

Audio file 38-2

AUTHOR/KEY FIGURE

Ernest Mancoba, Wonga Mancoba

FACTS

Document type:

Audio clip

Duration:

46:52

Language:

Engelsk

Date explanation:

The audio files are undated, but this conversation includes Elza Miles who visited Ernest in August and September of 1990

General comment:

transcription prepared by W. Sze

Sender's location:

Paris

Mentioned people:

Prophet Mohammed

Roman Emperor Constantine

Archive:

Estate of Ferlov Mancoba

DOCUMENT CONTENT

In the first part, they continue their discussion on the impact of religion on Africa; in the second part, they turn to questions from Elza Miles on Ernest's art praxis

About the recordings: Ernest Mancoba's son, Marc also known as Wonga, recorded 200+ interviews with his father. The interviews seemed to serve different purposes and are not in chronological order. A selection, based on art historical relevance and copyright clearance, have been published.

TRANSCRIPTION

00:00 continues from file 38-1 - on Christianity

Wonga:... soldiers

EM: that's it, for practical and political

Wonga: and also because he [Roman Emperor Constantine] needed a unifying religious structure ... for the new form of the Empire

EM: that's it. And so, when Christianity was brought to Africa, ...

Wonga: I just want to say that it is this type of Christianity which has created by reaction, Islam. That is to say, when ...Christianity became a political entity...

EM: that's it

Wonga: ... it became a big power. Then the populations, Arabs, populations felt threatened. And to defend themselves they ...

EM: Mohammed [Prophet Mohammed]...

Wonga:... Mohammed

EM: ...invented

Wonga: ... invented or was inspired by god – I don't know – but anyway he made this religion which, primarily, is a political religion. Because, right from the start, he makes war. He acts like a political leader, he's got armies and organises society like a politician.

EM: oui [French: yes]

Wonga: So that whereas Christianity started without a martyr – a prophet who became a martyr – and many martyrs, as a religion devoted solely to the spirit or to the survival ... to saving ... the spirit

EM: the human sacredness of life

Wonga: and the human sacredness of life, and ...

EM: Jesus Christ says you shall not kill

Wonga: oui, that's it. And so that in Christianity you have the change, the big debate and the change. Which leads Christianity into the opposite of what Christ has said. That you can kill if the King is a Christian – a good

Christian – then you can go to war and kill for him. Which is completely in opposition with the word of Christ

EM: that's it

Wonga: But!

EM: hence the movement and the phenomenon of martyrdom in North Africa

Wonga: Yes. But! In Islam you do not have this change. In Islam, from the start...

EM: it's the sword

Wonga: the sword. And not in the way Christ means the sword

EM: no.

Wonga: it is the political sword. And therefore Islam coming to Africa and Christianity coming to Africa are of the same type.

EM: similar

Wonga: more or less, they are similar. They are the two sides of the same thing.

EM: That's it. And therefore, Marc, by me, the attitude towards art and the sculptures of the African sacred, artistic attitude – the sacred is a matter of secondary importance. So far as these two religions are concerned, and both of them look with a pitiful eye at these barbarians who are worshiping false images, false gods. And the Christians did not use the same methods of violence, but they put their followers in [stops tape]

04:59 [tape stopped and restarts]

EM: the attitude of the colonial conquests from both sides towards African art of the primitive society when it was conquered and Christianised, it is not quite similar. On the side of the Muslims, there was absolutely no compromise between the African art and African sacredness. Anything which was not according to the word of the Prophet Mohammed was absolutely to be resisted by all means. But on the side of the colonial European Christians, we find that even when – Benin – was conquered, the statues and the sculptures of Africa which are today present in the British Museum were not totally destroyed.

Wonga: not totally but many were...

EM: but many were

Wonga: but many were so the attitude is the same

EM: so the attitude fundamentally were the same...

Wonga: it's only that they were kept as curiosity ... things...

EM: possibly

Wonga: ... but not as works of art or as expressions of the spirit

EM: that's it

Wonga: It's only at a later stage, a recent stage

EM: and they were looked upon as idols and false gods

Wonga: that's it, and one thing which you must mention is the experience you had in the Rue Seine.

EM: that's it. On the side of the Muslims, we had a very sympathetic art dealer

Wonga: friend of Sonja

EM: friend of Sonja Ferlov who told us, during one of our visits to his gallery, his experiences in Africa in his attempt to trace and find what was still remaining of African sculptures and he went from village to village, and he collected what still could be found – hidden – and the inhabitants had guarded with great care these sacred images and sculptures of their spirituality. He told us how the people who made these carvings in wood were threatened by the Muslim authorities and told to stop making idols and images because they distracted attention from the worship of the true religion and the true god, who was represented by Muslim religion. And those who stood up and insisted that the tradition goes - and the man tells us, this art dealer – they went so far, the authorities, as to cut off the hands of the artists who made these wooden images.

09:19 [tape stopped and restarts]

Wonga: yes this is true, but on the other hand, it is also true that one has the impression that in the Islamic world, the traditions ... seem to be better preserved, the African traditions, for some of them, some aspects of the tradition...

EM: In the upbringing of my life

Wonga: you were taught by whom?

EM: by my mother and my grandmother

Wonga: especially on the mother's side

Wonga: who kept the memory in your family?

EM: it was my mother who gave the accounts and my aunts who now and again I could meet

Wonga: it's women

EM: it's women

Wonga: more than men

EM: more than men

Wonga: strange, eh. Then

38:39 – [tape stopped and restarts] - Wonga poses Miles' questions about pictorial aspects of Mancoba's work with the totemic figure with the three aspects of its top.

Wonga: then Elza asks the significance of three in the human experience, in general. And then she also ...asks you about ... the significance of the division of the head into two, making three. And with an open top. How did this form of expression develop? And the third question about it is that every work, on either paper or canvas, is done with a responsibility and it leads to an overall reading of the picture space, could you expand voilà [French: that's it]. That's the questions, now try to start with the first, the significance of three in the human experience.

EM: I say three is a number in my effort, unconsciously, as I worked and as I made my effort, more and more significant for myself. I myself noticed and discovered that there was this relationship of three elements which manifest themselves in my [unintelligible]. And upon reflection, and upon thinking about it, when I became conscious of it and realised this evidence, I find that it corresponds to a principle which seems to me, basic, in the effort of human development, as a whole. Even considering the element of birth. Of generations. And this is based upon the principle of three. I explain myself. In the ...

Wonga: the two principles, the two opposing principles...

EM: the two opposite principles in childbirth, for example, you have the male and the female principle which come together. And have a dialogue. And in this intimate dialogue comes the offspring, the child. In nature, in the animal life it's more evident than in the vegetation life. And even in the principle germination of the seeds, in the flowers, the male and the female elements coming together and meeting having a dialogue, and the result is the third element.

42:37 [tape stopped and restarts]

EM: And also, in a more direct way, when one takes two stones and bring them together and strike them together, these two stones produce a third element, which is a flame. So even when there is a dialectic – and a dialogue, a discussion – between two opposite principles, in discussion. Even between two opposite orators in a dialectical discussion there comes a third, the result of this discussion. So that it seems to me a general principle, that three is the result of two single and fundamental elements which give a result for progress.

43:51 [tape stopped and restarts]

Wonga: yes, and also, perhaps in the chemical experiments, very often you have two elements ... brought together and nothing happens. And then when you have a third element, which is called a catalyst, an agent...

EM: a reaction takes place, a chemical reaction takes place

Wonga: takes place, yes.

44:24 [tape stopped and restarts]

EM: In my work, quick drawing, I have a – when I consider the human dialectic and the human presence as symbolised in my expression based upon the

[tape stopped and restarts]

EM: In my effort to keep true to my tradition, and to keep true to the symbolic expression and the meaning of my work was when I felt not to lose hold of the heritage and the baggage of traditions upon which our society, for ages, has been based. And this symbolic figure, this totemic figure, represented itself to me. In this division, for example, of the head into three parts representing the dialectic, and the dialogue, which confronts us, and which is eternal discussion. And which gives a result for a certain time, for a certain epoch, and then, again, is representing itself as a question when new fundamental problems rise up.

46:52 - tape ends