The Five Teachings of the Chameleon

If I have any advice to give you, I would tell you: Open your heart, and above all, learn from the Chameleon. It is a great teacher. And if you follow this advice, you will see what the Chameleon is.

1. When it decides on a direction, it never turns its head. Therefore, have a precise objective in your life, and don’t let anything distract you from that objective.

2. It is not its head which turns, but its eye. It looks up, it looks down. Find out. Don’t believe that you are the only living being on the planet. The whole world surrounds you.

3. When it gets to a place, the Chameleon takes on the color of that place. This is not hypocrisy. More than anything, this is tolerance, as well as a savoir vivre. Fighting with each other doesn’t settle anything. Nothing ever gets built up in fighting. Fighting destroys. So, mutual comprehension is an important duty. In all situations, we must seek to understand our fellows. If we exist, we must admit that others exist also.

4. When it lifts its foot, it will sway back and forth so as to know whether the other two feet it has already put down are not giving way. It is only after this that it will put its two feet down. It will sway again, then lift the other feet. This is called walking with care. Since its tail is prehensile, the Chameleon will anchor it so that if its front end gives way, it will still be hanging by its tail. This is called “covering your back.” Don’t be careless.

5. And what does the Chameleon do when it sees prey? It doesn’t just pounce on it. Instead, it sends its tongue. It’s the Chameleon’s tongue that goes out to find prey. After all, it’s not the prey’s small size that will tell you it’s not going to kill you. If the Chameleon’s tongue can fetch its prey, it reeves it in slowly. This way, it always has the option of withdrawing its tongue and avoiding harm. Therefore, go easy in everything you do. If you want to create a work of lasting significance, be patient, be good, be easy to get along with, be humane.

So, this is what the Chameleon teaches you. Should you cross the African bush and ask those who know, this is what they would say about the chapter on the Chameleon.

— Amadou Hampâté Bâ
translated from the French by Wanda Boeke
Jean Rouch was very fond of these 5 Teachings