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Kingsajz, or the Worldliness **(postcards from Amsterdam and Bissau)**

In the collectanea *Rozliczenie. Doświadczenia i praktyki*, Jan Kieniewicz gathered, among other materials, a series of essays he wrote on the brink of the crucial decade of 1980 and published in the periodical “Literatura”.¹ Today they offer an insight into the idiosyncratic vision of the world as it was imagined and conceptualized by a representative of the Polish intelligentsia (an “inteligent”) at that time, secretly or openly anxious of acquiring a peculiar condition of a “man of the world” (*światowy człowiek*); I do not doubt that the author himself might have often been regarded as a perfect accomplishment of this ideal. Yet the expression, quite popular in Polish, is not a frequent one in English. The first association of the term “worldliness” points out to Edward Said’s classical book *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, where the accentuated aspect is the immersion of the subject in the earthly reality that determines both creation and interpretation of texts.² It is not exactly the secular, or anti-transcendentalist, resonance of the term

¹ J. Kieniewicz, *Rozliczenie. Doświadczenia i praktyki 1976–1996*, Warszawa 2015, pp. 31-188. The present essay is freely inspired by some of the topics that appeared in those texts; cf. especially *Bez pracy nie ma...*, ibidem, pp. 47-49.

² E. W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge 1983.

that I am interested in. What appears as crucial to me is the immersion of the subject in the world as a context of intellectual involvement and responsibility, or “answerability”, ability and readiness to resonate with stimuli and inspirations of the world. A world seen not as a conjunction of alien territories, but as an organic whole composed by idiosyncratic forms of our common humanness.

As Kieniewicz states in the *Introduction* to this retrospective volume, the idea of making such a “settlement of accounts” (*rozliczenie*) came to his mind in the context of the PhD program *Searching for Identity*, where, at a given moment, we decided to put our own biographies in the limelight as an inescapable key to the problem stated in the seminar’s title. Personally, I believe that the question of “worldliness” is at least as interesting as identity. It emerged both in 1980 and 2014, acquiring at these historical moments a divergent, yet complementary illumination.

The personal concept of the world is not only a key factor of identity, but first of all a product of a given biography. Any self-definition implies a determined way of building relation with strangeness and strangers: the external reality, understood as the multiplicity of alien people, places, ideas, geographical and mental territories. At a distance of more than one generation, our views on those core questions certainly differed. Yet it cannot be denied that to a certain degree we shared a common source situation, or, as Jan Kieniewicz prefers to call it, “the Situation” (*Sytuacja*). At the beginning of the crucial decade of 1980, I was 8 years old; it can hardly be considered as an age of reason. Nonetheless, I keep clear memories of that time, an indelible remembrance of fear, as one Sunday morning I saw myself deprived of my favourite TV program “*Teleranek*” to be rudely advised from the screen that the “martial law” (*stan wojenny*) – a novel, yet instantly terrifying expression – had been introduced. I also believe to have heard early the satirical song of Wojciech Młynarski, and that particular meaning that Kieniewicz emphasizes with the capital letter was simply the first meaning of the word *sytuacja* in my eyes. Roughly, a synonym of “generalized hardship,” or yet another key word of that time, “the crisis” (*kryzys*). Not even a child was granted the privilege of ignoring it.

In 1987, I was already 15, old enough to appreciate the comedy *Kingsajz* by Juliusz Machulski. The allegory of Szufflandia (the Drawerland), a country located in an abandoned library catalogue hidden deep in the underground of the Quaternary Research Institute, resumed not only the Situation, but also

the ambitions of worldliness that were sprouting at that time. The gnomes, living under a tiny dictator and suffering a constant shortage of supplies (in spite of such limited appetites as theirs), presented an unmistakably Polish, Romantic mentality, conspiring against the tyrant and nurturing lofty dreams of freedom. The fact that one of the heroic gnomes was a chemist rather than a typical 19th-century insurrectionist, introduced a significant trait of modernization into this Romantic landscape in the undergrowth. The conspirators, Adaś and Olo, strived to discover the Formula, enabling them to access the Kingsajz, the world of the fully grown. That meant to break, at the same time, the official monopoly reserving the “Polo-Cockta” (a rather mysterious brew, sold in the Communist Poland as a local ersatz of the Western Coca-Cola) to a privileged group.

On the other hand, the allegory of two scales, that of the gnomes and that of the fully grown people, translated the sensation of eternal minority nurtured by the Poles in relation to the higher, greater, more serious reality of “the West” (*Zachód*). It is westwards that the heroes try to flee, even if they remain utterly caught in the minor dimension. In the final scene, the train that should transport them to freedom becomes a mere toy speeding on a closed circuit of miniature rails across the lawn in front of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. Later on, this surreal, yet strangely horrifying image often haunted me during our debates on “local” or “domestic humanities” (*humanistyka krajowa*), opposed to “world humanities” (*humanistyka światowa*). This topic was discussed at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” on more than one occasion.³ I have also meditated on it on my own account, nurturing a sensation of being minor in the global intellectual and academic context and trying to break the Kingsajz formula just as hard as Machulski’s gnomes did. I believe I have managed to achieve it, yet still, I shiver any time I look through the window, fearing to discover that I am travelling on a toy train or aircraft, taking me to a cardboard Amsterdam Centraal station or a delusive Schiphol.

³ Cf. *Nacyonalnaya gumanitarnaya nauka v mirovom kontiektstie. Opyt Rosii i Polshy* (Национальная гуманитарная наука в мировом контексте. Опыт России и Польши), J. Axer, I. Savelieva, eds., Moscow 2010 and *Humanistyka krajowa w kontekście światowym. Doświadczenie Polski i Rosji*, J. Axer, I. Sawieliewa, eds., Warszawa 2011 (the same book published in two linguistic versions), as well as *Debaty Artes Liberales*, vol. 8, *Inteligent, humanista, intelektualista*, K. Tomaszuk, ed., Warszawa 2014.

There is certainly greatness and heroism in a gnome, made obvious at the moment when Olo, being asked: “What is this all about?” (*Ale o co tu chodzi?*), answered shortly: “It’s about freedom” (*O wolność*). In the genial interpretation of Jacek Chmielnik as Olo, the inflection given to the word breaks through the limits of the comedy to assume, for a fraction of a second, all the past and present aspirations of a nation. The way Olo pronounces the word “freedom” gives the gist of its sublime concept in the Polish culture.

On the other hand, having landed on the polder where the Haarlemmermeer (Haarlem’s Lake) had once been, it is easy to see the difference, even if it is better resumed in Goethe’s *Faust* than in any identity self-definition produced by the Dutch:

Ja, diesem Sinne bin ich ganz ergeben,
 Das ist der Weisheit letzter Schluß:
 Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Leben,
 Der täglich sie erobern muß.
 Und so verbringt, umrungen von Gefahr,
 Hier Kindheit, Mann und Greis sein tüchtig Jahr.
 Solch ein Gewimmel möcht’ ich sehn,
 Auf freiem Grund mit freiem Volke stehn.⁴

Certainly, this untimely discovery costs doctor Faust his soul, but at the same time the Dutch concept of freedom comes as close to the notion of comfort as it does to safety; as far as I was able to interpret it, it appeared to me epitomized as a peculiar antique chair carefully preserved in the Rijksmuseum together with a cushion padding the seat. Olo has his freedom always in front of him as a sublime target; the Dutch freedom, located at the rear, is always a means leading to further acquisitions; it permits to sit down comfortably, thinking what to do next. Machulski’s heroic gnomes cannot go beyond the point of achieving their freedom; they prove unable to inhabit it as fully grown men. For them, freedom cannot be translated into commodity. Olo cannot construe himself as someone in possession of it; he cannot imagine freedom as a space to put his furniture in, making it cosy. Perhaps

⁴ J. W. von Goethe, *Werke, Kommentare und Register. Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden*, Bd. 3, Dramen I, München 1989, p. 348.

this is what utterly transforms his train into a miniature, taking him back to the uncomfortable and penurious Drawerland.

Freedom as a means of further acquisitions leads to work and creation, makes work and creation viable. Once again, the best illustration of this truth is contained not in a self-definition, but in an alien glance, that of King Crimson's lyricist Richard Palmer-James musing on Rembrandt's masterpiece, *The Night Watch*:

So many years we suffered here
 Our country racked with Spanish wars
 Now comes a chance to find ourselves
 And quiet reigns behind our doors
 We think about posterity again

And so the pride of little men
 The burghers good and true
 Still living through the painter's hand
 Request you all to understand.⁵

Another basic distinction I remember from my childhood is the opposition "to have or to be" (*mieć czy być*), which in the decade of 1980 was regarded as defining the intelligentsia as a class that "chose to be." Probably this stoic subterfuge safeguarded its survival and integrity against the material shortage. Yet later on, during my studies at an artistic high school, it clashed against the dawning consciousness that the entire history of art is in fact a constant testimony of the survival through "having", a perennial victory of the pride of those other "little men" who chose to have. Nonetheless truly do I wonder how this instinct of unstoppable acquisition, alien to the stoic philosophy in vogue at the time, came to me; perhaps due to the fact that my social extraction had so little to do with intelligentsia. I could not hope to "be" as the members of this social group "were" – in their sublime essence, independently of any material possession. Thus I started to

⁵ R. Palmer-Jones, *The Night Watch*, lyrics of the song included in King Crimson's album *Starless and Bible Black* (1974), http://www.lyricsfreak.com/k/king+crimson/the+night+watch_20078633.html (accessed September 28, 2017).

accumulate very early. As a child, I was already gathering books of any sort, even if I had no such knowledge as required to peruse them (in 2014, at the time of my travel to Island, I was amazed to discover a critical edition of the *Poetic Edda*, yellowed with age, that I must have bought at a ridiculous price when I was still at the primary school; even now, in any of my travels I buy books written in languages I can hardly decipher, with unshakable faith that the mere possession will secretly transform me, and one day their meaning will become clear to me). Someone might say that I constantly try to have what I am not, and I carry on my back what I cannot reasonably hope to become. Seeing me one day at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales,” Jan Kieniewicz spontaneously exclaimed: “Oh, how awful you look with this backpack!” (*Ależ pani okropnie wygląda z tym plecakiem!*).

Obviously, that inelegant backpack contained books, and the fact brings me into further musings. As much as a sublime concept of freedom, there is also a sublime concept of academic excellence; both of them without articulation with earthly acquisitions. There is a belief that, also academically, certain people “are”, no matter their diligence or negligence. Also this notion has a Romantic origin; it comes from innate talent, heavenly inspiration, gratuitous grace that simply is bestowed to some and denied to others. This theological concept of *gratia gratis data* – the free gift conferred on particular persons for the salvation of others – is at the same time the source legitimisation of the privileged role of the intelligentsia as the anointed guide of the remaining social classes. Why should they need backpacks?

Participating at the same time in the sublime and the tragedy of miniaturization, the toy train of Olo is speeding on a circular rail. One of the distinctive traits of the Drawerland humanities is precisely the constant recycling of ideas. As there is no reason why the actualization of knowledge should matter, obsolete schools, methods or theories are never abandoned or eliminated definitively. At the same time, it often becomes apparent that theoreticians and thinkers are suspended in a kind of eternal present of reflection, contemporary to each other: Freud and Said, Fraser and postcolonial school, Adorno and Foucault, Benjamin and Vattimo. The world seen through the windows of the toy train is unreal; the circular rail never leads to an effective encounter with otherness. The open horizon, the presence of strangers (let us remember the crucial scene in the lobby of an international hotel where Olo penetrates trying to avoid the capture by the secret agents

of the gnome tyrant) is one of the wonders of the Kingsajz, while the Drawerland, located underground, has no exterior and no alternative to its own reality. Yet the final encounter with the dreamed or fantasied foreign world never takes place. Similarly, the “domestic humanities” are a field of discussion where all the categories, criteria and problems present a centripetal tendency. This is why, trying to debate the perspectives of the postcolonial theory in Poland, we were constantly falling back into the same, essentially circular and centripetal, order of questions: was Poland a colonizer? Was Poland the colonized? Yet this self-defining option does not usually come as the first one in the postcolonial studies.

The inhabitants of the Drawerland lack an exteriority and aspire to it. This is why early in 1980, Jan Kieniewicz wrote his essay on Salvador and Ecuador, evoking, in the first sentences of the text, the fact how enormously far away those countries were situated.⁶ The epoch knew other excellent works on similarly distant regions, just to mention, most obviously, Ryszard Kapuściński. And yet this kind of writing, including Kieniewicz’s extensive *History of India*,⁷ remained somehow – at least it is my personal feeling – without reception, repercussion and posterity. Salvador and India remained as far as they were, and the incessant attempts at centripetal self-definition remained in the focus of our humanities. This is legitimate, of course, but if we consider the highly ranked academic systems, the proportions are exactly the reverse. The leading universities of the world live intensely their worldliness, skilfully avoiding any temptation of umbilicalism. The dominating mechanism is that of further acquisitions, extending the range of questions and constantly redesigning the maps of distant geographies.

Apparently, thirty years after Machulski’s comedy, the request of “Kingsajz for everyone” has been granted. Adult trains and airlines take even the tiniest of men not only westwards, but to a surprising number of destinations worldwide. In 2016, having in mind a travel to Guinea-Bissau, I could verify that the cheapest and the safest way of penetrating this country lacking public transportation, urgencies, postal service, and even law enforcement (at least on the casual Internet forums, Guinea-Bissau seems to be famous, in the first place, as a country without a prison) was to accompany

⁶ J. Kieniewicz, *Rozliczenie*, op. cit., p. 136.

⁷ Idem, *Historia Indii*, 2nd ed., Wrocław 1985.

a group of tourists regularly expedited to the island of Canhabaque in the archipelago of Bijagós by the travel agency Rainbow Tours. The efficiency of this penetration proved indeed remarkable. Having landed at the airport of Banjul in the Gambia, I crossed Casamance – the southern region of Senegal regarded for many decades as a dangerous and unstable place – with unexpected ease. I travelled in a minibus hired by the travel agency, together with a dozen of Polish tourists, our luggage safely placed on the roof and fastened with ropes. At one of the numerous military check-points, a similar vehicle, transporting the Dutch, stood immobilized, apparently for many hours. Determined to cut down the African corruption, they refused to hand out money to the soldiers.

The clients of the Polish travel agencies interested in such extremal, off-road destinations as Guinea-Bissau form a reduced, yet characteristic group. Those “men of the world” travel widely, from Albania to New Zealand; nonetheless their knowledge and consciousness of the world often appears as shockingly reduced. In a way, I still shared with them a toy minibus and a travel experienced with a childish ingenuity, while we were entering one of the world’s poorest countries.⁸ Both in its continental part and on the Bijagós islands, it was hard to spot an obese person; people are skinny in any age and condition. As they rely on the meagre crops that the primitive, “dry” culture of rice can render,⁹ a bit of sorghum, cassava, and *mancarra* (the local peanut), as well as some occasional fish, the malnutrition and the ever-present menace of hunger is an everyday reality.¹⁰ Yet imagine the grotesque of those Polish travellers exhorting each other not to give any sweets to the local children, so to avoid spoiling their “natural, healthy diet.”

⁸ Guinea-Bissau occupies the 178th place among 187 countries and territories of the world according to the Human Development Report; cf. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/GNB> (accessed September 28, 2017).

⁹ The so-called “pam-pam” culture of rice is a form of itinerant agriculture, performed on patches of earth where the forest had been previously burned down. These ephemeral fields are not permanently inundated; the crop of rice depends on the natural humidity levels during the raining season.

¹⁰ Vítor Rosado Marques, in the conclusion of his study, puts the same truth in neutral, deliberately artificial terms, characteristic, at the level of style, for the postcolonial Portuguese: “A análise da informação recolhida sobre a situação alimentar revela a vulnerabilidade dos agregados familiares em termos da segurança alimentar.” V. Rosado Marques, *Situação nutricional no Leste da Guiné-Bissau. Estudo diagnóstico realizado nas regiões de Bofatá e Gabu*, Lisboa 2015, p. 41.

I would not be concerned with the tourists, of course, if I had not the sensation that quite similar phenomena of “world blindness” are to be discerned in much more serious, academic contexts. To some degree, our “domestic humanities” reflect the same state of consciousness: being in the world, yet away from the world. With all the opportunities and ways of access widely open, the state of isolation in a mental Drawerland persists, and this should be a serious reason to worry. Certainly we do possess specialists and specialized works, even on the topics that are studied but very rarely in the international context, such as the animist cultures of Guinea-Bissau (just to give an example, Magdalena Brzezińska’s *Kontrakt z duchami*,¹¹ based on the author’s field research in the region of Bissorã, would easily stand the comparison with the publications existing abroad). But in the Polish multidisciplinary context, these achievements are marginalized, lacking impact and visibility. They are powerless to transform the general academic landscape; their contribution does not modify the predominant discourse. The self-centred vision prevails, vested in second-hand theoretical robes imported from a narrow range of traditional academic metropolises. But strangely, for some reason I have never managed to fathom, the crucial strategy of those leading centres is not imitated. The institutions that might be in many ways the equivalent to the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” in Warsaw engage in a constant, frenetic exploration of the worldly horizons. In the meanwhile, during the last decade of teaching at my home university, I did not even manage to maintain a full-scale Mediterranean perspective. My classes, aiming at the presentation of the complex Christian-Islamic interplay in the Western Mediterranean, obviously including its African shores, had been arbitrarily reduced, without as little as a serious conversation with me, to a mere “History of the Iberian Culture.” Such a narrowing of the scope is constant, surreptitious, ever-present, operating by slight changes and small modifications; but as the final result, it does put us all in the Drawerland again.

On the other hand, I do understand why my classes could not dovetail in the curriculum of cultural studies in the Mediterranean Civilization, realized at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales.” The curriculum in question was centred on the sublime concept of harmony and common heritage spreading indefinitely across imaginary geographies (this is why Poland could also be included in

¹¹ M. Brzezińska, *Kontrakt z duchami. Czary i religia w Gwinei Bissau*, Sopot 2014.

this Mediterranean world *sensu latissimo*), while the real, unspeakable Mediterranean, a less lofty, not to say dirtier cluster of problems characterized by an awkward complexity, inharmonious divisions and quite unclassical tragedies, had been deliberately kept away, very far away. In the meanwhile, the abstract notion of a civilization as a continuity of the heritage of Antiquity is certainly as beautiful and as worthy of being preserved as the natural, healthy diet of the Guinean children.

The choice of places from where my symbolic “postcards” are sent is not as serendipitous as it may seem.¹² It brings back another memory, that of the seminar “Facing the Challenge of Identification: New approaches to Buryat identities and their cross-border dynamics” that Jan Kieniewicz organized in 2016. The distinguished guest in this event, Professor Catherine Humphrey from the University of Cambridge, presented her findings on several “Zomias” she identified in Central Asia. The concept of Zomia, a refuge zone, initially proposed by the Dutch historian Willem van Schendel is precisely what made me reflect on these two, apparently unlike locations: the Netherlands and Guinea-Bissau. The original Van Schendel’s Zomia corresponds to the highlands of North Indochina, situated beyond the control of the centralized governments of the lowlands; my own hypothetical Zomias are, on the contrary, composed of wetlands and small islands, thus isolated by quite different geographical circumstances from the main landmasses and their centralized traditions, be it France or Mali.¹³ Both seem to have served as sanctuaries for vanquished and persecuted groups; what else could explain the prodigious ethnic and linguistic diversity of such a small territory as Guinea-Bissau, where 22 languages are attested?

The reason why I was interested in Zomias in the first place was my transcultural project. I hoped to identify some kind of natural transcultural laboratories in which extreme diversity might have led to new forms of

¹² In fact, my parallel between the Low Countries and the former Portuguese colonies in Africa is not completely novel; among other instances, it has been explored by the Angolan writer Pepetela. In *A Sul. O Sombreiro* he has portrayed the paradigmatic Iberian colonizer while suffering the tropical heat in his heavy leather boots still dirty with the Dutch mud. Cf. Pepetela, *A Sul. O Sombreiro*, Lisboa 2011.

¹³ The coast of Guinea-Bissau is often seen as a margin of the Mandinga world as it is situated far from the trans-Saharan routes that gave rise to the Empire of Mali. The opening towards the Atlantic Ocean was useless from the point of view of this civilization.

consciousness, transgressing the very principles of cultural division, identity and identification. What I discovered was rather a two-fold potential of the Zomia. The diversity achieving hyperbolic levels may create conditions of unusual creative fertility, as well as a new sense of transcultural community; it may bring about the emergence of inclusive and expanding spaces of linguistic communication, such as was the neo-Latinity radiating from the Low Countries in the past and such as is the particular use of English and Dutch in the present; (Dutch literature is not a national system in which a cohesive identity might find its expression, but a confluence of many cultures, illustrated by such names as Moses Isegawa, originally from Uganda, or Kader Abdolah, originally from Iran, without mentioning those who, like Dubravka Ugrešić, merely reside in Amsterdam, but do not write in Dutch). On the other hand, Guinea-Bissau is very far from this reality, not only for what concerns the material aspect of human existence; it is also the contrary of creative fertility and blooming. At many moments, both during my past Lusitanist career and my recent attempts at a penetration of the West African secrets, it seemed to me that this is a Zomia where everything went wrong: the accumulation of strangeness led to generalized suspicion and finally to the dissolution of all profound communitarian links. Guinea-Bissau is a location from where people constantly depart towards the distant European shore on those fragile embarkations that usually connect the islands of the archipelago, and a land to which people never come back, not even those who managed to achieve reasonable levels of prosperity in Portugal, their colonial ex-metropolis. Their fear is too great. The fear of envy, resentment, gratuitous hostility, and the magical revenge their own family and neighbours would certainly take on them. Even the crocodiles, so persuasively depicted by Brzezińska, are believed never to attack people out of their proper nature; if they appear to do so, they are clearly the “transformed” ones, induced into aggression by some envious sorcerer, most probable to be found in the victim’s intimate circle.

The unification of the various ethnic elements inhabiting the country appears as a trans-historical conundrum. Guinea-Bissau had always been an unsolved and uncontrolled margin, be it for the Mandinga kingdoms that, having come from the high Niger, built up the medieval Empire of Mali, or, later on, for the centralizing ambitions radiating from the Kaabunké (Kaabú), considered by Carlos Lopes as “the unifying cradle of all the cultures

of the region.”¹⁴ For the Portuguese, claiming the territory as their possession since 1446 (although they effectively administered it for less than a century), the unruly region had always constituted a serious challenge. Unsurprisingly, it was there that the erosion of the colonial Empire began, in 1959, with the revolt and the subsequent massacre in the Pidjiguiti docks, in the port of Bissau. Nonetheless, several decades of independence hardly led beyond the bitter conclusion inscribed in the poem of Tony Tcheka:

Enfermo declino o convite
 para a grande festa da liberdade
 Estou no meu tempo
 no meu espaço
 na minha tabanca
 onde festa
 é choro
 é doença
 é criança morrendo¹⁵

Being sick, I decline the invitation
 for the great feast of liberty
 I stay in my time
 in my space
 in my village
 where the feast
 is crying
 is sickness
 is a child dying

(transl. E. Ł.)

Is there any moral to be gathered from this handful of poetic fragments and personal recollections? Certainly it is true that travels educate and bring

¹⁴ C. Lopes, *Kaabunké: Espaço, território e poder na Guiné-Bissau, Gâmbia e Casamance pré-coloniais*, Lisboa 1999, p. 244.

¹⁵ T. Tcheka, *Noites de insónia na terra adormecida*, Bissau 1996, p. 69.

men to wisdom, even if the definitive interpretation of these serendipitous comparisons must remain open. The Low Countries *versus* Guinea-Bissau; the Dutch who did not give money to the soldiers *versus* the Polish who did not give sweets to the children; the classical and unclassical tragedies; the ambitions of the “men of the world” and their world blindness. The experience of travelling permits – or at least should permit – not only to see and to contrast the divergent ways of facing our common, human destiny, but also to discern the strategical clues, the slight modifications that make big difference, leading to prosperity and hunger, success and failure, academic excellence and marginalization. The great lesson of the world does not speak of fatality; it speaks of diversity and choice. I believe it is utterly by choice that, in a country without a prison, people try to bewitch crocodiles and build their own, private prisons of alienation; in another one, gnomes, having finally got everything to live as able, fully grown men, transform their own life into a toy story. While some other people and peoples, having once managed to put their hands on a foreign book, quietly go on with further acquisitions.

