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Denise Paulme Deborah Lifchitz *Lettres de Sanga*

Edited and presented by Marianne Lemaire.

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Lettres de Sanga, published in Paris by the French academic press CNRS, tells a story of French ethnographer, Denise Paulme's first trip to Africa through letters she and her companion, Deborah Lipchitz, sent and received from the French Sudan. Paulme has just turned twenty six as she set out in February 1935 as part of a team headed by the then highly influential scholar of French Africa, Marcel Griaule. After seven weeks of increasingly tense relations during which Griaule's research team busily conducted fieldwork in this region, known as Dogon country, the party split. Griaule and four associates continued their expedition from the Sahara through the Sudan, leaving Paulme and Lipchitz in Sanga. The two women remained in this one location through September 1935 on a mission their professor and mentor in Paris, Marcel Mauss, had defined as their primary focus, notably to observe and record «une société des femmes'» (98).

It was thanks to the Rockefeller Foundation in Paris that Paulme was able to undertake this extensive period of independent research. Armed with a generous PhD bursary of 50,000 francs, she found herself equipped with sufficient resources to cover the expenses both of herself and Lipchitz, a talented young ethnographic linguist from Russia via Poland, studying in Paris and like Paulme, working part-time at the Trocadero Museum in Paris, then the hub of ethnological activities in the French empire.

Paulme and Lipchitz's experiences in Sanga from arrival in February 1935 to their departure in September of that year are related from various perspectives through four sets of letters

prefaced by a helpful and informative introductory essay by Marianne Lemaire. Through Lemaire we learn that the split that separated the young women, disparagingly referred to as 'potiches' or wallflowers by their opponents in the group headed by Griaule, reflected a difference in methodology. While Griaule appears to have worked fast and furiously in his fieldwork sites amassing data in the form of artefacts and observational records, Paulme was developing a more measured and reflective approach. Griaule failed to appreciate Paulme and Lipchitz' preference and, as Lemaire suggests, did not appreciate their refusal to follow his instruction.

Their new methodology, admired by such luminaries as Michel Leiris, as letters in this collection reveal, did not however lead Paulme and Lipchitz to achieve what they set out to do. According to Paulme it was impossible to record an identifiable 'société des femmes', as she notes in one letter, «je n'ai, à Sanga, trouvé aucun indice malgré mes efforts»(98). Using gender as the singular construct around which to configure 'women' as a historical and scientific category remained a Western scholarly pursuit for decades, and Paulme is one of the earliest scholars of African studies in French to point to its shortcomings. In this case Paulme also notes that she and Lipchitz were working entirely through male interpreters, as such the conception of their project, at its most practical level, was faulty. What they did do over the months that followed was to observe and painstakingly describe Dogon culture, amassing over 180 artefacts to take back to the museum in Paris, following the materialistic methodology prevalent in that era. Notwithstanding these experiences in Sanga, Paulme's interest in integrating women in Africa into Western scholarship did not abate and any reader unfamiliar with her edited collection, *Women in Tropical Africa*, translated from the French by H M Wright, (first published in English in 1963 and reissued by Routledge in 2004) will encounter there work extraordinarily advanced methodologically for its time, and indeed still of relevance to scholarship on gender in postcolonial African studies today.

The rift that separated Paulme and Lipchitz from Griaule and associates, illustrated in these letters, notably by Paulme's entreaties to her trusted collaborators not to show Griaule the duplicates of their field notes sent at regular intervals to Paris, deepened after the women's return from Sanga. According to Lemaire this marks a turning point in the history of French Africanism when methodology and epistemology divide (51). While Paulme went on to

forge a career as a groundbreaking African ethnographer, returning many times to Africa with her husband André Schaeffner (also a member of Griaule's Sahara-Sudan expedition team of 1935), Deborah Lipchitz's career was tragically cut short. Arrested in Paris in February 1942 and transported to Auschwitz in September of that year, she died in the gas chambers shortly after her arrival in the camp. Her letters, translated here from the original Russian, are conserved in a special archive in her honour in Paris.

Her letters in this edition provide a moving counterpoint to Paulme's more data-driven epistolary style, Lipchitz constantly beseeching her clearly much-loved family members to write more often. Through all their letters, and the replies received from their interlocutors in Paris, we gain rare insights into ethnographic developments in this era, but perhaps of even greater interest to the historian of Africa are the vivid glimpses they offer of life as a colonial in French West Africa. For those equipped with a 'reading knowledge' of French, it will be worth dusting down the Collins-Robert for this edition.

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