

# IN COMMEMORATION OF JEAN-MARC ELA

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*For Jean-Marc Ela and his generation of postcolonial Christian intellectuals in Cameroon, achieving redemption and meaningful spirituality depended fundamentally on acknowledging the value of the everyday practices of pagan village life. This also provided a mechanism of vigilance against destructive external forces.*

*“Sentinel. what of the night?”*

*- Isaiah 21:11*

I want to devote this appreciation of the life of Jean-Marc Ela to the Christianity of Ela himself and his generation of Cameroonian clergy-scholars; and to end with a request for illumination. Scholars of Christian history in Africa have written about particular meldings of Jesus with Africa: Lamin Sanneh, Valentin Mudimbe, and others. Certainly there have been famous scholar-clergy in other Central African countries. But it perhaps bears naïve rediscovery, in the context of Cameroon. When I was living in Yaoundé between 1974 and 1977, figures within the Catholic clergy were amongst the most outspoken critics of the political status quo, the most revolutionary about the future, and – to be dwelt on here – the most deeply appreciative of the ‘pagan’ religions of the past. Many interpretations of Christianity in Africa have allied it with missionary zeal, colonial rule and the hegemonic westernization of spiritual



Jean-Marc Ela

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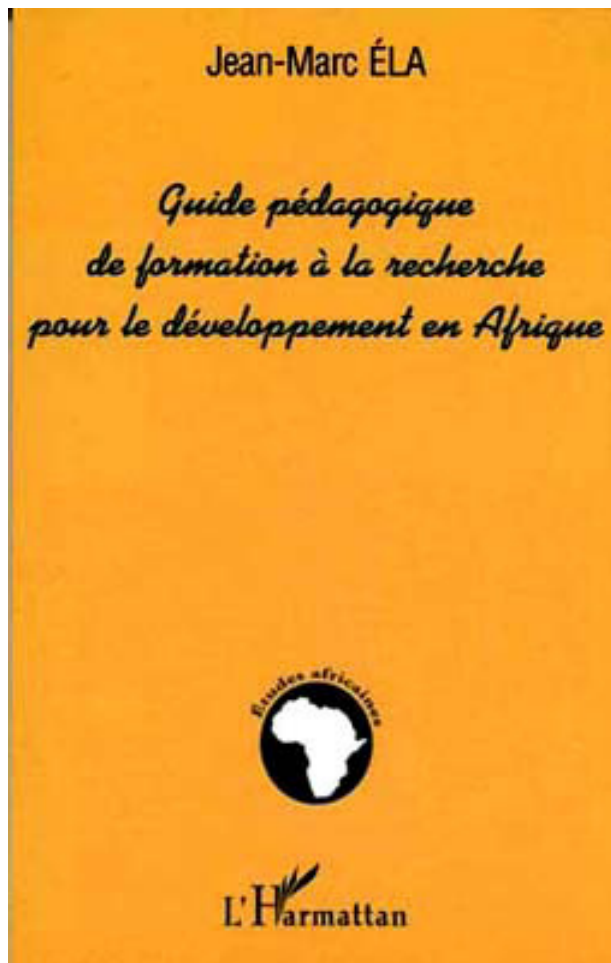
and symbolic life. But, as Lamin Sanneh suggests for the biblical translations themselves, some people created a profound intimacy between the ancient religion of the Near East and the ancient religion on the African South. Ela was one of these. As the Cameroonian clergy replaced the last French bishops – such as the much-feared Monseigneur Graffin – in the mid-twentieth century, they developed their own liberation theology and their own deep connection between the messages of the Book and the magics of the forest.

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I never knew Jean-Marc Ela personally, although I read his book *L’Afrique des Villages* as I worked

through my own studies of village economy. I did, however, know some of Ela’s friends and colleagues who were based in Yaoundé: Catholic clergy Engelbert Mveng, Theodore Tsala and Isidore Tabi; and I eventually came to know the work of devout lay scholars who worked in Cameroon around that time: Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, Frederick Quinn, Bernard Fonlon. They all seemed to create not just a kind of aesthetic syncretism of Pagan Africa and the Bible (in the liturgical music, for example), but a deeper sense of connection that seems more general in Equatorial Africa than anywhere else. Perhaps Father Placide Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* (original published in 1949) is its most famous exposition. But the work of Wyatt MacGaffey (*Kongo Political Culture*, 2000) on much earlier scholar-clergy in the same region suggests a much longer and deeper history. It would take more study to discover its wellsprings and explore its many modes, over time. This short piece cannot do justice. I simply allude to two of the clearer convergent streams of thought and expression in Cameroon, and end with a realization that emerged in the process of composing this intervention.

First, Jean-Marc Ela refers to one well-travelled conjuncture of Africa and Christianity in the forceful words of his 2006 address to Boston College, a Catholic University (<http://frontrow.bc.edu/program/ela>). The message about the increasing marginalization and impoverishment of Africa in his book *l’Afrique des Villages* (1982) had been almost entirely expressed in secular terms. The epigraph to the book is a quote from a peasant: “Nobody pays attention to what we say. No-one listens to us. We are there to wait at their door. Those who have pa-



Cover of Jean-Marc Ela's book *Guide Pédagogique de formation à la recherche pour le développement en Afrique*

pers pass in front ... taken care of .... For us nothing.” In his lecture, twenty-four years later, speaking to a Catholic audience, Ela identifies that empty-handed and voiceless waiter-in-line with the impoverished and endangered of ancient Israel, with the poor of the Gospel, and with Golgotha itself. In our own times, he argued, Africa, “offers the opportunity for

us to witness the depth of full communion with the promise of the Kingdom, *in its historical journey*” (emphasis added). Today is just as compelling as the first century C.E. The poor of Africa are as in need of liberation of body and spirit as the downtrodden of ancient Palestine under the Roman Empire. Then after exploring that parallel, along with the imperatives and, indeed, opportunities for service and redemption that flow from it, Ela ends the lecture almost abruptly, with a reference to the Hebrew Bible (or the Old Testament). He terminates with a question from the book of the Prophet Isaiah: “Sentinel, what of the night?” (‘Sentinel’ is the French translation; the word is translated as ‘Watchman’ in the King James Version in English). By the context, we understand that Ela is alluding to the vigilance that God commands to be set up before the advancing attacks from Babylon and Assyria: a “whirlwind from a terrible land” (as it says in the book of Isaiah).

So here in his lecture at a Catholic university, Jean-Marc Ela calls the Christian to do two things: to serve the poor, especially in Africa; and to cultivate vigilance against threatening whirlwinds advancing from terrible places. The first is familiar. It The latter, I think, is much less so, and plumbs towards the depths of mutuality between Pagan and Christian sensibility.

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So, vigilance offers a second and less familiar sense of convergence, and one that is less explained by Ela himself in his lecture. It is left to us to do the looking. As I searched for a more tangible sense of him I found this quotation from his 1998 volume

*Innovations Sociales et Renaissance de l'Afrique Noire*: “Endogenous knowledges, which are systems of meaning, must be seen at the same time as arts of living according to an internal logic which strictly unifies, in a sort of trinity, knowing, doing and being.”

How can a priest value an internal logic to Pagan arts of living and represent it as a trinity? This generation of clergy-scholars clearly loved the spiritual roots of African daily life, which in theory might have taken them far, and in other directions altogether, from monotheism, a personal savior and the “historical journey” of the gospel. But their works suggest that it was not a stretch or a struggle to overlay the two trinities. It was Engelbert Mveng who was writing a history of Cameroun from a Camerounian angle. It was Theodore Tsala who collected up *Minkana beti*: Beti proverbs. It was Isidore Tabi who wrote an appreciative memoir on indigenous marriage, created a Beti form of exorcism for his parishioners, and built an African grotto for service and pilgrimage. And it was Jean-Marc Ela, philosopher, sociologist, theologian (as we read from the cover of *L'Afrique des villages*) who moved from a scholarly center to a village in the pagan north of Cameroon in 1971 to live his Christian life. That move – back, out, up and into spiritualities of Africa – was very marked, and – in a way, for scholars – perhaps puzzling. How does it work?

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We can be pedestrian textual analysts for a while here and ask, in terms of scholarly artisanship: Where do they begin their arguments? One striking



Millet beer in Rhumsiki, Far North Province, Cameroon  
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theme in all these works that I have in my collection, is that they start from material life. In *L'Afrique des Villages*, Ela immediately puts aside any yearning for an authentic African Golden Age, then starts his own exposition of *le monde rural* with the colonial crops: on the second page of Chapter One, we read of groundnuts, cacao, coffee, bananas, oil palm. The whole analysis of colonial impoverishment starts from there.

In *Minkana beti*, Tsala opens his collection of proverbs with the chapter on Techniques and the Natural World, starting with *Costume et Parure*, what Mauss would have called Techniques of the Body. He moves on to habitat, food and meals, fields, animal husbandry, hunting and fishing. Part 2 is devoted to society: chiefs and notables, women and so on. Spiritual life as a separate topic is not represented in this collection. It is as if he approaches the spiritual through the material. “Food and Meals” is by the far the longest chapter. Nearly every prov-

erb uses meals to refer to relationships and human character: Some of the proverbs require a whole paragraph to get from a succinct reference about a tangible food, or a moment in a meal, to an explanation of its meaning and use. A four-word proverb invokes two styles of eating from a communal pot of fresh maize soup: plunging one’s spoon into the middle of the hot soup, versus scraping the cooling and drying soup at the edges. This refers, Tsala tells us, to two ways of answering a question: straightforwardly or by indirect steps. Four words invoke two whole styles of addressing things, perhaps two temperaments or sometimes two strategies: that is, a multiplicity of possibilities.

One could go on with these astonishing materializations of philosophical and ethical subtleties. I did once meet Tsala and talked to him, one-on-one. But at that time I knew neither how to “plunge into the soup” nor linger at the edges in posing questions about how the practices and turns of phrase of a pagan life could become such an urgent and compelling topic for his Christian life and work. This is not a clergyman’s exploration of indigenous religion “so that we can know better how to change it”. This proceeds from a question: how does the African villageois imbue the moments, phases, and actions of life with small-poetic and expansive-cosmological meanings? As Ela wrote for *Savoirs Endogenes*, Christian and Pagan arts of life seem, for these clergy-scholars, at some level all-of-a-piece, fully compatible, all falling under a sign of manifestation and blessing.

Moving from crops to food, and now to the wonders of the African natural world: I want to mention here Isidore Tabi’s grotto. Tabi was a contemporary of Ela who went south into the forest instead of north

to the mountains. When Houphouët Boigny built the cathedral at Yamassoukrou on the model of St. Peter’s in Rome, he defended its extravagant European mimetics against African aesthetic criticism with a question: Why can’t Africa have anything beautiful? Tabi, by contrast, found a natural wonder in his own parish south of Mbalmayo. It was a gigantic rock or boulder, just sitting on the forest floor, resembling the planet in *Le Petit Prince*. A giant forest tree was growing from the top, lianas hung down, and the smooth exposed surfaces were washed and stained by the rain. Tabi cleared an amphitheater around it, built an altar, set up Stations of the Cross in the forest edges, and proceeded to hold classic Catholic services, in his vestments, in its shade. He thought it worthy to become a pilgrimage site, so miraculous did it seem.

This materiality of spirit – from crops to food to natural wonders – seems striking. “Watchman, what of the night?” is a question that contains an injunction to look at the material world, to sense its presence even in the dark, to pay attention to its signs and to place oneself in time and space according to its messages. The question goes directly to the soup in the pot: not to its congealed edges, to be tasted cautiously and contemplated timidly.

When I started writing this piece, I had just listened for the first time to Jean-Marc Ela’s voice (on line) as he pronounced Isaiah’s words “Sentinel, what of the night?”, in English, at the end of his sermon, almost out of the blue and with no following interpretation. Clearly he considered its relevance to the condition of Africa to be self-evident. Then I remembered the full page obituary I had kept from the January 26<sup>th</sup> 2009 edition of *Le Messager* – the Cameroonian Catholic newspaper – that described

his remains returning home to Ebolowa from Vancouver. It was by Achille Mbembe, in tones heavy with grief, and entitled “Le veilleur s’en est allé”: (The watchman has left us). The text continues: “He who, during half a century, made himself our tireless watchman (*veilleur*) and who, without respite, exhorted us to rise up and walk, he who had given his life to deciphering the night and discerning the signs of an awakening dawn, is no more.” I had come across the article while waiting in a ministry office in Yaoundé and managed to confiscate it. I looked, now, at the astonishing parallel and wondered more deeply about its meaning. I later asked Mbembe to explain the French verbs, with whose resonances I was not familiar: *guetter la nuit et scruter l’aube*. My Concise Oxford French Dictionary defines *guetter* as “to watch for; to be on the lookout for; to lie in wait for; to keep an eye on”, implying an acute sense of potential dangers. *Scruter* also implies attentiveness: “to search, to scrutinize, to pry into, to investigate”. In his answer, Mbembe extended the literal secular meanings of the watchman’s job of deploying all his senses to note the slightest signs of life, to feel how time was passing, to make note of any surprises. And then he added spontaneously: the ‘night’ refers also to the occult and its forces, forces whose reality certainly Tabi also would have sensed, for his exorcism ritual. The sentinel; the watchman; *le veilleur*: they all evoke a particular sensory as well as political attentiveness to a world of many active forces: some deepening the night, others bringing whirlwinds from terrible lands, and others heralding the dawn.

[in what kind of self-implication in the world do apparently non-consonant ‘beliefs’ become](#)

[mutually reinforcing and compelling forces for life?](#)

It is only with Jean-Marc Ela’s death that I have felt provoked to repose a question that puzzled me over thirty years ago: in what kind of self-implication in the world do apparently non-consonant ‘beliefs’ become mutually reinforcing and compelling forces for life? Vigilance of the senses goes deepest in the nature of the watchman, who *cultivates* the modes of “knowing, doing and being” through which spiritual worlds attain fullness and consonance with each other. Reading Ela’s work again, we can try to imagine him at work in his parish. I am very fortunate to have spent time with Isidore Tabi in his village and to have discussed Beti culture with Theodore Tsala. Through them, I can try to bring to an imperative reacquaintance with Ela’s wider work a sense of that generation’s grounding of religious ideas and sensibilities in an enduring acuteness to the qualities of the local, the tangible, the evocative phenomenal world.

[This piece was first presented as part of a roundtable in commemoration of Jean-Marc Ela at a meeting of the African Studies Association, Nov 22nd, 2009.](#)