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## **The other wind**

*Phillip Van den Bossche*

*“Is this how a talisman works, I wonder, setting traps made of third meanings? The dangerous spirits out to get you are deflected by the design that is the talisman, kept busy trying to figure out the meaning but cannot. Their mistake. And one we repeat endlessly ourselves, too.”*

(Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 2011)

She came from the mountains, holding a cool breeze in the palms of her hands. The world needs this gentle cold, she whispered, walking in a peaceful way towards the city’s entrance door. The sun was rising and it was getting warmer again. Everybody thought summer and the dry heat would return soon, like every year. But she who walked from ‘adrar’ announced a new balance. If I remember well, it happened on January 22, 2970. Two brothers, both craftsmen, recalled later in their songs that she came from Taroudant, dressed in white with yellow embroidered motifs and wearing reddish orange jewellery. But maybe she came from much further away, from another time when she was still holding stars in her hands like grains of sand. She said the breeze was not only cool but also accommodating, participating and nourishing. Her words travelled from the south to the north and changed the rhythm in the ‘funduq’, the making of tools and the sound of objects. With the years the story became a supporting beam or ‘assalas’, and was sometimes named after she who listened to the wind in her hands: ‘little bear’.

### A Bauhaus detour

When Walter Gropius (1883-1969) wrote about the virtues of handicraft in 1919, this was closely related to the fact that large parts of the industrial and economic structures had been destroyed after four years of war in Europe. “We must all turn to the crafts”, he declared in his Bauhaus manifesto: “The artist is an exalted craftsman. In rare moments of inspiration, moments beyond the control of his will, the grace of heaven may cause his work to blossom into art. But proficiency in his craft is essential to every artist. Therein lies a source of creative imagination.” The new unity he proclaimed between architecture, painting and

sculpture was nothing less than “the crystal symbol of a new faith”. At the same time, scholar Magdalena Droste emphasized that The Bauhaus undertook a tremendous media campaign and modernized the then current means of media communication, “the school constantly produced magazines, leaflets, exhibitions and catalogues, as well as holding lectures in order to promote the new cause”. Much earlier, in the beginning of the 18th century and another context, Seddik Souiri wrote a ‘qasida’ called Jadwal (Talisman). It contains a swirling, helical description indirectly infused with a passion for crafts:

*« Plateaux de cristal sertis de verres  
Et de coupes en cristal réverbère...  
Ma belle interpelle sa servante,  
Oum Keltoum sur-le-champ se présente  
Avec un plateau en or massif,  
Une théière en platine expressif,  
Et des verres et des coupes de cristal. »*

Souiri wonders where the real artists are. Without them, there would be no more joy, splendour and flavour, he writes in his poem. Where are the craftsmen singing this ‘malhoun’ nowadays? Does ‘traditional’ music needs a museum? A closed vitrine only allows to look at the past as an artefact, disconnected from natural resources? The number of artisans decreases per year. What is left of their handicraft within a rumbling, touristic machine based on reproduction? It mutated into a global consuming industry, with origins going back to Lyautey’s Paroles d’action, during the early French ‘Protectorate’ period in Morocco; his so-called master plan (written in between 1912-16) with a grand imperial role for tourism to bump up heritage and craft into modern times. From a medina organised around a large diversity of specialised ‘funduq’ to a contemporary souk where the quantity of transactions prevail, including uniformed ‘gentrified’ store doors illuminated with LED lamps: a worldwide phenomenon moves through the small alleys, questioned in many languages and different parts of the world. At markets in Kinshasa for instance, the Lingala word ‘Ngwanzu’ can spice up disputes. It means ‘China’. The word is derived from Guangzhou, the Chinese production city where just about everything is copied in large quantities. ‘Ya Ngwanzu’ is an adjective used in the Congolese metropolis for anything fake or of poor quality.

Human and environmental aspects are left out of the above, too summarized sentences about tourism related to modernism and (neo-)colonialism. A reductive focus on the aesthetic always leads to the exotic. It's also about me, the viewer, the image maker. Precarious social and economic conditions are easily left outside the artistic, discursive frame. "Theory can never do justice to the contingent, the concrete, or the particular", once remarked Roland Barthes (1915-1980). Maybe we need more historico-theoretical fictions, subjective voices to 'unlearn imperialism'? "Unlearning means not engaging with those relegated to the 'past' as 'primary sources' but rather as potential companions.", writes Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: "I sought out companions with whom entering (or not entering) the archive or the museum could be imagined and experienced as a form of cocitizenship, a partnership against imperial citizenship that dooms different people who share a world to not coincide in it ontologically or politically." Salima Naji proposes in *Architectures du bien commun* to abandon the sterile distinction between tradition and modernity. We're moving away from Gropius' building ideology into another direction when she states: "Il s'agit [donc] aujourd'hui de retisser les liens historiques entre les activités humaines en lien avec le végétal et l'architecture non pas en termes d'ornement mais bien en termes de co-construction territoriale." In her treatise about an ethics of preservation in the south of Morocco she underlines that architectural thought is built above all from the site: "Ce dernier est le nœud des interactions où se tendent les rapports sociaux autour d'un objet concret. À partir de là, la pensée quitte la seule sphère de l'abstraction, voire du virtuel dans un monde de plus en plus dominé par le fétichisme de l'image, pour se confronter à la réalité. Il est alors possible de mesurer le hiatus entre une pensée codifiée par le biais de logiciels et les alternatives techniques possible proposées dans la co-construction du projet avec l'ensemble des parties prenantes et surtout les artisans. Les savoirs ne sont plus dès lors disjointes des savoir-faire mais bien liés dans une même dynamique continue d'enrichissement mutuel."

## Malhoun 2.0

What if emotion instead of reason leads to social change? One could even go one step further and say that the 'malhoun' tradition among craftsmen follows a similar line of thought. The 'qasida' is created to be both sung and listened to within the context of a gathering. The written manifesto, supposed to be read or seen as an announcement, excludes an ecology of sound, whereby poetic

creativity, the act of labour and emotional value are melting together. Both the working as the percussive hand indicate the rhythm and instigate the rhyme. What if the master teacher hierarchy has been eschewed and replaced by a more diverse roster? This second question is a tribute, inspired by how Bisi Silva (1962-2019) set up ÀSÌKÒ in Lagos: she conceived a new house for the arts as part workshop, part residency and part academy. This concept of 'sharing' implicates that a multitude of stories and observations are offered as an option, as a form of learning from each other.

What if there is a thesaurus of non-conceptual words to indicate the relationship with materials, the use and meaning of tools, working techniques and experiences? It has always been an orally transmitted vocabulary rooted in a practise of 'doing together'. It could enrich existing educational systems, refresh modern models as well as the relation between the aesthetic object and the expressiveness of the real.

What if a new ecology of labour is closely related to environmental issues? The complex interrelation between thought and production could move from a process of mere conflict to a more alternating system, infused by new technologies, ecological concerns and the reconnection with traditional methods. Skilled labour is more than simple labour multiplied.

What if the act and the concept of repetition can activate the archive to become a place of dreams? What if Malhoun 2.0 is a collective door on the threshold to re-emerge again? It's a voice, guided by a sonic hand, to open up a multitude of contemporary issues, becoming-minor histories pointing towards a 'fenduq'.

"North and south of the Sahara, Pauline"

One evening, during a group conversation at Sidi Moussa, someone mentioned a quote from Roland Barthes: "Il n'y a rien d'étonnant à ce qu'un pays reprenne ainsi périodiquement les objets de son passé et les décrive de nouveau pour savoir ce qu'il peut en faire: ce sont là, ce devraient être des procédures régulières d'évaluation." It was also Barthes, the restless thinker, that pointed out how we get lost, again and again, in 'third meanings'. I swear I listened to this, and a lot of other stories, in different languages: "C'est en partant du pluriel des langues que l'on visera la langue des langues. En comprenant que, comme dit Ngugi wa Thiong'o, cette langue des langues, c'est la traduction." With these words Souleymane Bachir Diagne characterised one of the construction sites of 'Les Ateliers de la pensée'.

*The Other Wind* is the title of a novel from Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018). It's the fifth and final part of her archipelago EarthSea set. At some point she introduces a dragon in the novel that takes the form of a young woman. It is revealed that dragons and men were once one people, but parted ways. Dragons chose a life of freedom and immortality, while men chose a life of mastery, power and rebirth, promising to give up magic.

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