chéri Samba mocks this attitude of taking up the most absurd challenge in “Tembe ezali mabe” [I am also able to do so] (1984), which does not prevent him from erring on the side of pride. The painting “Death by hanging” refers to these rumors; the suicide admits in his verdict that he slept with his sister-in-law, his niece, (let us keep in mind that Chéri Samba comes from a matrilinear society in which men have paternal responsibilities toward their sisters’ children) and with the wife of his friend who put him up.

The difference between Chéri Samba and about ten other very talented Zairian artists is that Chéri Samba, thanks to his own immeasurable ego, which is in keeping only with that of the president of his country, remains himself wherever he is. In this way, he makes the best of all his friends, who are also his advisers, without ceasing to be the best postmodern man, since he travels everywhere with his culture, keeps intact his personality and the ability to impose himself on others, to bow to no authority, money nor fame. In New York, just as in Paris, he remains a typical Kinshasa man, always resorting to subterfuge to avoid the enemy he cannot confront, only to reappear somewhere else himself again. It is his deep-seated pride in the politics of cultural authenticity that gave him the ease with which he paints: “Since 1989 Chéri Samba has taken the entire world as his theme: New York, Chicago, Paris, London, Frankfurt... And he also comments on our ‘weird’ art world that he has found out all about and which bothers him. He does this by portraying himself directly on his canvases, the man from Kinshasa who has ‘made it’ a self-taught artist . . .” (Magnin 21).

There is no doubt that Chéri Samba’s self-confidence and its manifestation in all his work owe a lot to the milieu where he grew up as a young painter. Toward the late 1970s at Kinshasa, as a popular painter, he was a frequenter of an informal group of some foreigners and Zairian intellectuals, best distinguished by *Analyses Sociales*, the journal they started publishing in the 1980s. Whenever they met in the Didier de Lanoy’s (Ana Lanzas joined him later) postcolonial salon, the group mocked the colonial taboos, trivializing, indeed holding up to ridicule the racial prejudices, scoffing at the bourgeois culture, drinking beer, having fun, and glancing through comic strips. In the midst of apparent disorder and casual atmosphere, they freely talked politics and expressed their concern about the fate of the Zairian society. This salon, very much of the Kinshasa style

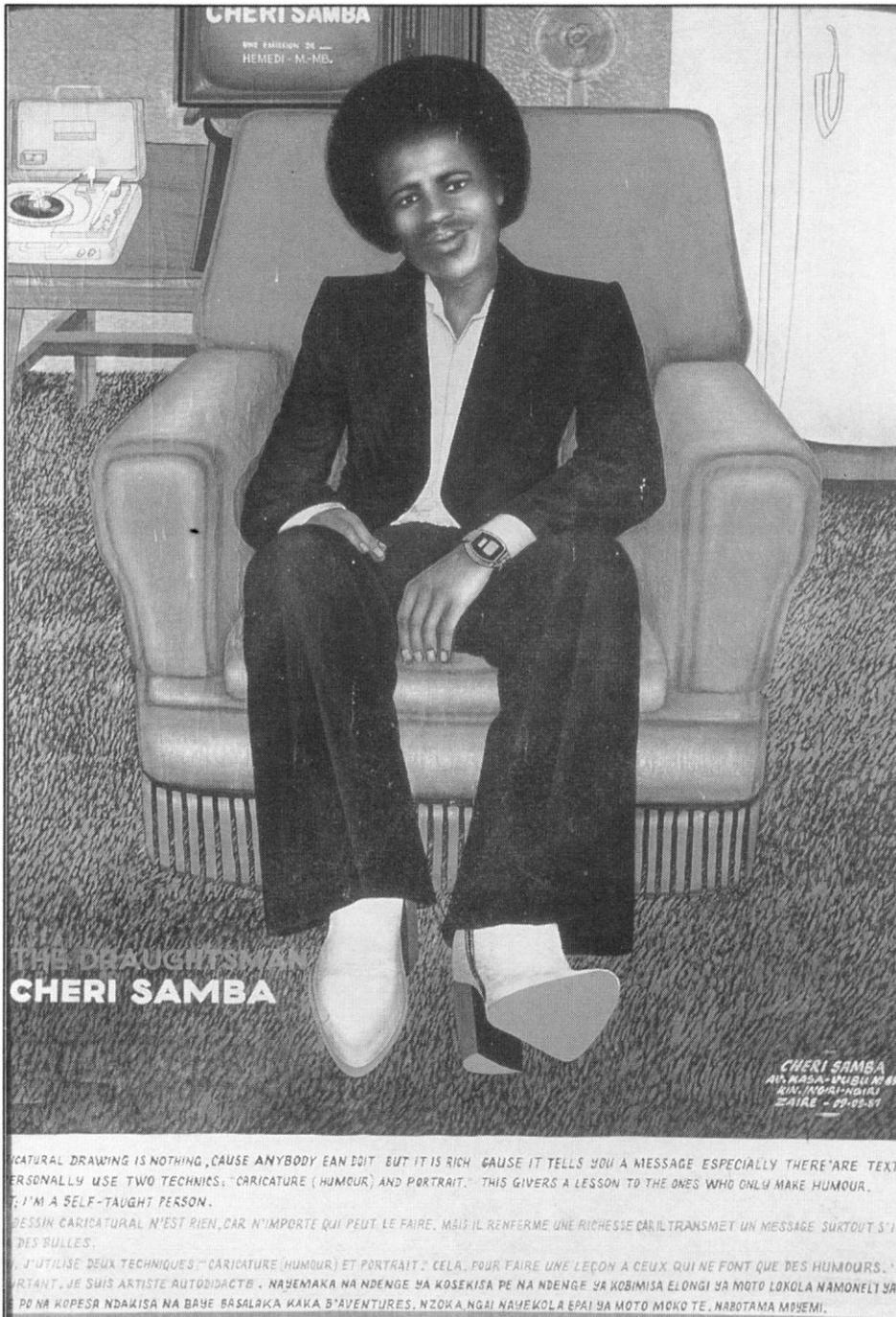


Figure 1: "The Draughtman Chéri Samba," by Chéri Samba.  
*Glycérophtalique sur toile de sac*, Jean Pigozzi Collection, 135 x 101.  
 Courtesy of Jean Marc Patras/ Paris.



Figure 2: "L'arbre," by Chéri Samba. *Glycérophthalique sur toile de sac*, Private Collection, 90 x 90. Courtesy of Jean Marc Patras/Paris.

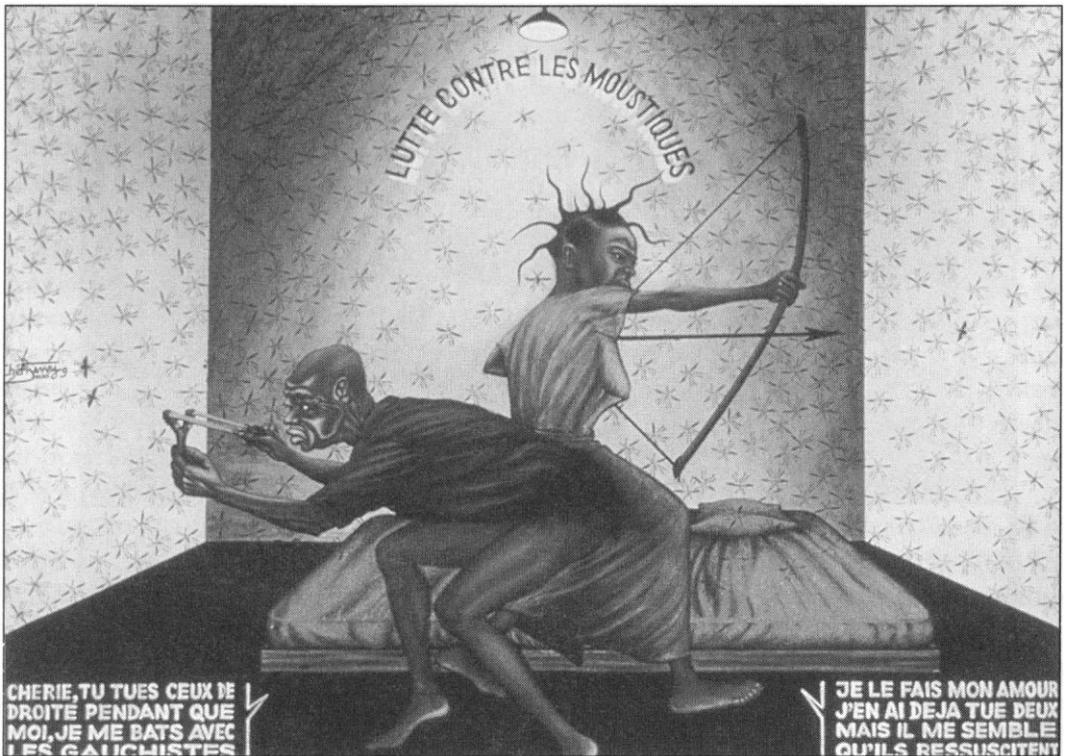


Figure 3: "La lutte contre les moustiques," by Chéri Samba. *Acrylic on canvas*, Private Collection. 81 x 65. Courtesy of Jean marc Patras/Paris.



Figure 4: "J' suis fait pour la femme Africaine," by Chéri Samba. *Glycérophthalique sur toile de sac*, Ana Lanzas Collection, 40 x 77. Courtesy of Jean Marc Patras/ Paris.



Figure 5: "Tembe ezali mabe," by Chéri Samba. *Glycérophthalique sur toile de sac*, Private Collection, 85 x 115. Courtesy of Jean Marc Patras/ Paris.



Figure 6: "Le renoncement à la prostitution," by Chéri Samba. Acrylic on canvas, Private Collection, 200 x 150. Courtesy of Jean Marc Patras/Paris.

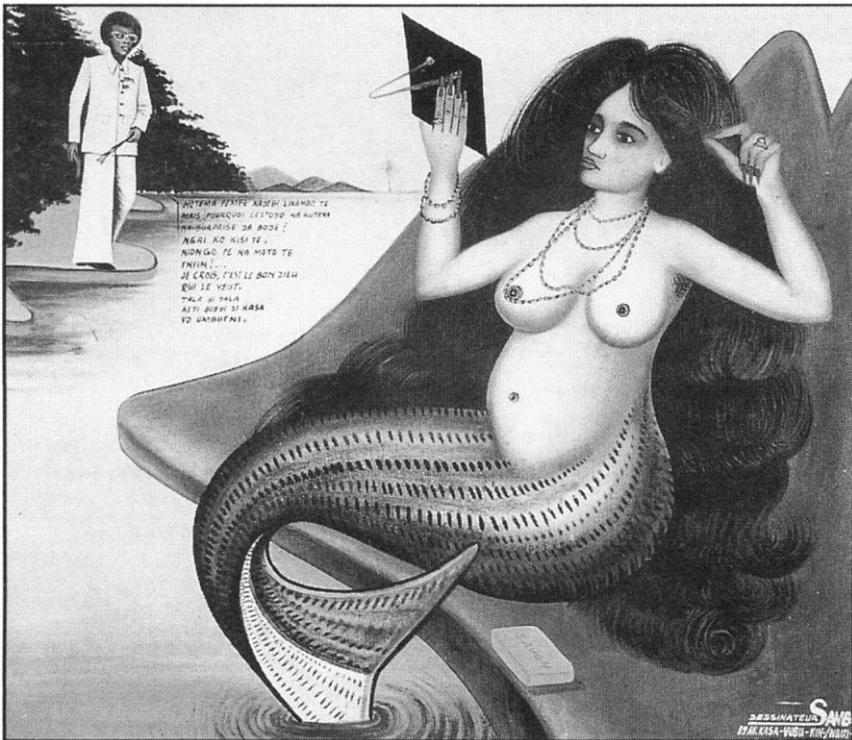


Figure 7: "La sirène," by Chéri Samba. Acrylic on canvas, Louis van Bever Collection, 150 x 120. Courtesy of Jean Marc Patras/Paris.



(de Lanoy's first wife was Zairian) for its open doors as well as for its entrances to many antechambers of power, was helpful in case of real problems. Chéri Samba enjoyed in this circle fundamentally disinterested and respectful patronage and counsel for the making of his personality. This environment accentuated his inclination to the narcissistic attitude of a Kinshasa lover of fine clothes, mixing it with a preacher type of behavior inherited from his father's christian village culture. His irresistible desire to shock people, tinged with voyerism and eroticism both in search of moral justification, found there a fertile ground. To a very large extent, he owes his self-confidence, the ease with which he navigates through the universe of contemporary masters of arts, to this milieu. One always had to be there on one's guard and be quick at repartee to avoid exposing oneself to funny and caustic jokes. Thanks to this salon, as well as Nestor Seewus' and Jean-Marie La Haye's—an amateur painter himself—patronage, he came up against western art. J.-P. Jacquemin quotes, in this regard, Chéri Samba's characteristic reaction. To the Seewus's question as to what he thinks about Breughel's paintings being shown, he answered: "I can do that" (31-32).

In this salon, Chéri Samba attended and participated in the political discussions and ideological disputes. The 1979 painting "Heaven, purgatory and hell are all here on earth according to Mr. Didier" precisely echoes this. At the center of the canvas, Didier de Lanoy and Chéri Samba, both with a glass in hand, display a small flag, chanting respectively "Hurrah for hell, and long live the kingdom of God." They are surrounded by an empty chapel and many people enjoying sexual pleasures. Another painting—"Is there a life after a death?"—takes up the same theme with Jean-Marie La Haye as the central character.

In this circle, Chéri Samba particularly took part in cracking jokes, and sometimes was even a target. His painting allowed him to play tricks on his friends/patrons, who incited him to search for an ambivalent pictorial and verbal discourse. In "The unfaithful woman" and "The naughty cats" (1989), he represents his friends/patrons in rather embarrassing situations, calling them by their first names Ana and Didier. He ceaselessly insists, sometimes with a subtle mockery and an undertone of moral lessons, on his white friends' unlimited interest in young Zairian women and their taste for change (see "Transferred love"). He rejects the role of a painter who merely executes orders meant for a joke. He participates in it, contributing his moral sense which values (male) chauvinism at women's expense, with the condition that his immediate family stay away. It is striking that the only time he painted his spouse was when he presented the most classic middle-class salon of Kinshasa, including a marriage photo on the wall, the refrigerator, the TV and the fan. "Woman and her desires" is a portrait of the salon, which gives man the social recognition and features Fifi (his wife's familiar first name) with a wrist-watch, ear rings, a gold chain and a locket on her neck. There is only one disturbing impression, probably an unconscious resemblance: the very position of the body and the attributes of a woman whose husband can afford to satisfy her desires evoke the image of a siren. Is such a woman, she who gives him children, both a part of the respectable male attributes and the one who channels his wealth from the devil of modernity in exchange from some of his family members' lives?

Jean-Pierre Jacquemin—a frequenter of the salon and a friend who promoted the exhibitions of Zaire painters, including Chéri Samba—tells the story of a painting left by J.-M. La Haye in a debauched state (31). Friends had entrusted Chéri Samba with the

canvas for alterations and finishing touches. The new painting read "I'm made for African women." The notice at the center of the painting read: "An exercise by the student Jean-Marie La Haye, corrected by his teacher Chéri Samba who gave him 35/50." The initial nude on the left of the canvas corresponds, on the right, to a portrait of Jean-Marie La Haye. This opposition underlines, through a moral message, the gratuitousness of an unjustified nude. Was that what Chéri Samba penalized by giving a poor grade to his "student"? At the upper center of the canvas, he corrects him: the same nude becomes an evocation of the flanked siren of another portrait by La Haye, whereas the ambiguous title proclaims "I'm made for African women," half confession, half request for absolution? This theme is taken up two years later in "No more in agreement with the grey beard." A long legend tells, among other things, that the character of this painting, this same painter and friend, is not able to "leave the paradise of young girls of 16 to 20 years of age." A third painting accomplished in a classic style of Kinshasa portraits, painted reproduction of an identity photo, "The grand father's love," reminds of his friend's age, and both paintings evoke an indirect commentary on the joys of Africa which, despite the sense of old age, allow white men to enjoy the gracefulness of young girls. This last painting pursues the creation of Chéri Samba the star's image; in French, the legend, attributed to La Haye, talks about "glorifying my grand son with Chéri Samba's painting."

But Chéri Samba was never a full member of the Didier's band since he was not an intellectual in the classic sense of the word. In this salon, he used to have a drink, or take advice, have his texts in French or English corrected for a painting in progress. His 1979 paintings "Heaven, purgatory, and hell are all here on earth," the 1980 "Let us immortalize the friendship," or the 1984 "Bameli Bangi" stage the setting and its principal characters. In "Let us immortalize the friendship" he does not necessarily present himself as a guest; he is surrounded by the girl friends of his white male friends, of whom Philda repeatedly appears in several paintings. To Didier, who slips his head to the upper left corner of the painting, and whose wife Ana is a member of the band, he yells humorously "Mundele [White man]...come quickly out of my painting."

All this has never prevented Chéri Samba from living a real Kinshasa life, to think in Kinshasa lingala (the main language spoken there), a language in which what is said can only be clearly understood through an association of terms whose simple grammatical structure only produces a general meaning, a culture in which modern popular songs and the Bible have replaced proverbs without actually obliterating them. For want of space, no analysis of the written texts is possible here; suffice it to note, however, that Chéri Samba gives as faithfully as possible an account of different levels of the language, and attributes to each character the appropriate speech between the vehicular lingala mixed with, for instance, the kikongo, the creolized French, the standard French, English, etc.,... He is the child of this city where cure and death fuse together in a powerful metaphor which gives meaning to daily existence, absurd according to western standard. He is that Kinshasa male whose ego, though bigger than the Chinese-made local People's Palace, is so fragile that it must ceaselessly be offered beer, young girls and especially other males' envy. For such a male, whose ambition is to boost his own ego, another man's girl friend or wife is only prey, whereas his own wife remains property, more personal than his own shirt. He explicitly addresses this question in "I embrace French women as much as Philda," or better still in "Ya ozalaka boye?" [Big brother you are like that].

In the true Zairian sense of this term, he is doing his best to “eat” the others, in other words, to promote himself at their expense, and in turn runs the risk, during night and day, especially at night which is the time for sorcerers, of being eaten. Nothing translates the socio-cultural universe in which Chéri Samba evolves better than the Zairian songs and his paintings. This atmosphere of complicity between the governors and the governed, this situation in which everybody is an accomplice of her/his own exploitation (Jewsiewicki *Vivre*), because s/he hopes to become some day the one who “eats” the others, are vividly expressed in life stories (see Mbembe).

*c) The extravagance of a petit bourgeois*

Chéri Samba consciously highlights what other artists do reluctantly. This is even the best characteristic specificity of his work as compared to those of his Kinshasa colleagues. He derives the maximum profit from his piercing look of a cartoonist who takes things seriously. Endowed with a personality of Andy Warhol’s stamp, he claims that caricature is a much too easy genre. Yet, all his work is extravagance and exaggeration, contrary to his life as the head of a family he leads in a conservative petit bourgeois style. In painting, however, Chéri Samba has no sense of measure. His canvases are very large, in an environment where almost every painter works on canvases made of cut-in-half 50-kg flour bags, usually stamped “US Aid.” He hangs his paintings on a tree near his shop and selects controversial subjects so as to provoke a mob in the corner of a busy thoroughfare:

The shop and the two avenues are crowded with people who admire the only painting entitled “Rebellion, (Lulua against Baluba)” exhibited in front of the shop. The roads are closed for traffic. The artist Samba meanwhile has a bone to pick with the authorities of his area. He is forced to remove the painting and pay fines for recalling the sad memories of the pre-independence era. He paints another picture under the name “Happy the people who dance” to win back the confidence of the authorities of his area. (Chéri Samba 79)

Out of necessity, all Zaire painters work in public for want of space, and because avoiding the public eye will certainly invite the suspicion that the artist is doing something underhanded: pornographic painting, sorcery, etc.,... As good artists, they exhibit at the shop-front small “classic” paintings: siren, animals, landscape-paintings that bear testimony to their ability without putting them in trouble. Trying to approach the limit acceptable for different components of State power is not without danger. Chéri Samba escaped it by paying a fine; another Kinshasa artist, Pap’Emma, suffered a few weeks of imprisonment for exhibiting at the French Cultural Center a painting which represented a gendarme making love with a married woman. The military thought they were insulted.

Almost all the painters inscribe a legend or elements of dialogue inspired by cartoons, very popular in Kinshasa. Chéri Samba writes entire stories on his canvases. All the painters try to attract white customers by referring to their collective imagination of Africa. Chéri Samba is bold enough to attract them through their masochistic penchant by

caricaturing their male obsessions for the body of a black woman able to give them a “primitive” pleasure. In his heart of hearts, he is an artist, but he does not rid himself of the craftsman’s pride for a well-done piece of work. The lettering of his texts are over-polished just as he strives to represent other people’s faces with photographic precision. It is in this regard that Jean-Pierre Jacquemin tells a very distinctive anecdote (14). He made it known to Chéri Samba that he had as much difficulty reproducing his own face as he faithfully painted others’. Pushing his regard for perfection to the extreme, Chéri Samba integrated his photo in the painting, “The barren tree that bears bitter fruits is never a target for stones. (Mat.7:17-18).” This 1986 painting is part of the new series of which Chéri Samba is the hero, for being the subject of other people’s covetousness, and where he engages in critiquing the tradition authorizing the exploitation of those who were successful: “The dowry” (1979), “The art of lazy-bones” (1989), “Condemnation without judgment” (1990).

Chéri Samba mocks everybody, and his eyes always ferret about; he respects nobody but himself alone, the great woman killer, the international star. The “I embrace French women as much as Philda” (1984) portrays him in the arms of two white women and gives an account of his conquests: “I knew 394 offices, which means I made love 5 to 8 times a day”:

I love making self-portraits so as to reproduce myself, since I am not a TV star. I love to make the artist known. If the mass media does not come to me, I should be the first to make myself discovered. (Samba, interviewed by Mercadé 10)

This middle class man, careful of the management of his wealth, who invests only in assets—he did not have a car before owning a house and two plots in the urban area—he respects the political and religious authorities. Let us consider, for example, his painting “The Marshal Bridge” (1984) which reflects the official propaganda to such an extent that it gives the false impression of impertinence. Many artists have painted this bridge to their fill as Mobutu’s (Zairian president) propaganda was successful at least for some time, on some notions of a somewhat kingly pride, before it was dislodged by the growing misery. Chéri Samba has always been very sensitive to on-going events in his city, as I have already demonstrated elsewhere (Jewsiewicki “Painting”). In other respects, he fills his canvases with naked female bodies, paints copulation without always hiding it behind a prudish removable curtain. His nudes always have a moral justification, the correction of a social evil; his social critiques always come out as an apparent endorsement of the government:

In Africa nudity is a shocking thing. The fact that an African, a Zaire citizen for instance, can see a woman’s thighs up to her slip, is deemed scandalous...Similarly, hugging in the street is obscene...When I am painting scenes of this nature, I am actually violating prohibitions...My solution to this is to critique these reputedly scandalous scenes and behaviors in the texts that come with the paintings. (Samba, interviewed by Mercadé 86)

Whenever the subjects of the critique are identified, and this is usually the case when he is concerned that he may probably be accused for critiquing the government, it is about his white friends, as in "The unfaithful woman," or in "A suspected kiompuker [one who penetrates]..." or still it is himself, as in "Chéri Samba implores the cosmic" (1979) and "The lake street" (1990). Indeed, he reproduces himself as a guilty but penitent person, regretting his mistakes even before he makes them, searching for pleasure less than he stands up to the challenge of the Kinshasa male: "...give me the courage to display my machism to this woman" —"Yo ozalaka boye?" (1983). His only guilt therefore is his desire to distinguish himself, which is a serious infringement of the "traditional" society's moral, but a proof of election in the urban postcolonial society, if blest by God. Chéri Samba claims he deserved this benediction in "Artist Samba and the siren." In "Pity! the prostitute," the business card which was dropped on the floor serves as a signature that suggests that the client, who dared to leave without paying because he gave sexual pleasures to the woman who directly evokes the siren, is none other than Chéri Samba himself. Similarly, "The lake street" represents him as guilty, since the street covered with pot-holes passes in front of his house. However, this painting gives him, particularly, the opportunity to assert himself as the owner of such a beautiful house. Any time he comes on stage, he shows off as the strongest, the one who achieves the impossible. For example, "Chéri Samba implores the cosmic" suggests that he made love to two women at the same time. "The tree" displays after its title the verse which was identified as Mat. 7:17-18: "The barren tree, or whose fruits are bitter, is never the target for stones." At the center of this painting, Chéri Samba's face sprouts from the trunk of the tree, leaving no doubt about the metaphor, whereas high up on the painting it is inscribed "The immortal Samba wa N'Zinga ("Chéri Samba")." Could anything be more meaningful?

I have always said that I never painted for the sake of beauty but to convey a message. But it is not so simple. For me there are three fundamental principles in my painting: to improve the work, create humor and to tell the truth. (Samba, interviewed by Mercadé 85)

*d) The painting and the knowledge*

Chéri Samba's project has three distinctive characteristics. First and foremost, his painting explores modernity, tracks it down everywhere, examines it, critiques it, caricatures it in an effort to capture its formula and key, and to possess it. This is his obsession which does not leave him any more in Paris than in Kinshasa. His early paintings, which were preserved in private collections, search for the key to modernity in keeping with the siren's body, the aquatic spirit half-woman half-fish. It should be noted that in Chéri Samba's Kongo culture, aquatic spirits intervene in healing whereas Kinshasa culture interprets poverty as an illness. The key to success is depicted in it, somewhere between evil (the magic book) and God (the Bible), between the individualistic pursuit of pleasure—the woman who offers herself—and the respect for social norms. After his big hit in the exhibition of "The Magicians of the earth," after a long stay in Paris and a visit to New York, he said. "After all, we are all the same [Africa and the West]. There is misery in the West also..." (Samba, "La peinture" 87). His quest for the formula for modernity challenges social disparities, and exploitation of man by man: "Paris is clean," and "Frontier-Airport, a developing country."

Secondly, Chéri Samba paints human beings as a moralist, a preacher who stands up as a teacher and a knight-errant whose mission is to save humanity. However, we should understand that it is all about an official figure, a mask worn by a dancer before a public who connives and participates in the ceremony. He defends himself for deviating from this path whenever the spectator realizes that s/he is the cheerful accomplice of a voyeur, of a collector of amusing items, a journalist on the lookout for a sensational event. Chéri Samba, remains a true adolescent of a big city, has an unsated passion for the eventful life of the neighborhood: adultery and other cases of morals, accidents, any kind of police operation, etc.,... He is also a true local moralist, whom the people follow because he touches them with his words. He therefore has to be on the look-out for these events in order to establish his teachings in real experiences, and to allow everybody participating in the preaching, all passers-by who hear his harangue, to feel personally challenged. He is a great amateur of the social pathology he would like to scan with his speech.

I am convinced (unlike Jean-Pierre Jacquemin) that his painting is erotic. He finds it very delightful painting a naked body (see "effects ya masanga" [1988] or "Crazy love" [1989]) and in spite of himself he cannot refrain from it. There are sensual pleasures and that mark of Kinshasa culture which he himself does not forget to underscore, the propensity for anything challenging; the greater the risk, the more exciting the challenge, while rumor constitutes the best of Guinness Book of Records (see "Tembe ezali mabe").

Contrary to Moke, a former protégé of Pierre Hafner, who takes pictures of scenes of urban life like a photographer, Chéri Samba discourses and tells stories that have several narrative levels. He declares, "The truth is most often told in my paintings. That is why there are a lot of texts in my canvases" (Samba, "La peinture" 85). If I have to propose the unique formula that captures the essential of the way he expresses himself in painting, I would say that every painting is an oral interview he grants himself, the transcription of which he leaves to the spectator. It is a production, a typically Bakhtinian performance, staged in similar political conditions. The carnival representation of society's submissiveness to authority, "The march of allegiance" is a cruel farce which naively pretends to confuse political allegiance to the regime with brassiere.<sup>5</sup> He painted several versions of it, some of them with the sub-title "Comic Please," and stretched this notion to the fight against AIDS.

Let us take another look at one of "The march of allegiance" versions: the master of ceremonies roars the usual political slogans from the platform; the transcribed song at the bottom of the painting is a parody of the "Zaroise"—the national anthem of the new regime: the first participant in the parade insists that "it is a parade of allegiance and not of shoes," which is an allusion to the economic crisis and the problem of poverty, because the people marching are barefoot whereas those on the stands wear shoes. Finally, it seems this parade of allegiance is also an allusion to the habit of the local authorities of a small town of choosing from among the girls, who were forced into the parade, those who will warm the night for the invited politicians. Isn't it also the occasion for proclaiming that cultural authenticity is imposed upon the people, who are forbidden to wear dresses declared non-authentic and take christian names? Is it authentic then that brassieres and pants be removed to please the powerful men on the stand? Several of Chéri Samba's paintings deal with the prohibitory politics of "return to [cultural] authenticity."

Thirdly, Chéri Samba's paintings give prominence to the only person most valuable for him, Chéri Samba himself. In the first place, it is about an abundant production of self-portraits which, apart from the siren engaged in a dialogue with Chéri Samba, dominated his works preceding his big success in the West. During the 1980s, Jean-Marie La Haye seemed to be not only his favorite model, but also that white man who served as his figurehead and perhaps even as a new incarnation of the siren. Later, this presence of the self will be less direct, more discreet, assumed especially by the written word, his way of constructing the verbal and pictorial discourse in reference to himself. It could be said that, from a naïve and an unconscious narcissism, Chéri Samba moved to a more intellectual, sophisticated, but also a more perverted egocentrism. The paintings of the 1990s represent Chéri Samba's world, the modern world he conquered, and which henceforth belongs to him.

Chéri Samba not only composes his paintings with the help of images and ideas of the environment, as I have already pointed out (Jewsiewicki "Présentation"), but also seizes them to bring out the meaning behind an unfinished painting composed of references. Thus, the usual interpretation of some 1990 paintings entitled "The fight against mosquitoes" has to take into account the fact that the principal character with a drawn bow was borrowed from a 1989 postal stamp which played a role in the campaign against AIDS. The mosquitoes that the old couple desperately chase around before going to bed represent retroviruses. To add more pun to the text, Chéri Samba resorts to a quotation which he does not even acknowledge. "Renouncing prostitution" quotes, in the form of a souvenir photograph or a tourist painting, typical black beauty with naked breast and is entitled "The era of prostitution." The beautiful half-naked girl carries books on her head. Should one conclude that for Chéri Samba both prostitution and girls' education are white man's heritage? On the painting itself, the same girl is dressed like a poor Zairian woman; the naked breast suggests this time maternity as she watches a pot boiling on a charcoal fire. The very fine confrontation of symbols should be stressed; it makes this painting into a real polyphonic composition. Finally, she refuses money from her former white lover who brings out from his pocket a huge bundle of bank-notes, and this evokes one of his paintings of which he made many versions in the 1980s—"Madeso ya bana"—corruption. Need we recall that in 1990 he said "...the West now accuses us of corruption, and yet it was the West that implanted these values in our land..." (Samba, "La peinture" 86). Should we see in "Renouncing prostitution" Chéri Samba's farewell to the siren?

Borrowing from others does not of course prevent Chéri Samba from denouncing in the painting called "The copyist" the artists who supposedly copy his works while all revert to the urban popular culture images. I have already evoked in this text the development of the siren as a signifier: it allows him—just as it did to Moke and other artists—to paint the prostitute, the barren woman, the love that only aims at sexual pleasures and avoids procreation. Another visual signifying sketch was made through the very successful Kinshasa painting "Inakale" (Biaya) which represents, according to Chéri Samba himself, "a palm-wine drawer who meets a snake on top of the palm-tree. He decides to jump into the river below, since the palm-tree is on the bank, but finds crocodiles on the surface of the water" (Samba, "La peinture" 79). He used this story to paint "A suspected kiompukeur" whereas Moke uses this image to paint in 1991 the "Gulf War" (*Africa Now* 173).

### Conclusion

If western artists no more tell stories, perhaps they simply ran out of ideas!...(Samba, interviewed by Mercadé 87)

I think I have demonstrated the validity of a reading that views with equal seriousness both aesthetic projects, that of Gauguin which, by chasing the primitive brings modernity into painting, and that of Chéri Samba which opens into postcoloniality by searching for the modern. The colonial project, in its epistemological sense, is impossible without the primitive. Gauguin traveled to the earth only to discover the other in himself, because, as Musil wrote, "the object subsists only by its limits, that is by an act of hostility toward its entourage...there is no pope without pagans" (33). But once identified with the primitive, Gauguin consumed himself, since "man only resolutely asserts his fellow-man by rejecting him" (31). Chéri Samba's project, the irruption in the West of the primitive, tracks down modernity and announces the possibility of looping the loop. Doesn't Gauguin's negative, the primitive that assumes the modernity, announce Musil's paradox? In "Renouncing prostitution" (1990), an anthology of Chéri Samba's painting, he affirms that one cannot be better asserted than when rejected. Would the distinction be the key to true knowledge, the key to the questions asked by Gauguin in his painting "Who are we? What is our origin? What is our destination?" Chéri Samba seems to pick it up by appropriating La Hay's unfinished painting. Would it be that the answer goes through the assertion of oneself, however narcissistic it may be?

Regardless of how arbitrary it seems, it is impossible for me to resist juxtaposing "The draughtsman Chéri Samba" and "Annah the Javanese," wishing I am right in seeing in the latter the self-portrait of the savage/modern Gauguin, an announcement of "Oviri." This juxtaposition, which is more of an act of planting two boundary-posts than a plain comparison, gets its meaning in light of what Victor Bol writes about Segalen: "This entry into the absolute, which archaic societies and elaborate religions achieve through the ritual [Bol quotes here Eliade describing Kierkegaard's effort to be Jesus' contemporary as a normal attitude of an archaic man] is what Victor Segalen wants to achieve through a poetic act, which is to represent the very essence of man" (242-43). Gauguin's painting, Segalen's writing, and of course Chéri Samba's work are as much poetic acts aspiring to say "the very essence of man."

### Notes

1. A version of this paper entitled "The Modern and the Primitive—in Search of Ourselves" was presented as The Annual Michael Wade Memorial Lecture, The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, May 10, 1993. A different version, stressing Chéri Samba's search for the essence of modernity, was read at The International African Institute and The African Studies Association joint seminar "African Philosophy and Critical Inquiry," Nairobi, April 26-30, 1993. It will be published in the volume of the conference papers collected by Ivan Karp and Dismas A. Masolo.
2. See Citti's "La figure du primitif dans les années 1890" (1992) for its meaning in the 1890s.
3. "The Exotic Eve" gives us a foretaste of this type of work (Fezzi 390).
4. The painting "Tahiti Women" is also known as "Red Flower Breasts" (Fezzi 76-555).

5. Note the pun. The author is playing with the French word "soutien," i.e., support or allegiance, and "soutien-gorge," brassiere [undergarment], which is a kind of support for the breast.

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