

African Voices and activists at the WSF in Nairobi – the uncertain Ways of Transnational African Activism

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January, 19th, 2007, in the comfortable hotel Six-eighty, downtown Nairobi. It is the meeting of the CRID, the Centre for Research and Information for development, a Collective of 54 international solidarity associations, and the main body of coordination of the French organizations at the World Social Forum (WSF). As the evening goes on and as each one introduces its organization and “its partners”, suddenly, a group of young Kenyans, helped by the group No Vox, holds up placards. A young Kenyan woman speaks on behalf of People's Parliament, a Kenyan organization which, according to her, was not enough associated to the WSF and the work of the local organization committee. The price of the participation in the FSM was too high: 500 Kenyan shillings (7 US dollars), that is, as Wangui Mbatia explains, one week of food for a poor family. The young lawyer, as it thereafter will be learned, will embody during all the forum the challenge of a part of the Kenyan militants against a forum often denounced as “another international conference”. During all the forum also the question of the representativeness of People's Parliament will arise: rumours and insinuations circulate on its leader, who studied in the USA, and who will be seen a few months later among the protesters against the G8 in Rostock. The question is even more general: who has the right to speak for the poor of Kenya and Africa in the great international militant events?

January 20th, 2007. Opening ceremony of the FSM in Nairobi, at Uhuru Park, vis-a-vis an inclined hill which gives an aspect of amphitheatre to the place. The audience is very variegated and counts much more Kenyans (the entry is free) than the remainder of the FSM thereafter. After the very acclaimed interventions of Wahu Kaara, Valerie Traoré and Chico Whitaker, one announces the secretary of the African Social Forum (ASF). Taoufik Ben Abdallah arrives on stage: “Hello, Viva Africa Viva! ”. Very few applause. His whole speech is very lukewarmly received, as if the audience were disconcerted with this clear skinned Tunisian speaking in the name of Africa.

From the 21st to the 24th of January, 2007, in a suburb of Nairobi, on the steps of Kasarani stadium, arranged to receive the workshops of the WSF. In the workshops on the cancellation of the debt, organized by Jubilee South and other organizations, the African public is in very minority. However, on this set of themes which relates to Africa in the highest degree, many African activists come on stage: Viktor Nzuzi, from DRC, linked to the networks of the CADTM¹, the Senegalese economist Demba Moussa Dembelé, Diakalia Ouattara from the Ivory Coast, or the famous Kenyan activist Wahu Kaara. These last three are members of the ASF. Further, in a workshop on pastoralism, only 4 of the 70 people of the room are white, one notices people in Massai garments, Ethiopian ones...

These militant scenes were held at the same place but do not tell the same World Social Forum. They show that, even within the unity of place and time of one World Social Forum, the internationalization of activism relates to multiple realities, depending on the channels through which activists travel and protest in internationalized places.

Why observing this WSF in particular? First of all because if the other WSF also took place in the South, the 2007 WSF was the first one held in Africa, if one excludes the polycentric social forum of January 2006, of which one of the emanations was in Bamako. The organizers of this forum were not unaware of the stake of making African voices heard and of incarnating Africa, the more so as Africa is perceived as the continent the most victim of globalization. Having a reflection on Africa at the WSF of Nairobi is at the same time

¹ Comité pour l'Annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde, Committee for the cancellation of Third World Debt.

thinking on the emergence of an African alterglobalism², incarnated inter alia by the ASF. It also implies a reflection on the multiplicity of transnationalized African networks, on the tensions between the latter, on the complex relationship they have to northern, and other southern (such as Asia and Latin America) activists: the African alterglobal movement, if any, is a field of multiple tensions. This finally implies to think on the use and revival of the afrocentric, anti-imperialist and anticolonial themes.

To observe the World Social Forum in Nairobi from the point of view of the South - in particular Africa - and of its participation, is thus a means of bypassing a series of shortcomings of the sociology of transnational social movements, which still remains today, in spite of some exceptions (e. g. Wood 2005, Rothman & Oliver, 2002), mainly centred on Western civil societies, or, at best, on transnational campaigns on topics concerning the South (dams, child work, debt...), but mainly animated by northern activists. We know for sure that this transnational militancy of the South exists: but it is generally considered as an adaptation or an appropriation of external dynamics (Bob, 2002, Wing, 2002). We are not satisfied with the binary explanations of this activism (seen either as an emergent *sui generis* civil society, or as the “compradors” of an ever patronizing North). In an alterglobal space which precisely seeks to occult them, it is important here to think the hierarchies, the conflicts, or even quite simply the division of labour within transnational activism. That supposes to pay attention to the social and material conditions of activism, like that was done for instance on the practical conditions of internationalization of European trade unions (Wagner, 2004). This is why we would like to show how Africans activists managed to participate to this WSF in Nairobi and what are the conflicts around the right to talk on, for, and from Africa.

Our work is based in a collective survey in Nairobi in January 2007: a team of 23 French and 14 Kenyan scholars³ has carried on a collective ethnographic observation in a hundred workshops of the WSF, added to the realization of 150 interviews of African activists at the forum. The ethnographic observation was aimed at observing the composition of the audience, the content, language and rhetorical form of the debates, the way Africa was referred to. The interviews had a biographical part, and another one more oriented on the practical aspects of the participation to the WSF: was it the first trip abroad? How did activists manage to pay their trip to Nairobi? Did they belong to Ngos of other kind of organisations? etc.

P. 1. African delegates at the WSF in Nairobi

In October 2006, only 8% of the members of the international Committee of the WSF represent an organization whose headquarters were in Africa⁴. Involving African delegates into the WSF was thus considered as a necessity for the Forum to be seen as a true worldwide

² As in political action, words are an issue, we chose to use the term “alterglobal” (a translation of the French “altermondialiste”) movement which is used by many European and Latin activists, and which is preferred to “Global Justice Movement,” perceived as too consensual and too anglo-saxon.

³ Apart from us, Evelyn Awino, Idris Irshad, Lilian Kayaro, Leonard Wambaya, Charles Mutua, Mwadzoya Mwandeje, John Ndung'u, Margaret Njeru, Nicholas Odoyo, Etyang Oita, Vincent Opondo, Andrew Otieno Aura, Lizz Kariuki, Benjamin Osiemo, Dominique Connan, Mathilde Debain, Nadjib Sidi Moussa, Fanny Laredo, Fernando Isern, Marie Baget, Camille Le Coq, Julie Aubriot, Marame Ndour, Guillaume Thiery, Xavier Audrain, Samadia Sadouni, Thomas Atenga, Nathanaël Tstotsa, Alphonse Maindo, Florence Brisset, Sara Dezalay, Pascal Dauvin, Lilian Mathieu, Dominique Cardon, Nicolas Haeringer, Ayito Nguema. All have made interviews and or ethnographic observations and should be therefore thanked. Only direct quotations from fieldwork notes or interviews are referred to their authors, by initials when in text.

⁴ See http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=3_2_1&cd_language=3 retrieved from the Internet on July 2, 2007.

initiative. The African continent was therefore chosen to host the seventh Forum from the 20th to the 24th of January 2007 in Nairobi.

African attendance at the WSF

The figures of the attendance at the forum must obviously be manipulated with caution as should be any self quantification of political activity: indeed, these figures were crucial to measure and show evidence of the representativeness of the forum. It is interesting to note, however, that even the most quoted of the official figures, probably overestimated, were of 45 000 registered participants which is far less important than the 100 000 participants who were expected initially or who attended the last Forum in Porto Alegre⁵. These official figures testify however that African delegates were a majority, or at least that it was the most important participation of African activists since the forum's inception. Indeed they were approximately 30 in 2001 in Porto Alegre, 200 in 2002 and a bit more in 2003. These measures are equivalent to the attendance at the African Social Forum: 200 African delegates were in Bamako in 2002 and in Addis Ababa in 2004, and between 300 and 650 went to Lusaka in 2004. By contrast, there were in Nairobi between 400 and 1000 Tanzanian delegates, between 50 and 120 Congolese (from the Democratic Republic of the Congo), between 25 and 50 Malians, more than 200 Senegalese, 150 Sudanese, 360 South-African and the same number of Ugandan delegates⁶. African delegates in Nairobi were more than mere participants: a good number came to make a presentation in one or more panels. Among 71 panels which our team observed (7% of the total), and which were directly linked to African themes or organizations⁷, a majority hosted more than a quarter of African speakers. A bit less than a third of them did count a majority of African speakers. Only a dozen of panels included less than a quarter of African speakers.

The participation of Kenyan people to the forum was at the core of several controversies before⁸, during and after the forum. It is reported that it was lower than the attendance of national citizens in India or Brazil⁹, even if Kenyan delegates made up of 90% of African delegates¹⁰. The main reason is said to be the entry fee which first amounted to 500 Kenyan shillings (7 US dollars) and dropped to 50 Kenyan shillings (0,75 US dollars) after protests were addressed to the local committee. In spite of this, a few groups of Kenyan, French, South African and Japanese activists expressed their discontent by forcing the gate of the stadium and asked for free entry for everyone. This financial constraint was not contested but some regular participants to the forum and the local organizers claimed afterwards that it had never been easy to facilitate the participation of the poorest¹¹. Some NGO members also pointed with irony this romanticization of poverty. Churches as well as ecumenical networks

⁵ The *draft final report* published in April 2007 by the organizing committee mentioned 74309 registrations. See <http://www.africansocialforum.org/english/fsm/Kenya2007/report.htm> retrieved from the internet on July 2, 2007.

⁶ Concerning other nationalities, there were between 1000 and 1500 Indians, 150 Pakistanis, 600 North Americans, 400 Brazilians, 20 Haitians, 1000 French, 400 Italians, 240 Belgians, 150 Spaniards, 50 British...

⁷ Our team did not attend panels which were only organized by Latin-Americans or Asian organizations nor did it participate to panels where issues discussed were not affecting the African continent. The main themes of the panels which were observed by the team were: food sovereignty, war and peace, international trade, debt, land issues, work and trade unionism, Human rights, environment, media, migrations, women, civil society, sexual issues, etc.

⁸ The ecumenical network led by CARITAS and the All African Church Conference sent a letter to the organizing committee in November 2006 asking for a decrease of the entry fee to 40 Kenyan shillings (0,60 dollars US) and for the establishment of a solidarity fund.

⁹ Gus Massiah as quoted in « Compte-rendu de la Journée d'évaluation du 17 février 2007 », organized by the Centre de recherches et d'informations sur le développement (CRID).

¹⁰ See the Draft final report, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Gus Massiah, as quoted in "Compte...", *op. cit.*

were the only ones able to mobilize massively people from the slums as they serve as an intermediary between them and Kenyan NGOs connected to international networks¹².

The most destitute were not the only ones to have been mobilized and subsidized to participate to the forum. All African delegates interviewed by our team were sponsored by northern NGOs to pay their plane tickets and their stay in Nairobi. The *Centre de recherches et d'informations sur le développement* (CRID), a French NGOs network, sponsored 47 partners including 19 African delegates with a funding from the French Ministry of Foreign affairs. Other organizations did subsidize Southern partners: the German faith-based NGO *Evangelische Entwicklungsdienst* (EED), national delegations of CARITAS, Action Aid, Oxfam, and of the Red Cross, *Brot für die Welt*, the *Friedrich Erbert Stiftung* (FES), the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT, a French trade union) as well as smaller groups like *Via Campesina* or the *Comité pour l'annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde* (CADTM). This external patronage has been in place since the beginning of the involvement of African delegates to the process of the WSF¹³.

Northern NGOs and donors subsidized the participation of African delegates to the forum for different reasons, one of them being to strengthen their relationships with their partners, contrary to the idea given by the Forum itself that it is an arena of exchanges between delegates who have not been connected beforehand. For instance, a panel on water issues was organised and attended by Italian and Kenyan activists who had been in contact for a long time: the aim seemed to have been to maintain these privileged relationships more than to create new ones. Other panels were kinds of shop-windows of northern NGOs' activities which promoted the projects of their Southern counterparts: for instance, African women rights NGOs did present their activities in a seminar during the forum before presenting them to their donor which organized a meeting, after the forum, to examine their grant proposals. Lastly this gathering of NGOs allowed northern NGOs and donors to get information on local initiatives and to select some of them as potential new partners.

In spite of this financial link, northern delegates refused to talk about patronage: a lot of them assured that a new kind of relationships had rose up in the alterglobal movement where North-South relationships would have radically changed. Gus Massiah, one of the French founder of the WSF, claimed on several occasions in Nairobi that it was necessary « *to stop saying: we helped our Southern partners to come. We should overcome this North-South relationship to create a shared global project* »¹⁴. In spite of this reminder, the dependency of African delegates to the good will of their northern counterparts was overtly criticized because it reportedly reproduced an imperialist domination¹⁵. Other African delegates did however ask for the intervention of northern donors as it was their only way to attend these international meetings. Other delegates did play with this material dependency: for instance, some were so closely connected to northern donors that they were granted several fundings to attend the WSF, and gave their extra grants to less connected activists. The autonomy of African alterglobal activists was often put forward in panels where African and Southern audience

¹² See, for instance, Steve Orvis, « Kenyan Civil Society: Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide ? », *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol.41, N°2, 2003, p. 247-268

¹³ African organizations have been sponsored by the French cooperation, UNESCO, Novib, Oxfam and the CCFD to prepare the African social forum in Bamako in 2002 and to attend the second World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2002. See Rémi Sulmont, *Forum social africain : émergence d'une mobilisation transnationale africaine*, Master thesis, Sciences Po Paris, 2004.

¹⁴ Gus Massiah, as quoted in "Compte-rendu...", *op.cit.*

¹⁵ "Africa: WSF - It Was a Meeting of NGOs, Not the Masses", *East African Standard*, January 28, 2007, written by Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, deputy director for Africa for the UN Millennium Campaign. This very same problem occurred when African delegates were subsidized by the African Social Forum.

were a majority. In one of these a South African participant warned: “we should be suspicious to our donors and to what they are expecting from us”¹⁶.

African delegates: local, national and international bonds

Going to the World social forum was part of the activist routine of most of African delegates (except East-African ones). A majority of them had already traveled several times outside their own country. For a minority, traveling is even an essential part of their job as a female delegate pointed out: “*I get out of a plane to board another one !*”¹⁷. This presence of already connected activists is easily understandable: northern NGOs or donors subsidized activists or organizations whom they already knew and worked with. This left little room for African newcomers in the alterglobal space. Some of the delegates did travel even before their involvement in international activism, especially when studying abroad but most of them did start traveling while getting in contact with transnational networks. A Cameroonian delegate, who got a position as a national coordinator of a faith based organization a few months before the WSF, had already been twice to Europe and twice to Africa since then, whereas he would travel very scarcely before. Internationalization of activism can thus not be considered as a consequence of acquired dispositions of already internationalized elites; this may explain some activist trajectories but not all of them. In Nairobi, East African delegates were the main beneficiaries of the WSF which gave them their first opportunity to enter the alterglobal space and to make contacts with foreign activists. Some of them came to the forum to look for protection as did lesbian, gay, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) activists from East Africa who came to light for the first time. Other delegates came to establish relationships with international NGOs in order to get funding or to build working relationships. This is the case, for instance, of a Burundian delegate subsidized by Action Aid, who did a 3-day trip by road to Nairobi and hoped to meet there international NGOs who could help his organization working on orphans and peace in his small country just coming out of a civil war.

The diversity of African delegates whom our team met during the forum makes it impossible to draw one profile of what could be “the” African alterglobal activist. Men and women, in their thirties to their sixties, from all over Africa and from all confessions, did however share some general characteristics in terms of social origins, school record and their perception of religion. Indeed, the biographical data our team collected show that African delegates shared a relative social proximity to the social injustices they denounced, a high level of education and political socialization which helped formulating their cause, as well as a critical stance to religion, through which they expressed a strong tendency to question the social order.

The social origins of most of African delegates were modest but some characteristics of their families made them slightly different from their close social environment: one of the parents was often a low rank public agent (administrative officer, primary school teacher, police officer, former soldier of the colonial army) and encouraged his children to go to school. More than an education place, school seems to have also been a place to learn how to stand for the others: a lot of interviewed activists were former class representatives or ran school related associations. Some activists insisted to say that they “discovered” poverty and hard social realities while working in development or advocacy organizations. They became spokesperson of the poorest, not because they were one of them, but because were able to articulate their demands. A minority of delegates came from wealthy and well educated families. Besides these social backgrounds, African delegates often mentioned the tolerant

¹⁶ The panel entitled “Reclaim People’s source of livelihood – the land struggle of people of Kenya and sub-Saharan Africa” was organized by the Kenya Land Alliance on January 23, 2007, observed by Mwadzoya Mwandeje and Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle.

¹⁷ Interview of a Malian female delegate by Aurélie Latourès, January 19, 2007.

opinion of their family towards their activism. Some delegates grew up in an “activist” atmosphere, like the South African delegates who talked about their parents being anti-apartheid activists or those whose parents were trade unionists. When their relatives were not activists, African delegates stressed on the receptiveness of their family and their financial help. Women delegates defending women’s rights insisted on their husband’s support: they talked about conflicts with them but also of their necessary support especially when they were advocating against practices like female genital mutilation in Muslim societies.

Most African delegates (except for East African ones) had graduated in African universities: they were lawyers, secondary school or university teachers, engineers... Their diploma did not always fit well with their activism but their connections to northern NGOs made it easy for them to get new diplomas like masters or to attend specific trainings related to their new activities. This growing offer of training follows a trend of professionalization of activism. This interweaving of activism and profession is often considered negatively as a sign of greed of NGOs’ staff, but this trend masks a more complex reality. Indeed, activists very often started working in NGOs or social movements organizations as a voluntary work before being paid for it. A Kenyan environmental activist explained indeed that working voluntary in an organization is the only way to promote it and to create jobs which will allow the activists in the future to “live of their passion »¹⁸.

A last interesting common characteristic of African delegates is their opinion towards religion. The religious dimension of the forum has been noticed as an African specificity. And it is true that almost all African delegates whom we interviewed claimed to believe in God¹⁹ while insisting on an original way of thinking and living their faith. A Kenyan activist asserted: “*I was brought up in a catholic background. I still attend church, but I do not agree with most things they do, but I still attend*”²⁰. Echoing this, a Congolese activist said: “*I am a rebellious catholic*”²¹. A female delegate told how she was accused to insult the Koran while advocating for a woman friendly interpretation of the religious text. The following example is even more explicit: a Ugandan LGBT activist explained that he attended an “integrated fellowship” run by an excommunicated bishop who used to defend the rights of homosexuals. These shared biographical characteristics of African delegates do not prevent the African alterglobal space to live with a number of tensions and divisions.

P.2. Internationalized African activism as a space of tensions

The international division of activist work, in Africa and in the world, may create tensions which are masked or translated into ideological oppositions.

Is there an African alterglobal movement?

If Africa has been used as a constant reference for the struggle during the WSF, divisions and competitions among the African alterglobal movement were fierce between regions, organizations and individuals. It is important to note however that these cleavages were put aside and even denied by African delegates who saw it as a misconception or a cliché conveyed by northern observers. Wahu Kaara, a Kenyan activist, said for instance to a French daily newspaper:

¹⁸ Interview by Dominique Connan and Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, January 22, 2007.

¹⁹ One rare exception, however: a South African activist said to have been educated in a Christian family but to have given it up and to have become a “non-religious socialist”, interview by Lizz Kariuki, January 24, 2007.

²⁰ Interview by Dominique Connan et Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, January 22, 2007.

²¹ Interview by Johanna Siméant, January 21, 2007.

We have got over the differences between Francophone and Anglophone mentalities. This cleavage is the result of disinformation in order to exclude the African continent from accessing its part of the wealth. From Cairo to Cape Town, we refuse this logic. As far as I am concerned, I have traveled through the whole continent and I can say proudly that I am a Kikuyu, an African woman, and a citizen of the world²².

The first edition of the ASF was held in January 2002 in Bamako. It was born out of a will of African movements to promote African participation to the WSF and to bypass European initiatives which also attempted to organize African participation to the WSF. The ASF was nevertheless helped since the beginning by the French Cooperation and coordinated by two West African activists Taoufik Ben Abdallah and Aminata Traoré both very well connected to transnational networks²³. Opening up gradually beyond its West African members, the council of the ASF was created in 2004 and is made up of more than 40 African organizations from all over the continent. Critical opinions, from inside and outside the ASF, have however never ceased. They all blame the ASF for maintaining ambiguous relationships with African governments and inter-governmental organizations like the African Union²⁴. Another cleavage, on which we will elaborate further, draws a line between those who want to anchor the ASF in community and mass movements and the promoters of the ASF coming from NGOs²⁵. Another common cleavage in the alterglobal space divides the ASF between those who consider the WSF as a “space” and those who see it as a “movement”²⁶. The first ones favors debates and exchanges while the second ones hope to unite activist groups in one common struggle²⁷. These multiple tensions are signs of struggles between diverse networks and traditions of mobilization, notably (but not only) between some francophone activists who did take the initiative and South African activists who were not involved from the beginning. This might have been caused by a lack of relationships between different parts of the continent but also by a will of European and Brazilian founders of the WSF not to involve Anglo-Saxon NGOs and, consequently, their “Southern” partners like South African organizations²⁸.

South African activists have been integrated into the ASF with some reluctance also because they were supposedly wanting to dominate the African alterglobal movement²⁹. Their activist know-how as well as their radicalism both inherited from the struggle against Apartheid and renewed in the protests against the neo-liberal policies of Mbeki government were visible during the WSF in Nairobi: they took part into the protests against the entry fees, they were among the few African delegates involved in the social movements assembly, and they were noticeable in some panels where they expressed their radical and experienced approach of activism by raising their fist when talking, using anti Apartheid slogans like *Amandla*, and speaking to other delegates as “comrades”. Their alleged hegemonic temptation should be

²² *L'Humanité*, January 22, 2007

²³ See Rémi Sulmont, *op. cit.* for more information on the creation of the ASF.

²⁴ See for instance: “ Briefing Document on the African Social Forum Prepared for the South African delegates to the World Social Forum At the request of the South African World Social Forum Preparatory Meeting held on 7 January 2004”, reproduced in Rémi Sulmont, *ibidem*.

²⁵ Mondli Hlatshwayo, « Le Forum Social Africain : entre radicaux et réformateurs », in Samir Amin and François Houtart (eds), *Mondialisation des résistances*, Syllepse, 2004, p. 221-226.

²⁶ Ruby Van der Wekken, “A picture of the African social forum process”, Network Institute on Global Democracy, September 26, 2005.

²⁷ Trevor Ngwane, “WSF 2007 in Africa must build a mass movement against capitalism”, available on : http://www.cadtm.org/article.php?id_article=1168, retrieved from the internet on June 11, 2007.

²⁸ Rémi Sulmont, *op.cit.*

²⁹ This fear of a South African hegemony is also present in the Southern African social forums : see Peter Dwyer and Miles Larmer, « ‘Four Wheel Drives and Burning Tyres’: Civil Society and Social Movements in Southern Africa », Paper delivered at the International Sociology Association World Congress, Durban, July 27, 2006.

however qualified by the existence of internal divisions inside the South African activist space. There is indeed a strong divide between, on one hand, mass and community movements like the ones which are fighting against privatization of water and electricity, some of whom are trotskists, and on the other hand NGOs which organize international campaigns like the Treatment Action campaign, the success of which confirmed South African reputation in mobilization³⁰. These national divisions make it thus impossible to homogenize the South African activist space which is also divided along the NGOs versus social movements line, as is the WSF.

NGOs versus social movements?

A sociological analysis would certainly challenge this conventional divide but when mentioned during interviews this opposition seemed to make sense for African alterglobal activists. NGOs, which are described as well structured, dependant from external funding and led by reformist intellectuals, are opposed to social movements, including trade unions, which are said to reflect popular demands and to aim to change radically the social and political order. The assembly of social movements, which is traditionally held at the end of the WSF, is one way to distinguish these two approaches. In Nairobi, the divide was clearly displayed when activists demonstrated against the offices of the local organizing committee, using one of the favorite tool of social movements to express their discontent against the entry fees. This strong opposition in Nairobi can be explained by its particular intensity inside the African alterglobal movement. Indeed the first components of the ASF in 2002 were mostly NGOs³¹. Even after its opening, the council of the ASF has been criticized as being “NGOs dominated”: the South African movement Indaba vigorously attacked the ASF in Addis Ababa on this issue³² while the common declaration of the ASF insisted on the necessity to build the ASF from “grassroots social movements”. In spite of these incantations, some African commentators regretted that, once again in Nairobi, NGOs had monopolized the WSF because of their financial superiority³³.

This hegemonic position of NGOs in the alterglobal movement should be considered in the light of recent African social history. “Civil society” organizations and notably NGOs have been flourishing since the 1980s because of international support as well as internal democratic protests and weaknesses of the state³⁴. NGOs took over from trade unions who were indeed moribund (except maybe in Southern Africa) because of one-party regimes and structural changes in economies. After imposing themselves as partners to the state and to external donors, NGOs also became the target of critics and tried to find a new legitimacy by working with community based organizations. African trade unions did however come back on the alterglobal scene during the WSF in Nairobi. This new process of internationalization of trade unions as well as their tendency to import NGOs « know-how » testified that they were now part of the alterglobal movement but also that cleavages between NGOs and social movements were less clear than they seemed to be in the delegates’ discourses. The “social movements” side of the WSF was actually still dominated by non African activists as shown during the social movements assembly in Nairobi attended by around 500 people, a majority

³⁰ Elke Zuern, « La pauvreté en débat. Marginalité et démocratie constitutionnelle en Afrique du Sud », *Politique africaine*, N°103, décembre 2006, p. 27-45. These divisions were clearly expressed when South Africa was considering hosting the WSF: activist groups were so divided that they preferred to abandon the idea of hosting the forum.

³¹ Rémi Sulmont, *op. cit.*

³² Mondli Hlatshwayo, *art. cit.*

³³ See the comments of P.K. Murty, Indian member of the international Council of the WSF in *L’Humanité*, January 27, 2007.

³⁴ See the introduction of Igoe, J., Kelsall, T., (eds), *Between a rock and a hard place: African NGOs, Donors and the State*, Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 2005

of which were not African³⁵. To counterbalance this absence, African activists and especially African women were encouraged to come and talk during the assembly where every organization could make a declaration and propose a protest activity.

This ongoing opposition between NGOs and social movements has been leading to changes especially in the way organizations express their “representativeness”. Whereas those who claim to be social movements were blaming NGOs for being far from the people they are working for, these critics have been largely assimilated by NGOs who invited spokespersons of the “grassroots” to make presentations during the WSF. This was especially the case of the “Human dignity and Human rights Caucus” which held dozens of seminars where professional activists and “people from the ground”, as they were introduced, were sharing the stage. During a panel on “Economic and social Human Rights”, a young woman introduced as Marcy, told the story of her life in Kibera slum. Her tricky position as an intermediary between NGOs and the communities was brought into light when young men of the audience denounced NGOs as using communities for their own purposes. Marcy did defend NGOs while admitting that in the past they may have been using ordinary people. As a spokesperson she had to adjust her answer to both the people she was supposed to stand for and to the NGOs who gave her the opportunity to be considered as the representative of her community.

Extraversion and national spaces of activism

The extraversion of activism does not entail absolute dependency from the North nor disconnection from national spaces of activism. The WSF was indeed a convenient assembly point for activists from the same country. Congolese activists for instance hold a stand adorned with a Congolese flag where they were preparing the Congolese social forum planned for June 2007. This “nationalist” dynamic outside Congo can be explained by the harshness of a civil war which dispersed activists in and outside Congo and by the difficulties to travel in this huge country. It is interesting to note however that this national dynamic was being financed by Belgian “friends” whose role was minimized by the Congolese activist who recounted this experience. More informal national conviviality without activist purposes could be observed during this cosmopolite event. A small group of Cameroonian delegates gathered around a Cameroonian woman holding a flag during the opening ceremony and Senegalese delegates used to have lunch together at a Senegalese restaurant outside the stadium. But these scenes of temporary sociability did not stir up national dynamics of activism. The relationships with northern partners who had paid for the plane tickets led actually to a splitting up of national delegations because a majority of delegates had to attend the panels organized by their funding partners. The WSF did also create competition among activists of a same country because of the opportunities the forum gave to individuals. In his critical reflections about the WSF, Onyango Oloo from the Kenyan committee wrote about the tensions inside *Bunge la Wananchi* (People’s Parliament), a Kenyan social movement organization, due to the over-mediatisation of one its activist during the WSF³⁶. More generally, the whole dynamics of WSF can give rise to tensions in the home countries of delegates. A delegate from Niger explained that frictions with another activist from his country were born about the question of holding or not a local social forum. Whereas the former considered that this was a premature initiative, the latter reportedly insisted because he received funding from his northern partner to prepare this local forum. Even in the alterglobal sphere, the setting of the mobilization agenda may be dominated by northern activists.

³⁵ The main organizers of the social movement assembly are: the Marche mondiale des femmes, the CADTM, Focus on the global South, and individuals like Christophe Aguiton.

³⁶ Onyango Oloo, “Critical reflections on WSF Nairobi 2007”, available on http://www.cadtm.org/article.php3?id_article=2544, retrieved from the Internet on July 2, 2007.

P. 3. SPEAKING IN THE NAME OF AFRICA: DOUBLE BINDS AND CENSORSHIPS

This world forum, more than others, was the opportunity to observe how activists, from Africa and the rest of the world, speak about Africa in an internationalized militant event. This helps to understand the constraints faced by all the movements that intend to denounce domination and at the same time to be able of agency (Gamson, 1992), as well as all the internationalized actors who claim to authentically represent their constituencies. And because the current situation of Africa seemed obviously a proof of the misdeeds of globalization and capitalism, mobilizing in the name of Africa did not go without constraints or even double binds.

Agency and domination

This is a classical double bind of social movements to criticize situations of misery without falling into pessimism or impotence, or in the contrary to celebrate agency without populism, ignorance of actual difficulties or dismissing possible supports by a supercilious claim of cultural and political autonomy. These are the traditional – and crossed - dilemmas of pessimism and populism (Grignon & Passeron, 1989). In Nairobi, Africa was at the same time acted and actress - in practice and words. These constraints weigh both on African and non African activists, the latter always trying to precede possible charges of paternalism, as they also express various degrees of ethnocentrism in their relations with African causes and activists.

Was this WSF a success or not? The answers to this question, during and after the forum, revealed the position of non-African activists towards Africa (as a reality that they knew more or less, or as an issue that mattered more or less). The members of the African social Forum, or the representatives of the Kenyan Organization Committee, considered that the criticism of the organization bore on venial elements, neglected the difficulties specific to Africa, and revealed the “neocolonialism” of some northern activists. Many representatives of INGOs, more familiar with Africa than some of their radical counterparts, found, sometimes not without paternalism, that “for Africa”, it was a success... Conversely, the most virulent critics of the organization were often those for which the African dimension of the forum was not an issue (or in the contrary those, for instance in the networks of the CADTM, who intended to denounce the “the elite” of the ASF). For them, since a country of the South had succeeded in organizing a WSF with a good popular participation (in Mumbai), there was no point in sparing Kenyan organizers.

Northern activists often feared to be considered as patronizing. At the WSF, they thus seldom dared to criticize African governments, even the most repressive: accommodating anti imperialism and defense of activists everywhere can be touchy. At most they considered those governments as “puppets” or accomplices of northern governments. They therefore let Africans criticize, or not, their leaders. Thus in a workshop on “Extractive and local livelihoods”, activists of the Niger Delta accused the federal government of Nigeria to be an accomplice of the oil companies, while the Western participants denounced “*an ugly face of capitalist exploitation and blamed it on the US and Britain*”. Admittedly, there is nothing more shared than anti-imperialism in a WSF, especially since its revival, for instance through Negri and Hardt’s books. But even Northern activists’ solicitude towards the “*victims of imperialism*” can be perceived as patronizing. That explains the uncomfortable position of northern activists in a number of workshops: when the debates correspond to what they claim to wish (a speech of the South on the South), they tend to offer their services, considering that civil societies from the North have to criticize governments of the North, and letting civil societies from the South do the same, if they wish or can, with their own governments. They

thus set a form of international division of criticism. For example, in this workshop on AIDS, this Canadian woman speaking vis-à-vis a mainly African audience: “*One is complementary. We must put pressure on our governments, and you on yours so that they do not pay the debt, that you do not pay colonialism. Mobilize yourself to let us know your goals*”. (Fieldwork notes, January 24th, 2007).

Northern activists of course do not have a unified perception of Africa, as very diverse militant layers coexist in the WSF: development and aid organizations members, Trotskyites opposed to war, Christian militants against the debt, mainstream or radical feminist, first hour anticolonialists... Moreover, the behavior of northern activists, their ethnocentrism sometimes, have not so much to do with their ideologies, and more with their familiarity to the continent, their socialization or social position. Such radical activist would vilify the venality of the African “volunteers” of the WSF (most of them paid in fact), such participant would take photos of street children without questioning the meaning of her gesture, such other radical militant would insist to put the partners of his organization, which had paid the plane ticket, on the front of the scene as an evidence of the grassroots constituencies of his NGO, and tens of radical “tiers-mondistes”³⁷ would stay in one of the very comfortable hotel needed to host a whole delegation, its meetings and access to Internet. Conversely, those most familiar with the continent did not idealize the participation of the poorest among Kenyans, and did not regard the looting of an overly expensive stand of food (held by a close relation of the Kenyan Minister of Home Affairs) by the street children as a completely positive fact, worrying what these children would become once the activists who supported them would have left.

A striking aspect of WSFs in general, and this one in particular, is the reactivation of an ideology shaped around the third-world, which had been strongly challenged in the Eighties. This strong presence is undoubtedly linked to the convergences it allows, sometimes due to its vagueness: according to workshops', one rediscovered dependency theory (Samir Amin, its most renown critique, was among the “stars” of the WSF), “Third Worldism” (“*Third world is the third estate of the world*”, declared Gus Massiah, of the CEDETIM³⁸, rediscovering therefore the origin of the term Third World), Liberation theology (with one of its main theorist, the canon and sociologist François Houtard), all forms of anticolonialism (the “Franz Fanon space” was particularly active), or finally afrocentrism, either in its Afro-American (Malcom X grassroots movement) or African (cf. many references to Sheik Anta Diop) versions. Throughout the WSF, a moderated form of afrocentrism thus seemed one of the processes making possible to claim agency, to mobilize identity and pride, while denouncing the fate made to Africa: a way of binding what Gamson identifies as three central components of collective action: injustice, agency, identity.

A first aspect of this afrocentrism classically consisted in pointing out what Africa could be proud of: celebration of great African intellectuals (Sheik Anta Diop, Joseph Ki Zerbo...), evocation of the great historical figures of African independences and fights, whose names had been given to the spaces of the forum (meeting places were named exclusively with African names, except for Che Guevarra: Amilcar Cabral, Chris Hani, Dedan Kimathi, Mary Nyanjiru, Mekatilili Wa Menza, Modibo Keita, Patrice Lumumba, Ruth First or Thomas Sankara – all of them being martyrs of colonialism or apartheid), or precisely the fight against apartheid (cf. the many “Amandla” which stressed speeches at the opening ceremony for instance).

³⁷ Literally “third-worldist”, in reference to this powerful ideology born in the 50s and who took this name in France in reference to the Third-Estate of the French Revolution.

³⁸ Centre d'Etudes Anti Impérialistes (Anti Imperialist study center).

The choice of these names of spaces spoke for itself as it expressed the ambivalent relation African alterglobalists have to African leaders. On one side they superciliously claimed the sovereignty of African States, but are aware that this can be used by governments as a tool for legitimation, as it was done historically when anti-imperialism was fastened with a project of national construction. On the other hand they criticized the “puppets of the North”. The criticism of the corruption of some African leaders is done more in private situations, between activist friends, from the North or the South, not only by fear of reprisals once returned home. If “beginner” activists (here, Kenyans, peasants, squatters, hawkers who came to testify) do not hesitate to clearly denounce the political leaders, senior activists have adopted, since their beginnings, an ambivalent attitude toward them. This problem is certainly faced by the majority of critics of domination: what to say which is not likely to be used by adversaries? This constraint is reinforced within nationalist or anti-imperialist frameworks as criticizing African leaders can provide new arguments to the international financial institutions, always prompt to denounce corruption and encourage “good governance”. Panafricanism, the call for true United States of Africa, seem here to be a way of challenging African leaders without having to spell it out, because in the name of union and in the critic of colonization inherited borders. The denunciation of the debt is very revealing of this rhetorical strategies: the example of the debt of the DRC, very often used, is undoubtedly explained by the fact that it makes it possible to criticize a *former* African leader, Mobutu, explaining why Africans do not have to pay the debt of the illegitimate dictator, also supported by Western countries. It also allows to say that western countries are still accountable for the horrors committed by their ancestors.

More generally, one frequently found in Nairobi this form of “side” criticism, which consists in denouncing vague or remote culprits and processes (EPA, IFIs, North, imperialism, heritage of colonization...). That indeed makes it possible to endorse a critical discourse, even when one is the citizen of an authoritarian regime, by thus reconciling a moderate activism within one’s national space, with a radicality of language directed towards external enemies in the international circles - leaving therefore blurred the question of the accountability of national leaders. This seems to be a strong characteristic of what the alterglobalist discourse allows. It is amplified by the fact that African activists can seldom allow themselves to face frontally their leaders.

An other way of combining agency and the critique of domination was observed in speeches evoking at the same time the evils of Africa and denying these evils, expressing the idea that Africa is more than that. Kenyan activist Wahu Kaara’s speech, at the opening ceremony of the WSF, was revealing of this form of expression, which, joined to an energetic speech, mobilized indeed a form of agency:

“Welcome to Wahu Kaara, the African revolutionary!” says the presenter on the scene. After a series of “*Karibu*” and “*Welcome*”, she explains why Nairobi is welcoming. Her harangue is followed by enthusiastic acclamations.

“Africa is not a dying continent!”

“Africa is not a (bargain) continent!”

“Africa is not a poor continent!”

“Africa is not a dying continent!”

“Africa is not a continent of diseases!”

“Africa is not a continent of malnutrition!”

“Africa is a continent of human spirit!”

(....) It can be very sentimental and very emotional... very sentimental and very emotional because we are here in Nairobi to say that Africa is here and now to stay !” (Yeah!) And I am saying this as an African woman because we have refused to die we are living for Africa...” (fieldwork notes, 20th of January, Uhuru Park, Nairobi)

The making of this African agency also resulted in the delimitation of “Them” and “Us”, a way of tracing the borders between friends and enemies, between those who are legitimate or not to endorse the cause of Africa. Kaara’s speech marked this very strong rupture between “Us” and “Them”.

“no matter what agendas THEY have... no matter what power THEY have... be it economic or be it political be it whatever... this time around the World Social Forum has given an opportunity to make a linkage with the others all other the world”

This cleavage (you/us/them) appeared in many workshops, “Us” being used as Africa and “You” as “the North”. That could appear paradoxical in a forum defined, according to its charter, as an “open space”, a coordination of civil societies’ movement from all over the world. To point out this cleavage is often a way to prevent northern activists from dominating fights for the South³⁹. This you/us divide could therefore be very situational, expressing the bitterness of African activists when realizing that the place where they stayed was far less comfortable than that of Western activists, that they did not have the means of buying the food or drinks sold around the WSF at the price designed for Westerners, or when, in a workshop, people of whom they felt have no legitimacy to talk monopolized speeches. Contesting this situation could very quickly make Westerners turn silent.

African identity within the WSF was thus prone to transformations, according to interactions and situations. From the remote “Them” of the IFIs, one shifted quickly towards a little clarified “You” and “Us”, that could crystallize a “situational anticolonialism” where “You” indicated the North, the whites, the moderate ones, all those who were resigned too easily to the unjust order of the world... (or the four altogether). Conversely, a northern activist who would have idealized “African tradition” could be challenged for this caricatural and anti-modern vision of Africa, whereas vis-a-vis a mixed audience, the reference to the traditions “that work” is a classic, and also relates to the influence by certain currents of development ideologies. The same could be observed as it came to religion, which could, according to situations, be alternatively denounced or in the contrary put at the heart of the “African soul”. The South-African case is characteristic of this unstable African identity: South-Africans enjoy a strong legitimacy due to their fight against Apartheid, but they are often regarded as insufficiently or “not exactly” African, as “atypical”... These aspects thus raised the question of the forms of legitimacy asserted by the militants.

Cultural legitimism and self-censorships

Organizing a World social forum in Africa was almost an injunction to make Africa central within the Forum. However this “injunction in Africa”, as it opened a space of competition to speak in the name of Africa, resulted in various forms of claims of cultural legitimacy and authenticity. What was at stake was the right to talk, sometimes against the North, but also vis-a-vis other African activists. First aspect of this cultural legitimism: asserting and representing traditions or cultural features as here, agency and identity resulted from one’s own cultural resources. This probably is a classical phenomena (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). This tradition could be the militant tradition (cf. the reference to independences and the fight against Apartheid). Tradition was also asserted through forms of expression such as singing or dancing, often mobilized between the sessions, or inaugurating them. But it could be more largely an “African culture”, sometimes idealized, often poorly clarified, made of consensus, sense of community, role of the family, elders and other traditional social bonds, or male/female complementarity.

³⁹ The cleavage is then more North/South than Africa/ North : during a Jubilee workshop, this young anti debt activist from Norway was contradicted by an Ecuadorian activist who challenged “*this guy from the North, a young man*” (January, 24th, 2007).

But this reference to a (re)invented tradition did not have for only role to dismiss Northern activists perceived as prompt to take over fights. Indeed, no militant from the North, within the FSM, dared to challenge an African activist for not being legitimate to talk: an African at the WSF was at least supposed to be a witness, even a victim, attesting personally the misfortunes of Africa. Thus, in a workshop on migrations, women who had tried to cross the desert tell their stories... and were listened to as victims. In a workshop of the “Franz Fanon space”, a Kenyan from the Sengwer group explained how his community has been deprived from its land. This implicit assignment to the statute of witness is ambivalent. It always make people worth being heard, as much as activists. But in the WSF it turned every African talking in a potential witness, even when African activists did not endorse the register of testimony.

The issue of africanity had also a central role in situations where the public was mainly African, and where one then saws competing strategies of representativeness. What seemed to be at stake in this internationalized space which sometimes so much looked like another international conference, was to avoid being challenged as non-African (because “westernized”, cut from grassroots, traveling too much...). This was the case of these Kenyan artists who made a performance in the Forum “*in the name of a sacrifice for Africa*”, and who reluctantly acknowledged that they “lived” in the USA whereas they spent most of their time there for professional reasons. This example expresses a tendency to a real cultural legitimism, a strong denial of extraversion (Bayart, 2000) and internationalization. It raises a central issue, as charges for “not representing anybody” were often heard, “off”, against some “stars” of African alterglobalism. And one cannot deny that the transnationalization of activism can contribute to worsen the gap between the most internationalized activists, sometimes the best gifted with social and financial resources, and the others. Hence this insistence to show that one actually is African, i.e. “culturally” African, that one does not reproduce colonialist patterns, that one did not travel, and is therefore more “rooted” than “cosmopolitan” (Tarrow, 2002).

This insistence, by all activists, either from the North or the South, in the denegation of extraversion and internationalization was significantly observed in workshops relating to sexuality. Northern activists here tried to be particularly discrete, and avoid appearing as imposing codes which would have been rejected if they had seemed promoted by the North.

WSF, Kasarani, Queer Spot, atelier « Reclaiming our sexualities », January 22nd, 2007

This workshop benefits from the organizational support of the ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association), materialized by the discrete presence of its communication Officer Stephen Barris, who confines himself to the Spanish / English translation. The issue is obviously, during all the forum, to minimize the presence of whites on this theme, as Barris acknowledges in the report written after the WSF⁴⁰. It is undoubtedly the workshop where the members of our team will hear the most speaking about what is “really” African, of Africa like a reference, or even “Mother Africa”: the reproach of homosexuality as “not-African” appears as a permanent obstacle to face. The audience is mixed, with a short African majority. The number of speakers gives little occasion for the floor to express itself. With these short interventions one after the other, the issue seems to be visibility rather than a potentially explosive dialogue (although

⁴⁰ “At the closing ceremony on Thursday afternoon (...) We decide to ask for a speech to be read but the program is already overloaded: someone takes our script, but cannot guarantee that it will be read. In the following minutes, our speech in the name of “the gays and lesbians of Africa” is announced but does not materialize. One hour, two hours, three hours... Kasha, a Ugandan activist, and I decide to go backstage to ask what's going on. (...) Kasha and I stand and wait. Nervously, she lights a cigarette. An hour and a half passes, and finally comes her moment to shine. I wait behind the scenes: a European – especially a white man – would discredit the attempt by trying to speak in the name of the gays and lesbians of Africa”. “World Social Forum - Nairobi 2007 Respect for All! Another world is possible – for African LGBT people, too”, 26/02/2007, retrieved on <http://www.babels.org/forum/viewtopic.php?p=2961> on Friday, 06th July 2007.

dialogue with Kenyans has been organized in small groups, in English and Kiswahili before). 4 of the 5 speakers are African, all from English speaking Africa: 2 South-Africans, an Ugandan refugee in South Africa, a Nigerian woman. The South-African activist and poetess explains LGBT fights, evokes the use of homophobia by postcolonial leaders who affirm that homosexuality is “unaffrican”. She explains: “*we are there precisely to reconquer our sexualities*”. The Nigerian woman evokes the work she has carried on about homosexuality in Nigeria : “*there are people who are born Nigerians, who are living in Nigeria, who have never left the Country, but who have same sex relationships* (some applause). *In English you would say they are homosexuals, in the local language it was more difficult to find a language for the behavior because with the advent of colonialism and Christianity and the Jihad that took place (...) a local language censorship has taken place as they try to institutionalize the moral code that they have brought in*”. She recalls that although the absence of the term “homosexual” makes believe that the reality did not exist, there are traditional terms to indicate this type of relations, that one can discover by questioning old people. The leader of the Coalition of African Lesbians holds up a work of anthropologists which collects life stories and testimonies of lesbians in English speaking Africa. She insists on the importance of this compilation, and against the idea of non-africanity of homosexuality, calls for a reappropriation of terminology “*to tell our communities who we are without using colonial language*”. (Fieldwork notes, JS)

The same way of speaking about what is really (or not at all) African could be found in less radical workshops, more connected to the world of international development and Northern INGOs. It was the case in this workshop named “Developing alternatives in the Panafrican fight against HIV and AIDS”, animated by the Ugandan employee of a big INGO.

The chairman, in charge of HIV programs for ActionAid, deals wonderfully with the reference to the African culture and the refusal to let the North impose anything. He of course defends the idea that treatments work, that prevention imports, that abstinence is a pious wish, etc. But he also insists on themes and arguments which would not seem very legitimate for other AIDS activists (e.g. his mistrust with regard to the condom if it had to be imposed without respect or knowledge of “African cultures”). Combining an image of competence and authenticity, he appears as the ideal leader for any INGO concerned with grassroots anchoring: an interface between “the populations”, the expatriates and the headquarters of the NGO. In his harangue, he challenges the 10 Downing Street, the White House, Brussels... and citizens from the North : “*It is necessary that you are listened to, and that they (your leaders) are accountable! (...) You are not lobbying your governments to put the money in the right place! (the room: “exactly”! Applause.) Get back to the world, if you are member of the WSF, you need to get back to the North to force your governments to put the money for AIDS in the right place rather than dictate us.*” He insists on the need for long-term money from donors. “*We are not guinea-pigs, do not send us PhDs on new tools! Use them on what works! And do not speak to us about abstinence! (...) and those who return (to the North) check how your money is used rather than to finance PhDs! Support tools and strategies that work: and even if you buy condoms, that does not mean I will use them! ... (...) It's my culture!*” The mainly African audience increases and shows her approval as the speaker delights the room. (Fieldwork notes, JS, January 24th, 2007).

CONCLUSION

To consider African participation in this WSF would thus make it possible to hold a double line: first the necessity to examine some concrete conditions of transnational activism, second the fact that social movements must not be considered as unified actors, but on the contrary as spaces of fights and tensions on the right to legitimate speech, and here legitimate speech on Africa. Internationalization complexifies this reality known by all social movements in national frameworks already. These two aspects, although analytically distinct, are not really separable. Dealing in detail with the concrete conditions of transnational protest (a “sociology of the plane ticket”) shows where are the tensions, alliances and also domination lines in the

space of transnational protest. It makes possible to understand how (without being only the reflection of it), certain ideological confrontations are a way of translating, in protest language, realities which also correspond to antagonisms of social position, on a national or international scale.

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