

A Drummer's Testament

Introduction part 1

Preamble: Trees

You are about to go on a long, slow journey. How far you will reach is in your hands, as close as they may now be to your heart. The thousands of words written here are words that at one time were not written or read. They were not patterns of light and dark on a page or on a screen. Written and read, these words have the material weight of their medium. In a book held in your hands, these words would be heavy. A screen on which they vibrated would also have its weight. Unwritten, as they once were, they had no evident mass. They could be described with a physical metaphor as held in memory and handed from one person to another. Still, in that use, these words first had only the weight of breath as they were spoken, mere vapor, carrying sounds. These sounded words, conveyors of a heritage of cultural knowledge, issued an epitome of a library of unwritten volumes that circulate merely by the vibrations of air on the delicate drum of the inner ear, bearing only the weight and substance of expired souls, of age and time. The words were conceived in drumming, communicated underfoot in the resounding vibrations of the earth absorbing the reverberations of heavy drums and the heavy cares of dancers.

The drums were formed from resonating trees rooted strongly in the earth, trees able to pull water upward, reaching for light, bearing fruit and flowers of regeneration, branching widely, to leaves that change expired breath to life-sustaining air, to leaves that let us hear the transpiring breezes of air in motion, the voice of shade, a voice which was, in some places, an oracle.¹ These same trees, had they germinated in different soil, would have been amenable to the composition of paper, the medium of written words, the material instrument of cultural dissemination in the West. In our computer age, there are still cultivated people who resist electronic media just because the idea of seeing words on paper has seemed more fitting to them, as something that can be bound, something suitable to be given as a gift, something whose weight represents the potential energy of its ideas, something that in itself represents the potential transformation of thought into substance. As with vibrations in the air, there is a delicate physical component in the light emitted from a screen, but it is still probably a good idea to print these words on paper, to give the new media's luminescent electrons a material form, something to hold in your hands in case your power or your access is vulnerable to interruption. Even those who only embrace the vibrating light of

new media perceive a precipitate of sorts and conceive of a gathering of words, woven together, to be a book.

Such sentimental affinities reflect the symbolism of seminal Western myth. In Ovid's myth of the metamorphosis of Daphne into a tree, the human Daphne was pursued by Apollo — the god of the sun and light, god of culture, god of music, god of poetry and prophecy, god of healing. Incapable of conjoining her human destiny with the immortal god, Daphne was transformed into a laurel tree.² The laurel tree thus stands as symbol of Apollo, symbol of the sublimation of human love into human achievement, symbol of the origin and permanence of culture, of purification and celebration, of the creative inspiration of the poets, as in Rilke's second "Sonnet to Orpheus":³

Almost a girl it was and issued forth
from this concordant joy of song and lyre,
and . . .
she made herself a bed inside my ear.
And slept in me. And all things were her sleep. . . .
She slept the world.

Within the vast symbolism of trees, a tree is sacred not because of what it is but because of what greater things it represents or points to, like the tree of life or the tree of knowledge in Judeo-Christian religious imagery.⁴ May I not start to prepare you for your journey by posing this coherence, from the tree to the drum, to the resonance of sound, to the sung and spoken word, to the written word on paper from the tree?

The purpose of this introduction is to let you know why this book is the way it is. I am hoping to prepare you to enter the world of another culture, to perceive it through a wealth and welter of detail, to feel within yourself how culture helps human beings, to comprehend through human sympathy how a group of sensitive people relate to this complex thing we call life, and to understand why they respect and treasure their cultural heritage. But the weight of a volume of written words on bound paper imparts an unnatural aspect to the weight of a voice. Hold a heavy book and lift it briefly, and then take your hand from under it to hold in your palm the generative qualities retained by the words. Your hand will rise. Let it rise until it shows you a horizon, far, blurred as if by mist over water or by the atmosphere at twilight. Let your horizon expand and deepen. Your open hand is positioned to beckon, to receive. Cupped by your ear, it will engender your hearing.⁵ Rilke's first "Sonnet to Orpheus":⁶

There rose a tree. O pure transcendency!
O Orpheus singing! O tall tree in the ear!
And all was silent. Yet even in the silence
new beginning, beckoning, change went on.

Creatures of stillness thronged out of the clear
released wood from lair and nesting place;
and it turned out that not from cunning and not
from fear were they so hushed within themselves,

but from harkening. Bellow and cry and roar
seemed little in their hearts. And where before
hardly a hut had been to take this in,

a covert out of darkest longing
with an entrance way whose timbers tremble, —
you built temples for them in their hearing.

Beyond the horizon, beyond the sight of your beckoning hand, sits an elderly man who is a musician, a drummer, a singer, a master of words. He has many names. His name is Ibrahim. His name is “Father Drummer.” His name is “What a human being refuses, God will take and make well.” His name is “Wisdom has no end.” How a person comes to have such names is another story among the stories in this book, but he is one man among many like him. He speaks the words of those he knows and has known. He speaks the words of those who gave birth to him and have passed away. He represents them, and he is old because he holds their words. He and his colleagues are all masters of words, but they do not write. Their cultural knowledge has been sustained for generations by unwritten words in memory; it is communicated in public places by sound and movement, by singing, by drumming, by dancing.

What a difference from the strange means of communication you can hold in your hands, a heavy book you would read, grasped firmly with closed hands! Extending from your hands, the weight of such a book pulls on your arms and shoulders, fighting your effort to elevate it, telling you that you cannot read it at a sitting, alone, as you have read many other books, to divert an evening, or as a quick snack to gobble up. These thousands of words were spoken by this drummer, Ibrahim Father Drummer, and they were meant to be heavy, but they were spoken and not written, and their unnatural weight in a book is perhaps a tolerable attribute of compromise with that other medium of communication that

the drummer knows, or perhaps the hidden complementarity of the tree of culture in polymorphous transformation.

If you could look beyond the horizon and go toward the evening, you would be able to hear the words. Where Father Drummer lives, in the evening, he sits outside his house on a mat, leaning against the wall. When he or a fellow drummer picks up a drum, he will first beat a prayer for walls: God should let the wall be nice, that the elders may lean against the wall, and we the children will thank God for that. After dinner, the air is mild, the sky clear with stars. Beside Ibrahim are his friends, those he calls his “sitting friends,” and they are talking. A few children and young people from his area are there, and you would be able to join them, as Ibrahim did when he was a child. If you were there, you would be listening to the words you are about to read, with no need to hold a heavy book or operate an electronic device. The conversation is leisurely, because tomorrow, if you like and God agrees, you will all be there again in that pleasant ambience. Over a period of time, the drummer would gradually share his knowledge in many quiet conversations.

I was there, and I collected such conversations and modeled this book from them, and I have brought them to you. If you would sit with me and follow this model, you will read the book patiently, chapter by chapter, and if you become tired holding it, put it down. There is no need to rush. What you don't read today, you can read tomorrow. No one is forced to sit outside with the elders of drumming. You go when you have the time or the appetite for it. I sat with Ibrahim, my Father Drummer, and his friends, many of whom I also call father or grandfather or brother, for several years of my life, and I went back again and again because I found such satisfaction in their presence. That satisfaction is a promise for you at the outset of your journey into their world, a promise I make because I myself had never imagined the type of experience I would have among them.

Notes:

1. Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple, and the Gods: Greek Sacred Architecture*, rev. ed. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), pp. 136-38; James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1940), p. 159; Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor, 1963), p. 257.
2. This preamble is a reflection of Norman O. Brown, "Daphne, or Metamorphosis," in *Myths, Dreams, and Religion*, edited by Joseph Campbell (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970), pp. 91-110.
3. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, translated by M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton Library, W. W. Norton, 1970), no. 2, p. 19.
4. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, translated by Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, World Publishing, 1967), pp. 265-330; G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, translated by J. E. Turner (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967), I, 55-58.
5. This generative image is from Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemméli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*, translated by Ralph Butler, Audrey I. Richards, and Beatrice Hook (London: International African Institute and Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 64.
6. Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, no. 1, p. 17.