

Ramon Sarró
**INVENTING AN ALPHABET:
WRITING, ART, AND KONGO
CULTURE IN THE DRC**
London, International African Institute/
Cambridge University Press, 2023,
199 páginas.

This is a truly innovative ethnography about writing; a worthy anthropological response to Derrida's deconstruction of the notion. It centers on the encounter between two marginal creators: a brilliant geometrician from Africa, and a seasoned ethnographer who moves way beyond the safe reaches of common anthropological theory to deal with one of the world's largest questions: what does writing do?

Closed in a cell, pinned down to the ground by frightening visions, a young man notices that the cement between the bricks in the wall forms shapes (an S and an Z) that, being symmetrical, can form the root of a generative geometry. This saves him from a life of madness and, ultimately, launches him in a trajectory leading to global academe.

The book is a memento to the encounter between Ramon Sarró and Wabeladio Payi (1957-2013), the inventor of *Mandombe* – a form of writing and a form of art, as well as the system of geometry that is at the root of both. His path of invention led Wabeladio, through a series of tortured

steps, to encounter the Church of Simon Kimbangu, which plays such an important role in Kongo – both in the Democratic Republic and in northwestern Angola. His inventions, he insisted, are *négro-africaine* – thus laying claim not only to a people but also to a land.

At the beginning of the book, Ramon Sarró tells us that “deviants, dissidents, and local sceptics are part and parcel of any society, and they should be part and parcel of any good ethnographic account” (Sarró 2023: 18, n. 7). Well, the book is an exemplification of just that by relation to the author's central concept of “double rupture” (2023: 13), for not only is Wabeladio's biography an exemplary trajectory from deviance to centrality, but the author's own positioning by relation to the inventor's trajectory constitutes an unexpected (and innovative) break away from standard ethnography.

Sarró moves in the contrary direction to Wabeladio: from Lisbon and Oxford to the Kongolese footpaths he trod together with Wabeladio in the hills leading to Nkamba, the Kimbanguist sacred city. In his exercise in ecumenical interpretation, he provides a voice for Wabeladio, just as Wabeladio provides the author with a means to explore creativity. As we read on, we feel in some way privileged: imagine that there had been an ethnographic companion to Blaise Pascal, set on explaining to us the conditions of possibility of his inventions?

Conditions of possibility are the affordances that, upon being encountered, provide the occasion for a thought, an act of communication, or a system of action. Thus, in the book, the analytical reduction traces backwards two processes of invention (Ramon Sarró's and Wabeladio's). There is immense erudition in the way Sarró echoes Wabeladio's work, returning politics to writing, as much as reflecting humanity back upon its objectified traces. At each turn in the argument, we go back to Wabeladio – what he said, what he felt, what he most likely thought. The book refuses to rise above personhood as the source of all ethics.

John Dupré, a respected philosopher of biology, recently wrote an article arguing that there is no good reason not to consider social sciences a part of science, an opinion we can only congratulate. However, he then goes on to downplay ethnography: “even if participatory anthropology gains a certain depth of understanding that is not available to other methods of study, it surely pays a price for this in breadth, or generality?” (Dupré 2016: 548-464). Well, I am sure that, had Dupré been able to read this book, he would realize the absurdity of what he wrote. What can there be that is more “general” than the study of geometrical imagination and its relation to writing – and, in particular, how can these emerge within a historically and personally determined conjuncture?

The Kongolese inventor and the European analyst are captured at a moment when the earlier one has already died prematurely, but after a process of intense interaction between both. The process is asymmetrical, therefore the words we read are the analyst's, the referential world they evoke is the inventor's. Nevertheless, this is a world of intense companionship marked by three pilgrimages: (i) Wabeladio's pathway from madness to science; (ii) Ramon

Sarró's pathway from science to madness (as exemplified in African prophetism); (iii) their joint path through the wooded hills of central Kongo (tracing both of the two earlier paths) from Kinshasa to the sacred city of Nkamba by foot. In this way the book does what Sarró assures us to be Wabeladio's greatest gift: the capacity to trace determination within the entanglement of the assumed world.

Thus, the two works echo each other asymmetrically. Mandombe is (i) a geometry – a study of how shapes appear in the world; (ii) a transcendence – a relation with the spirit world; and (iii) an ethics – a discourse on what it is to be black, African, and Kongolese. Similarly, Sarró's book is (i) a relation between revelation and invention – a critique of ontologistic sociocentrism; (ii) a complex mediation between interior originality (creativity) and external influence; and (iii) a discourse on the constitutive complexity inherent in the relation between creator, cultural instrument, and sociopolitical domination.

The most fascinating analytical aspect of Mandombe is its apparent inevitability – the way it all emerges out of symmetry. Still, as we move on, Ramon Sarró reveals that there is a demon in the system, without which it could not possibly work. The symmetry is at all points cut by asymmetrical lines that allow for the integration of vowel sounds and, in this way, allow the system to represent real scenes and real sentences. As we read on, we feel almost cheated by the way randomness emerges within necessity. This applies both to the writing and to the system of art Wabeladio also invented. The figure that unites the two systems – that strangely geometrical figure of an angel dressed as a bureaucrat – is the higher signal of how Wabeladio had to integrate order with disorder (randomness), so as to create the asymmetries without which life does not thrive. A perfect geometry is a

dead end – ultimate pluralism is the condition for life. Thus, the symmetry between the inventor and the creator is ruptured by the purely random event of Wabeladio’s tragic death in the middle of their joint voyage. And here we return to Ramon Sarró’s notion of double rupture.

The book ends on a peculiar note: “The demand for an African alphabet is there at the grassroot level.” (Sarró 2023: 178) This is interesting if we consider that a new alphabet is not a new language – it is merely a newly private way of communicating. Mandombe will not substitute the Western alphabet, of course. It is not meant to do that. Thus, we can look at it as a call for an *négro-african* form of privacy and self-determination. In light of what is happening today in the continent, there is a tragic note to all of that.

REFERENCES

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Receção da versão original/

/Original version 2024/03/15

Aceitação / Accepted 2024/05/29