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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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RENE PHILOMBE'S HISTOIRES QUEUE-DE-CHAT:

A COMMENTED TRANSLATION

Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, and Research,
of the University of Ottawa
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts (Applied Linguistics) (Translation)

presented by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
PART I	
Philombe's works, objective and style and the problems they pose to the translator	5
Chapter 1	
René Philombe's life, works, and ideas	6
Chapter 2	
Problems in Translating Philombe's culture- bound Works	17
Chapter 3	
Problems posed by Philombe's typically African style	29
PART II	
Translations, with background information and notes intended for the North American public	54
Background information required to understand Philombe's culture-bound stories	55

TABLE OF CONTENTS (cont'd)

BEKAMBA, LE REVENANT	83
THE GHOST OF MANGATA	109
LA ROUTE DES AMANTS MAUDITS	133
THE PATH OF CURSED LOVERS	152
NOTES	171
CONCLUSION	198
BIBLIOGRAPHY	204

INTRODUCTION

Histoires queue-de-chat is a collection of five short stories by René Philombe, criticizing certain aspects of Cameroonian society and other African countries. «Bekamba, le revenant» and «La route des amants maudits» - the first and second stories, respectively, of Histoires queue-de-chat - are the two stories I have translated.

Translation is above all an act of communication¹ - an act whose main functions may be expressive, informative or communicative², depending on the functions of the text translated. A text with an expressive function is author-centered and bears the mark of the individual style and leitmotifs of the writer. A text with an informative function is message-oriented and focusses on extralinguistic information. The style is generally neutral and objective: the emphasis is on «transparence» of content. A text with a communicative

1 Cf. Roda P. Roberts, «Translation - An Act of communication», Bulletin of CAAL, Vol. 3, No. 2, Autumn, 1981. «...it is now generally accepted, thanks to new sociolinguistic theories of translation, that translation is above all an act of communication...»

2 Peter Newmark, Approaches to Translation (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981) p. 13; and Eugene Nida, Toward a Science of Translating (Netherlands: Leiden E.J. Brill, 1964) pp. 44-45.

function³ is receptor-oriented and tries to elicit from the reader a given reaction. The style is often persuasive or imperative, with the writer using a variety of resources to ensure that the reader gets the message. Obviously, a text may - and in most cases does - have more than one of these functions, but one of them is normally dominant. It is up to the translator to analyze the functions of the source text and take them into account in the transfer phase of the translation operation.

Literary texts are often given as examples of texts having an expressive function and Philombe's short stories are no exception to the rule. Philombe's «individual» style combines many devices typical of oral African literature: dramatic dialogue, repetitions, pauses, rhetorical questions, etc., intermingled with description and straight narration to retain the receptors' interest and to draw attention to his leitmotifs.

The themes that dominate his work are the abuses of both traditional and modern African society. And the very nature of these leitmotifs implies that the short stories are not only expressive, but also informative

3 This function is also sometimes referred to as the «vocative function» cf. Newmark, op. cit. p. 13.

and communicative. Philombe seems to want to «inform» his African readers of what he sees as abuses in society and to persuade them to react against these abuses.

While the style of his Histoires queue-de-chat - stories that are so incredible and so entertaining that they are capable of amusing and hypnotizing the audience⁴ - certainly merits attention, Philombe's purpose seems to be informative and communicative, as well as expressive. In light of Philombe's generally militant views - he is a dedicated union man - I feel that it is the communicative function (i.e. eliciting a reaction) that is most important in these short stories.

However, it is difficult to elicit a reaction when information is lacking. And since my translations of these stories are intended for non-African readers, I have had to give greater prominence to the informative function. However, in order not to overload the translations with information, I have presented a) the life and works of Philombe in Chapter I, b) the cultural background of aspects criticized in Chapter IV, and very specific cultural details in the footnotes following the translations.

If the informative function takes on more

4 Cf. note 30 of Notes.

importance from our point of view, the expressive function is nevertheless not totally neglected.

Wherever possible, Philombe's stylistic devices are retained in the translations and a separate chapter is devoted to his style.

My objectives then as a translator are to

- a) inform non-African readers of what Philombe sees as problems in Cameroonian society,
- b) to elicit some reaction from them - however different it may be from that of the African readers,
- c) to reflect to some extent the author's style, which is typical of oral African literature.

PART I

Philombe's works, objective and style and the problems they pose to the translator.

CHAPTER I

René Philombe's life, works, and ideas

René Philombe, author of Histoires queue-de-chat, is a well-known Cameroonian writer from what was formerly French Cameroon. Cameroon, which was colonised by the Germans in 1884, was mandated by the League of Nations, after the end of World War I to the French and British Governments. France took the greater sector, known formerly as East Cameroon, while Britain took the smaller sector, formerly West Cameroon, also known since then as «Cameroon under British administration». On January 1, 1960, the French sector became independent under the new name of Cameroon Republic. Following agitation for independence by the then West Cameroon, a plebiscite was held in that sector of Cameroon on February 11, 1961 under United Nations supervision. The result of the plebiscite gave former West Cameroon automatic independence and unification with former East Cameroon, on October 1, 1961.

It is against this historical background that Cameroonian writers are usually studied and their works classified. Thus, Cameroonian writers fall into two main groups: colonial or pre-independence writers and post-colonial or post-independence writers. While the literary works of pre-independence writers portray

anti-colonial struggle, the sufferings of the Cameroonian people, their revolt and aspirations under tight colonial rule, those of post-independence writers focus on denunciation of traditional social customs, the conflict of human emotions, and personal relationships within the family and the village in the traditional social structure, unchanged by independence. Very often these post-independence works, although literary in nature, constitute moral and didactic treatises on self-help in the building of a new society. It is to the latter group of Cameroonian writers that René Philombe belongs.

René Philombe (pen-name for Philippe-Louis Ombédé) was born about 1930 in Ngaunderé, Adamaou district, in the north of Cameroon. He is the son of a former interpreter of the French colonial administration, who had been transferred to Ngaunderé from his home in Batchenga (Beti tribal area) in the Lékié District, near Yaounde, in the south of Cameroon. Philombe received his primary education in a number of schools, his secondary education partly in Dschang, in the western part of Cameroon, in 1944. In 1945 he attended the Ecole Primaire Supérieure in Yaounde. It was during that year that he began his writing career as a founding member of the school journal «L'Appel du Tam-Tam».

At the end of that year, he abandoned his studies and joined the civil service, where his career was marked by intense activity. He was assigned to work in the police force. From 1947 to 1949 he was secretary to the Native Court of Saa, in the Lékié District. During that period he founded a cultural association in the district.

From 1950 to 1957 he got more and more involved in politics as a partisan of the political party called U.P.C. (Union des Populations du Cameroun). In 1957 his activities were temporarily interrupted when he was stricken with Poliomyelitis, the consequences of which he is still bearing courageously. However, this disease did not hold him back for long and in 1959 he founded two weeklies, one in French, «La voix du citoyen», the other in Ewondo, «Bébéla-Ebug». Because of his political involvement and the activist nature of the weeklies, he soon got into difficulties with the Authorities, and was sent to prison, where his health deteriorated further. However, as soon as he was released (the same year), he pursued, undeterred, the same cause, becoming Treasurer of the Union of Cameroonian Journalists (U.N.J.C.) in 1959 and founding with friends in 1960 the National Association of Poets and Writers of Cameroon (A.P.E.C.), of which he is still General Secretary. In 1962 he interrupted his

journalistic activities and returned to his home town Batchenga. There he used his organizational abilities to found an Association of Farmers and Workers. This led to a second arrest in September 1963, and he was sentenced to six months imprisonment for subversion.

Since 1964 he has spent all his time on literary activities, although for a short time in 1967 these activities were threatened once again by the spectre of imprisonment.¹ He founded «Le Cameroun littéraire», mouthpiece of A.P.E.C. in 1964. In 1968 the President of the Republic nominated him to the jury formed to award the President's prize for excellence in writing and research: El Hadj Amadou Ahidjo- Prize for Literature, Arts, and Science. In 1969 he founded the theatre company «Les compagnons de la comédie». In 1970 he founded the journal «OZILIA» and was elected Director of the journal «Le Cameroun littéraire», of which he is still Director.

In the course of his very active career Philombe has emerged as a figure with a strong will and a critical mind. He is recognized as a courageous man very strongly dedicated to work, as a man with progressist ideas, as a man with an incorruptible quest

1 In 1967 his house was searched and legal proceedings were begun against him. But in 1968 they were dropped.

for justice and truth, whose activities and ideas have had a strong influence on certain classes of society in Cameroon, especially in Yaounde. He is a man deeply rooted in the fatherland, the source of his inspiration, the fatherland that he has never left, in spite of having the means to do so.

Not only has he served his people as a dedicated union man but as a writer, for he believes that literature is as necessary to a people as bread or rice, because it has the capacity to awaken them to that which is beautiful, good, and true. This is what he indicated in «L'écrivain Camerounais face à ses responsabilités civiques», a paper he presented at a colloquium². In that same paper, his views on a writer's role are clearly revealed. He feels that the «authentic» writer is necessarily engaged in a twofold endeavour: questioning the abuses of traditional as well as modern society, and inciting his people to conceive of a freer, richer, and more satisfying future. To fulfill such a task, the writer must be actively involved in the political, social, and psychological realities of his environment; he must not accept a moral or political vision dictated

2 Bjornson, Richard, «Colloquium on Cameroon literature and literary criticism», Research in African literatures, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Texas: University of Texas Press, Spring 1978), p. 81.

to him by any fixed dogma or tradition. He must above all, demonstrate intellectual honesty in literary creativity and criticism - an honesty that is not always easy to preserve when one is confronted by the contradictory pressures that exist in some African countries.

However, intellectual honesty must not be confused with a servile reproduction of what society and nature have to offer to the writer. Philombe argues that a writer is not a photographer whose job merely consists in restoring the image perceived³. According to him the role of the writer consists in examining nature closely in order to create individuals and situations not exhibited by nature, for without such an act of creation there can be no true literature⁴. Through personal creation, he must fill in the gaps and silences in nature, and render meaningful, significant and audible both those things in it that are usually taken for granted and those that are never mentioned.

3 Makoutou, J.P. M'Boukou, Introduction à l'étude du roman négro-africain de langue française (Problèmes culturels et littéraires), (Abidjan: Nouvelles Editions Africaines 1980), p. 219.

4 Cf. ibid., p. 219. «Le rôle de l'écrivain consiste à interroger la nature afin de créer des êtres et des situations que ne fournit pas la nature. Sans quoi, il n'y aurait point d'oeuvre littéraire véritablement originale.»

The magnitude of Philombe's creative ability is clearly revealed by the number of works he has written since 1959. His first published work, La passerelle divine (1959), later translated into English under the title The Divine Foot-bridge, is an ethnographic pamphlet classified as folklore⁵. This was followed in 1964 by an autobiography, Lettres de ma cambuse which has been translated into English under the title Letters from my storeroom. A collection of poems, Hallalis et chansons nègres, was produced on record in France in 1965 and was published in 1970. The poems in this collection denounce everything in society that leads to the oppression of man. They advocate love, justice and fraternity among men in society. Philombe's first novel, Sola ma chérie was published in 1966. It denounces matrimonial customs in traditional Cameroonian society. It has been translated into English under the title Sola, My Darling. This first novel was soon followed by a second one, Un sorcier blanc à Zangali, in 1970. This time, Philombe portrays conflict between two cultures - the traditional Cameroonian culture and the Western one. This novel, considered his masterpiece in this genre,

5 It falls within the literary genre commonly referred to as oral literature which comprises folk songs, folk tales, proverbs, riddles, and superstitious beliefs.

has been translated into Russian. From the novel, Philombe moved to the dramatic genre in 1971, when Les époux célibataires, a comedy, was published. This play has been adapted for radio broadcast by Radio France-Inter. Philombe changed genres once again in 1972 when Histoires queue-de-chat, a collection of short stories of critical realism was published. This publication too has been adapted for radio broadcast by Radio France-Inter. This collection was followed in 1973 by the publication of a single short story, C'est moi le vrai martyr, which was adapted by Radio France-Inter for radio broadcast the same year. 1974 was a prolific year for Philombe with the publication both of L'amour en pagaille, a comedy, and Les Blancs partis, les Nègres dansent, a collection of poems. Then followed a period of apparent literary inactivity, which was broken in 1977 by the appearance of a third collection of poems, Petites gouttes de chant pour créer l'homme, and in 1978, by Africapolis, a tragedy criticizing the political system and considered one of the masterpieces of Cameroonian political drama. Since then, Philombe has continued to be active as a writer. This is revealed by the number of different literary works in press or in preparation at the moment: L'Ancien Maguisard, a novel in press; Peuple debout and Monstre sans âge, both collections of poems in press, Le Livre Camerounais et ses auteurs, a literary history, still unedited;

and finally L'histoire de Ndenn-Bobo, an unedited epic of Mvet⁶.

In spite of the extremely large number of works written by René Philombe — he is the only professional Cameroonian writer, according to Jacques Rial⁷ — there has been no in-depth study of this author.⁸

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- 6 The word «Mvet» in its habitual usage refers to three separate but related things. First of all, it designates a traditional musical instrument with chords, used in the Beti area. It is this instrument that is referred to later in the translated text. Secondly, the word «Mvet» designates an epic story or any epic song recited with the accompaniment of the above-mentioned instrument. Finally, «Mvet» designates a long-standing type of traditional play comprising of traditional epic literature, music, and choreography. The «Mvet» epic is therefore recited, sung and danced.
- 7 Jacques Rial, Littérature camerounaise de langue française, (Paris: Editions Payot, 1972) p. 37.
- 8 Up till now no critical work has been published which gives both a complete study of this author's life history and a critical appraisal of his works. Most of the information about him and his works is presented in a fragmentary and scattered form in several books, the larger part of it only appearing on the back-covers of some of his works.

This seems all the more strange in light of the number of awards and distinctions he has received both in Cameroon and abroad for the excellence of his writings. As early as 1965 he was awarded the Prix Mottart of the Académie française for his Lettres de ma cambuse. The same year he received two more prizes, the Premier Prix International de la Nouvelle of the International Centre of French Arts and Thinking, and the Premier Prix de la Poésie d'expression française au Cameroun, from the Society of Poets and Artists of France for his collection of poems, Hallalis et chansons nègres. Moreover, based on the favourable appraisal of his literary works, he was admitted as a certified member of the Association des Ecrivains de Langue Française (ADELF) in 1969. In 1974 he became a full-fledged member of the Cameroon National Council for Cultural Affairs, and in 1977 he was admitted to the Société des Gens de Lettres de France. Furthermore, the fact that three of his works, Les époux célibataires, Histoires queue-de-chat, and C'est moi le vrai martyr, were adapted for radio broadcast by Radio France-Inter is itself a distinction.

René Philombe, the prominent and prolific Cameroonian writer, and René Philombe, the outstanding Cameroonian national and dedicated union man working for the good of his people, are one and the same

individual, whose seemingly divergent interests blend in the committed literature he has produced. This literature has brought to the man who has never wanted to leave Cameroon fame and fortune from abroad.

However, this literature, which has carried his image and his ideas far beyond the frontiers of his country, has themes that are typically Cameroonian - or at best African. Therefore, while Philombe's background and ideas throw significant light on his literary works and are therefore of great importance in decoding the message in these works, his readers - especially non-African readers - need more than such information to fully understand the author's objectives and typically Cameroonian themes: they require some knowledge of Cameroonian society as well. How much «extra» information should I present as Philombe's translator for a non-African, primarily North American public? Where should such information be presented? Those are the questions that I have had to answer, bearing in mind Philombe's general views on literary creation and his specific objective as author of Histoires queue-de-chat.

CHAPTER 2

Problems in Translating Philombe's Culture-bound Works

As a critic on African literature pointed out¹, African literature has come to mean different things to different writers. While to some it is a political document of protest against colonialism and imperialism in Africa, to others, it is a tool for the literate African to express not only his pride in his culture, but also the essence of his cultural heritage, in other words, to ensure that the content and excellence of black culture does not go unforgotten in a white-dominated world. To still others, it is 'a new literature of the world'² with its own authentic and original themes, message, etc. In short, African writers, just like Western writers, have very varied objectives.

René Philombe's objective in writing the short stories translated is clearly stated in his preface to the stories: «...sensibiliser mon public à certaines pratiques qui pareilles à des boulets aux pieds des

1 Ernest Emenyonu, «African literature: what does it take to be its critic?», in African Literature Today (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971) p. 1.

2 Ernest Emenyonu, ibid., p. 1.

esclaves, entravent la marche en avant des jeunes nations africaines en général et en particulier de mon Cameroun natal». In other words, he is criticizing certain traditional practices and customs in African society which impede the progress of the Cameroonian nation in particular and that of other young African nations in general.

With this objective in mind, Philombe has obviously written his short stories for an African public. This is again clearly specified in the preface: «Peu nombreux seront les Africains qui ne se verraient silhouettés çà et là, visés d'une manière ou d'une autre dans les pages qui suiventdes jeunes nations africaines en général et en particulier de mon Cameroun natal».

In the light of the intended audience (i.e. African readers), Philombe could often achieve his objective in his short stories by making only passing references to the customs he considered undesirable.³

3 The following customs or practices are referred to briefly without any accompanying description or explanation: les tam-tams «d'essani», p. 13; des rites appropriés, p. 13; envoutée par le «kong», p. 17; gris-gris protecteur, p. 19; j'ai consulté mon «ngam», p. 34; l'épreuve de l'elonn», p. 35 etc.

He does not need to provide African readers with detailed explanations and descriptions of these practices, which are an integral part of their background; such explanations, which would slow down considerably the pace of the action, would inevitably tend to make the stories boring for the public he is writing for.

However, the communicative situation in which I, as the translator of these stories, have found myself is by no means the same. I have translated the stories for a non-African public, more precisely, a North American public, with no knowledge or only a limited knowledge of the original author's culture. I have therefore been faced with a difficult choice: I could either opt to translate the stories as pure fiction, rendering, as best I could, the many passing references to practices, but without bringing out their latent significance, or I could decide to remain faithful to Philombe's objective, that of using the stories as a means to make the audience very aware of certain questionable traditional practices, and find some way to provide my readers with the cultural background they lack to understand the various practices and cultural

aspects explicitly mentioned or implied by the author.⁴

As translator, I have opted to remain as faithful as possible to Philombe's objective. However, the decision to remain faithful to the intention of my source has inevitably led to the following question: how could I best convey Philombe's message to my non-African readers? In other words, what methods could I use to communicate those culture-bound aspects in the original text unknown to the readers?

This crucial question has drawn the attention of such well-known translation theorists such as Georges Mounin, Eugène Nida and Peter Newmark, who have, between them, suggested at least six different ways of dealing with the problem of culture-bound words and expressions.

4 Situating the aspects in their wider context prevents the non-African reader not only from making a simplistic analysis of a society which in reality is very complex, but also from judging or analyzing the various aspects based on Western or non-African standards.

A first proposal⁵, made by Mounin⁶ and Newmark⁷ is that the translator simply transfer the source language term to the target language without translating it. In other words, he may use a borrowing, hoping the context in which it is used will provide enough information for the target reader to guess what the borrowed term signifies. Thus, in translating the sentence, «Sans interruption, une musique douce vous enveloppe de volupté; et elle sourd des mvets, des balafons, des tambourins et des algaitas qu'on ne voit guère!» («Bekamba, le revenant», p. 15), he may retain «mvets», «balafons», and «algaitas» in the target language version and hope that in context the reader will realize that the objects referred to are musical instruments and not any other objects.

5 The order in which the suggestions are presented is not chronological. The proposals have been arranged a) in terms of the degree of effort each involves on the part of the translator - moving from the simplest to the more difficult (proposals 1 to 4) and b) in terms of where the explanatory material is placed - within the text proper (proposals 1 to 4) or outside it (proposals 5 and 6).

6 George Mounin, Linguistique et traduction (Bruxelles: Dessart et Mardaga, 1976) p. 52.

7 Peter Newmark, Approaches to Translation (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981) pp.74, 77.

A second proposal, made by Newmark,⁸ is that the translator use translation couplets: «transcription» of the source language term (i.e. borrowing) followed by its approximate translation in brackets - for example, metet (plant).

A third suggestion, made by Nida, is that the translator choose to leave out the culture-bound term in the target language but substitute for it a clear descriptive phrase⁹. For example, «akus» in the source text («La route des amants maudits», p. 32) may be rendered as «traditional rite performed on widows» in the target language.

A fourth suggestion, made by Nida¹⁰ Mounin,¹¹ and Newmark¹² is that the translator transfer the source language word to the target language without translating it but glossing it with an explanation usually in the form of a definition. For example, «elonn» in the short story «La route des amants maudits», may be rendered as «elonn, a procedure used in the exercise of

8 Peter Newmark, ibid., p. 76.

9 Eugene Nida, Towards a Science of Translating (Netherlands: Leiden E.J. Brill, 1964), p. 172.

10 Eugene Nida, ibid., p. 172.

11 George Mounin, op. cit., pp. 52, 82.

12 Peter Newmark, op. cit., p. 174.

justice», in the target language.

A fifth solution proposed by Mounin¹³, Nida¹⁴ and Newmark¹⁵ is that the translator transfer the culture-bound word to the target text and add a footnote to explain it.

A sixth solution, proposed by Newmark is that the translator transcribe or translate the culture-bound term in the target language version and give supplementary information in a glossary.¹⁶

While all these suggestions are certainly useful to the translator, many of them have definite drawbacks. The first is that supplementary information built into the text in the form of translation couplets (solution 2 above), descriptive phrases (solution 3 above), and definitions accompanying a borrowing (solution 4 above) inevitably lengthen the text and often render the sentences in which they are found clumsy and unwieldy. Thus, in the case of «elonn», if the translated text is to provide the reader with enough

13 George Mounin, op. cit., p. 82.

14 Eugene Nida, op. cit., p. 172.

15 Peter Newmark, op. cit., pp. 74, 77, 147.

16 Peter Newmark, ibid., p. 77.

information to understand the full significance of the term, the translation would read as follows: «(elonn)¹⁷, a poisonous liquid used in a procedure of the same name, in the exercise of justice». To avoid going to such extremes, the translator may try to present only the most important information in the definition or descriptive phrase. Thus, in the case of «elonn» once again, he may decide to explain the term as follows: «(elonn), a procedure used in the exercise of justice». However, as is clearly shown by a comparison of the two definitions above, the second one, while «fitting in» more easily into the text, is by no means as revealing. In fact, even the longer definition leaves the precise link between the poison and the procedure vague. This leads me to the conclusion that any information that has to be integrated into the text will necessarily be partial.

Another drawback of trying to integrate supplementary information into the text is that not all information that the translator deems necessary can be treated in this fashion. This has been pointed out by

17 The borrowed term would appear in the text if solution 4 were chosen, but not if solution 3 were adopted.

Nida, who claims that the translator «may make explicit in the text only what is linguistically implicit in the immediate context of the problematic passage ...» and he «may not (...) add interesting cultural information which is not actually present in the meanings of the terms used in the passage.»¹⁸ The problem posed by Nida's restrictions is clearly revealed by the following sentence from our first story, «Bekamba, le revenant»:
«A longueur de journée et de nuit, les tam-tams d'essani ajoutent des notes troublantes à cette atmosphère de double deuil». «Essani» may be made clearer by the translator by rendering it as «dance» or as «essani dance», since tam-tams (drums) in its immediate context implies that it is a dance that is referred to. However, the word does not refer just to any ordinary dance but more specifically to a war dance staged exclusively at the death of an important person. What is even more significant is that the funeral rites for important persons used to involve certain cruel practices carried out until they were abolished by the

18 Eugene Nida, The Theory and Practice of Translation (London: E.J. Brill, 1974) p. 111.

colonial administration¹⁹; thus «essani» contains within it an allusion not only to a war dance and to funerals but to certain cruel practices which, although abolished, are still hankered after by the people. However, the extended allusions are not implicit in the immediate context and therefore, if one follows Nida's principle, they may not be integrated into the text.

19 Before colonialism, it was during the Essani that some servants and widows of the deceased were chosen and buried with him so that they should accompany him and continue to serve him in the invisible world. During colonization the Beti people were forced to respect human dignity and to abandon this practice. However, people still express disappointment today at not being able to perform the full traditional funeral rites. This is evident in the wording of the song used at the ritual nowadays by the Beti people:

Est-ce peu que le Conquérant ... se soit emparé
à jamais du pays,
Pour qu'il nous apporte encore ce grand malheur?
A-t-on idée que X ... s'en aille tout seul sans
qu'on puisse le faire accompagner au moins
par une toute petite femme, au moins par
un tout petit esclave!

Quelle triste histoire!

Venez voir cela et vous aurez compris dans quel
embarras

Et dans quelle situation ridicule il va se
trouver là-bas!

P. Mviena, Univers culturel et religieux du peuple Beti
(Yaoundé: Imprimerie St. Paul, 1970) p. 186.

Even if one decided to ignore Nida's principle, one would have to admit that integration of all this information into the text would be unadvisable on the basis of the length of the explanation required.

It is no doubt because of the problems involved in integrating cultural information into a text that Nida, Mounin and Newmark have added as a supplementary solution the use of footnotes to present such information. However, footnotes in abundance can be as disruptive to the reader as are long explanations within the text itself, for they too disrupt the flow of a text, forcing the reader to divert his attention from text to notes and vice versa.

Newmark's suggestion of a glossary to explain culture-bound terms (which are transcribed or translated in the text proper) is basically a variant of the footnote proposal, for checking an item in a glossary is not really much different from looking up a footnote. Moreover, since a glossary often provides far less information than a footnote, this suggestion seems even less appropriate in most cases than the previous one.

If thus becomes evident that none of the solutions proposed above is adequate on its own, that the translator must use a judicious blend of them and that even a combination of these solutions may be

insufficient to provide a «foreign» reader with all the information he requires to fully understand and appreciate a text dealing with a culture far removed from his own. Thus, while I occasionally provide definitions within the translation for borrowings used and while I certainly provide definitions and explanations of specific terms and expressions in notes at the end of the translation, I still feel the need for yet another way of communicating more detailed, and at the same time more general, information to my readers. I have therefore decided to provide them with the general cultural background I feel they require through a separate chapter covering those aspects which Philombe has mainly focussed on in the two stories. This chapter should enable them to situate in their wider context²⁰ the various African practices that Philombe refers to either explicitly or implicitly.

20 Here we mean the geographical, historical, political, socio-cultural etc. context of the various practices and traditional aspects criticized by the author.

CHAPTER 3Problems posed by Philombe's typically African style

Apart from the problem of conveying Philombe's message (i.e. those aspects of his society criticized in the stories) to a non-African public (discussed in the chapter on background information) the translator is also faced with the difficulty of rendering the style used by the author to convey his message. Since many of the stylistic devices used by Philombe are typically African, it is important to place the literary conventions used in the stories, in their literary context - that of oral African literature, which is unfamiliar to most people brought up in contemporary western cultures, where the oral tradition in general seems to take second place to the written tradition.

By literary conventions I mean principally phraseology, allusions, rhetorical questions, ideophones, repetitions, and the kinds of introductions and conclusions that are satisfying or attractive to the culture in which the stories are set - in short, the art of story-telling in Cameroon in general, and the Beti tribe, in which Philombe's stories are set, in particular. By oral African literature I mean poetry, drama, speeches, stories, and accounts (i.e. reports presented on different occasions for different

purposes e.g. narration by an elder of an incident, presentation of findings in a given investigation), although the focus of my study is primarily stories. Oral African literature, like all oral literature, is unwritten, traditional literature, normally passed down word for word from generation to generation and reproduced verbatim from memory throughout the centuries.

Stories (one of the genres of this type of literature) are often «acted out» in the sense that, to a greater or lesser degree, the speech patterns and gestures of the story's characters are brought alive by the narrator, and the action is largely presented through dialogue between various characters portrayed vividly by the story-teller. This may be illustrated by the following two passages, the first taken from the first story («Bekamba, le revenant») and the second from the second story («La route des amants maudits»), respectively, where the dialogue is indented and preceded by a dash:

- 1) Oh, les mauvais quarts d'heure ne conviennent vraiment pas à toutes les gueules! Devinez comment s'est transformée celle de Bekamba Adzi, fils d'Adzi Manga, le prestigieux revenant de Mangata. Son visage s'anime de tics, de grimaces et de rides, indignes d'un homme illustre. Ses lèvres, tantôt s'allongent, tantôt se rétrécissent hideusement comme celles d'un gorille bavant de terreur.

- Qu'y a-t-il, qu'y a-t-il donc Monsieur le Commandant?
- Il y a que tu dois mieux nous raconter tout ce que tu as vu au pays des fantômes! répondent les fonctionnaires en choeur en pouffant de rire.
- A plat ventre par terre, et vite! gronde le commandant.

Bientôt, de toutes les portes et fenêtres du poste de Gendarmerie fusent des abois de bête en détresse, ponctués de coups de cravache et d'énormes éclats de rire... Ce spectacle dure tant et si bien que n'en pouvant plus, notre Bekamba se résigne à supplier:

- Pardon, pardon, Monsieur le Commandant! Arrêtez, arrêtez, de grâce!... Je me meurs! Pardon!... Je vais vous expliquer, vous dire la vérité, toute la vérité... Laissez-moi!...

On laisse Bekamba s'expliquer, et Bekamba raconte toute une autre histoire, la vraie («Bekamba, le revenant», pp. 25-26).

- 2) De son côté, le fils de la soeur de Belinga Mvondo fait irruption dans la cour. Il va et vient en vociférant un flot de paroles inconsistantes; il réclame sur le champ l'épreuve de l'élonn.
 - Oui, qu'on me donne vite à boire de l'élonn; et les Dieux feront connaître si c'est moi Zibi Mendo, fils de Mendo Mvondo, l'auteur de la mort prématurée de mon 'nyandomo' Belinga Mvondo, de mon 'nyandomo' qui m'aimait tant, que j'aimais tant!

Des protestations et des éclats de rire moqueurs se font entendre partout. Zibi Mendo non plus n'est pas pris au sérieux. On ne voit en lui qu'un mauvais plaisant qui joue, lui aussi, la comédie. L'homme du ngam se lève encore et, dans un rire

impitoyable, il déclare:

- Haaa!... Bien malins, ces petits bambins d'aujourd'hui! il ose réclamer l'élohn, Zibi Mendomo, parce qu'il sait que les autorités administratives de Nanga-Eboko en ont formellement interdit la pratique, sous peine d'emprisonnements et d'amendes!... Tombe des morts! Les petits morveux de son espèce ne se moquaient pas si impunément des hommes et des Dieux quand la terre était terre. Mais ce n'est qu'aux hommes blancs que nous devons nous en prendre, car ce sont eux qui ont mis ainsi notre pays à l'envers. (cf. «La route des amants maudits», pp. 35-36)¹

However, as these passages also reveal, the dramatic dialogue is not sustained throughout the story, nor is it complete enough to portray fully the character. It is normally supplemented and complemented by straight narration to communicate the events of the story (cf. non-indented paragraphs in the passages quoted above, and the footnote below). Thus, storytelling while having certain dramatic characteristics, is not «drama» in the full sense. While, in an African setting and for an African public, performance is very important, one may say that in stories there is only one real «actor» involved - the story-teller - who either speaks directly through his own voice - as the narrator -

1 Cf. also «Bekamba, le revenant», pp. 14-17, 19, 26, 28 and «La route des amants maudits», pp. 34, 35, 36, 40, 41, 42, 43.

or through the voices of each of the characters he brings to life. Every muscle of the story-teller's face and body speaks, a swift gesture often supplying the place of a whole sentence. Thus, the story-teller «lives» and acts the story rather than just telling it. The performer (i.e. story-teller) usually makes use of such devices as expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, various uses of pause, parentheses, repetitions, ideophones and rhetorical questions. Like an orator,² the story-teller usually makes personal appeals to members of the audience and makes sure of their participation; he expects murmurs of support and agreement, muttered rejoinders of his rhetorical questions, laughter when he purposely brings in something amusing or exaggerated.

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- 2 Traditional African oratory makes much use of gestures: elders in particular stride about in the centre of their audience, playing with the full sleeves of their long gowns to create effect, alternating for effect between solemn stance and excited delivery when the whole body may be used to emphasize a point. They are masters in variation of tone and speed i.e. they can switch from quiet, even plaintive utterance to loud yelling and fierce (assumed) anger, only to break off abruptly with some humorous or ironic comment, an effective silence, or a moving personal appeal, (cf. speeches in the first story «Bekamba, le revenant», pp. 14-17; and the second story «La route des amants maudits», pp. 34-36, by Bekamba and the Ngam fortune-teller, respectively).

While Philombe makes use, at least to some extent, of all these devices, he makes more abundant use of some of them, particularly repetitions, rhetorical questions, ideophones, various uses of pause, allusions and personal appeals to his audience.

Personal appeals to the audience, directly involving the listeners in the stories, is an essential feature of story-telling in Cameroon, in order to hold the audience's attention during the long sessions of story-telling. Stories are normally recounted in the evening when the day's work is over. During an evening's story-telling session a number of relatively short, self-contained stories are generally told. As the evening wears on, the stories change from light-hearted to more serious ones, delivered with more art and relatively more solemnity. To ensure that the later stories - the «better» ones - are fully appreciated, the narrator must engage the audience totally in the story-telling so that they do not lose interest and go to sleep.

In the stories translated, Philombe engages his audience (i.e. readers) by often addressing them directly through the use of the second person plural form of the personal pronoun, «vous», or by the use of the imperative. This is illustrated by the following examples, which are only a few of the many found

throughout the stories:

- il faut vous dire que dans nos petits coins de brousse, les histoires les plus farfelues sont monnaie courante... (p. 18)
- Est-il besoin de vous apprendre que les femmes sont les personnes au monde les plus soucieuses de leur bonheur? (p. 22)
- Allez à n'importe quel établissement de santé, vous y rencontrerez des femmes... (p. 22)
- Pénétrez dans n'importe quelle «maison de Dieu»... (p. 22)
- Hasardez vos pas sous le cagibi d'un sorcier... (p. 22)
- Et puis, dites-moi (p. 22)

Obviously, English has similar forms that can be used in the translation. And in most cases, these personal addresses have been translated directly into English. However, since I felt that such abundant use as Philombe makes of direct address is not typical of English story-telling style, I did not hesitate in some cases to render the forms of direct address by other forms which seemed more natural in the context. Thus, the phrase «il faut vous dire que dans nos petits coins de brousse...» (p. 18) has been rendered as «It should be noted that in remote areas of our country...». In yet other cases, the personal address was left unreplaced in the translation, either because it seemed to interrupt the narrative needlessly (cf. «Pensez donc!...», p. 24), or because the entire section in which the

personal address is found has been translated more freely (cf. «Devinez comment...», p. 25)'. However, while not wishing to render the English story in translation unnatural, I did wish to bring out the «tic» of African story-telling - that of personal address - and I have thus compensated for some of the instances where the personal address in the original is dropped by adding such an address at other suitable points. Thus, the sentence «Non, ce n'était pas facile de reconnaître Bekamba Adzi, fils unique d'Adzi Manga» (p. 17) has been rendered as «To tell you the truth, it was not easy to recognize Bekamba Adzi, Adzi Manga's only son».

Besides engaging the audience in the story-telling by addressing them directly, the author further seeks their active participation through frequent use of questions, such as the following examples:

- L'appeler ainsi, lui dont tout le pays sait où séjourne désormais son fils unique?...
(p. 11)
- Quelques succès? Et comment!... (p. 20)
- Quoi? Etre fier dans un poste de Gendarmerie?...
(p. 23)
- Vous pensez qu'il en a terminé? (p. 34)³.

³ Cf. also pages: 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 20, 22, 23, 24, 34, 35, 37, 38, 42, of the stories.

These are basically rhetorical questions used for effect or for reinforcement of a particular point. But while the answers to such questions are normally obvious and not expected, Cameroonian story-tellers expect the listeners to respond to them by uttering murmurs of support or agreement and muttered rejoinders.

While rhetorical questions can certainly be asked in English, it has been amply pointed out that this rhetorical device is not as commonly used in English as it is in French or in many other languages. This has been stressed by Hilaire Belloc who says that, «In the translation from French into English we must remember that the French use of the question not for purposes of inquiry but for the regulation of the prose is not native to the English tongue...» (p. 180). He further adds that even when ample use of rhetorical questions is made in French, «...the prose will follow quite naturally. The effect in the original will not be strained. Put the same into English and you get at once an exaggerated effect. (...) It is rather native to English to put the data into statement form» (p. 180)⁴. In the same vein, Peter Newmark states that, «rhetorical questions are more common in many foreign languages

4 Hilaire Belloc, «On translation», Bookman, LXXIV (Dept. 1931 - March 1932) p. 180.

than in English, and are frequently translated/converted into statements» (cf. Peter Newmark, Approaches to translation, p. 173). Thus to ensure that our translation of the stories reads naturally, I have only retained a few rhetorical questions such as the following:

- L'appeler ainsi, lui dont tout le pays sait où séjourné désormais son fils unique?... p. 11 (Who could be calling him «father» when everyone knew what had happened to his only son?...)
- Avaient-ils osé passer la nuit sur l'une de ces nombreuses petites îles qui jonchent le lit, combien accidenté, de la Sanaga? p. 12 (Had they dared to spend the night on one of the tiny islands scattered in the terribly turbulent Sanaga river?)
- Quoi? Etre fier dans un poste de Gendarmerie? ... p. 23 (Can you imagine anyone exhibiting his pride in a gendarme station, of all places?...)

In many cases, however, such questions have been converted into statements, for example:

- Comment après ce compte-rendu, pouvait-on écarter l'hypothèse d'une noyade? p. 13. (This evidence led people to believe that the cousins might well have drowned)
- Un adage ne dit-il pas avec raison que 'tout porte-bonheur est avant tout propriété d'une famille'? p. 17. (After all, there is truth in the saying that a charm is first and foremost the property of its owner's family)
- Vous pensez qu'il en a terminé? p. 34. (You

would have thought he had finished speaking.)

- Et quoi encore? p. 35 (And there could be even more serious repercussions...)

Thus, while not completely eliminating rhetorical questions, we have limited their use in English to conform to the «genius» of the English language. However, we have tried to make the statements that replace the rhetorical questions fairly emphatic to retain the tonality of the original and the interest of the readers.

Another device used by Cameroonian story-tellers to sustain and heighten the audience's interest in the stories is that of ideophones. An ideophone is a special type of word which conveys an idea through sound. To some extent it resembles an adverb of manner. In certain cases, the verb it modifies may be implicit in the structure. For example, in the sentence «Mais, plouf!... le courant emporta au loin Edongo Kounou» (p. 27), the verb modified by the ideophone «plouf!...» (describing the manner in which Edongo Kounou got pulled to the bottom of the river before he eventually got drowned) is omitted. Similarly, the ideophone «Ekyé, ékyé!» (p. 17) modifies the omitted, but implicit verb «s'exclamer». In other cases, the verb the ideophone modifies is explicitly stated, for example, the ideophones «Oooh» (cf. Oooh, Monsieur, le Commandant!)

p. 28), and «Haaa!...» (cf. Haaa!... Bien malins, ces petits bambins d'aujourd'hui!» p. 35) modify the verbs «s'écria» and «déclare», respectively. However, while ideophones are often considered to act as adverbs of manner, in actual use the ideophone seems more like an interjection⁵, as the above examples also show.

Ideophones are commonly used in most African languages to add emotion or vividness to a description or recitation. They are the key to native descriptive oratory. It is difficult to imagine a native African speaking in public with intense feeling without using them. They enable the story-teller to express through short, simple words, movements, sounds, expressions of fear, joy or amazement. The sensations of the speaker are immediately transmitted by such words, which, through their «sounds» which are so appropriate, so fitting, make the listeners hear the intended sound clearly themselves or see the movement of, say, a drowning person, or feel the sensation of the speaker. In the source text (i.e. the stories translated), the

5 The ideophone has also been called «mimic noun», «intensive noun», «descriptive», «indeclinable verbal particle» etc. (cf. Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 64.

word «plouf» (p. 27) makes us actually hear the sound and see the movements of Edongo Kounou drowning; the ideophone «gbo-gbo-gbo...» (p. 10) makes us hear the outburst of yaps, grunts and growls of the dogs; the cry «Ékyé, ékyé!» (p. 17) makes us feel the apprehension of fear in the villagers when they are threatened by Bekamba. Through the use of these ideophones and many others⁶, Philombe, like any other skillful African storyteller, dramatizes the action. The ideophone in African languages is a rhetorical and emotive tool whose effectiveness cannot be overemphasized; one may well say without exaggeration that, in vivid and dramatic passages, to use it is to be graphic and to omit it is to be prosaic.

Ideophones resemble to some extent the literary device known as onomatopoeia. Certain ideophones are based, like primary onomatopoeia, on the imitation of sound by sound, i.e. the referent itself is an acoustic experience which is more or less closely imitated by the phonetic structure of the word; for example, «Haaa!»,

6 Cf. also: the merciless laughter of the «Ngam» fortune-teller «Haaa!» (p. 35), the author's mockery laughter «oh là là...» (p. 23), the expression of self pity by Bekamba «aïe, pauvre de moi!» (p. 17), the expression of relief by Bekamba «Oooh, Monsieur le Commandant!» (p. 28).

the sound of the ngam fortune-teller's laughter in the second story («La route des amants maudits», p. 35). Still other ideophones resemble secondary onomatopoeia, consisting of words whose sounds evoke, not an acoustic experience but a movement or some physical or moral quality. Such is the case with the word «ale» which is an expression of self pity by Bekamba (cf. «Bekamba, le revenant», p. 17).

While, therefore, a translator could in principle resort to onomatopoeia to translate the African ideophones, he would in practice be faced with two very different types of problems. First of all, onomatopoeic formations are not necessarily similar from one language to another. «Even where there is a genuine similarity of perception, there are also marked differences, due to the fact that the imitation is only partial and that each language has conventionalized it in its own way», says Stephen Ullmann in Semantics (p. 86). Thus ideophones cannot be merely «borrowed» automatically. Each ideophone would therefore need to be analyzed to discover precisely what impression it was intended to convey before it could be translated, and obviously errors of interpretation could arise, for as Ullmann points out, there is a very subjective element in the study of phonetic motivation. The second problem in rendering ideophones by onomatopoeia

is that certain situations and environments are hospitable to onomatopoeia while others are practically impervious to it. While it will flourish, according to Ullmann, in emotional and rhetorical speech, in poetry and artistic prose and expressive forms of language such as nursery talk, colloquial and popular speech, dialect and slang, it will be less at home in other contexts. While short stories could be considered artistic prose, the fact that our stories also contain a definite «message» make them perhaps less fertile ground for experiments in onomatopoeia.

For these reasons and because the primary aim of our translations was to convey the message of the originals, I have not tried to render the ideophones by onomatopoeia. Instead, I chose to convey the meanings, sounds and emotions expressed, through expressive descriptive expressions. Thus, «un vigoureux concert de gbo-gbo-gbo» (p. 10) has been rendered as «a chorus of loud barking», and «Ekyé, ékyé!» (p. 17) as «they asked apprehensively».⁷

7 Cf. also: «aïe pauvre de moi!», p. 17 (Lord have mercy on me!); «Oooh, Monsieur le Commandant!», p. 28 (Bekamba....laughed loudly and then exclaimed...); «Haaa!...», p. 35 (with a merciless laugh...).

The same type of relatively free treatment has been accorded to «culture-bound expressions» found in the source text. Example of what I call culture-bound expressions are «Mille tombes!» (pp. 11, 14), «six lunes entières» (pp. 14, 17, 21), «depuis que la terre est terre» (p. 33), «Tombe des morts!» (p. 36), «quand la terre était terre» (p. 36). While some of these expressions are interjections (cf. «Mille tombes!») and others are fixed «proverbial» expressions («depuis que la terre est terre») and still others represent simply the Cameroonian way of expressing an everyday concept («six lunes entières») they all carry some allusion to the Cameroonian milieu and are traditionally used by story-tellers to inject into the tales an air of seriousness and credibility. These expressions are meant a) to indicate the good faith of the story-teller and convince the audience that what he is relating is true, or, b) in the case of an amusing or fantastic story, to bring the listeners back to reality.

All of the culture-bound expressions in the stories I have translated are linked directly or indirectly to the cult of the ancestors. In traditional Cameroonian society, where ancestors are believed to play a major role in the lives of the living (cf. chapter on background information), no one would dare

to swear by the dead (i.e. ancestors) or even evoke life in the past, if such a person was not speaking the truth or if the situation he was describing or in which he found himself, was not a serious one giving rise to considerable concern. Thus the use of «Mille tombes!» (pp. 11, 14) and «Tombe des morts!» (p. 36), both oaths involving the concept of death, and of «depuis que la terre est terre» (p. 33) and «quand la terre était terre» (p. 36), expressions that evoke the past, is an indication of the seriousness of the situation and the credibility of the speaker.

The expression «six lunes entières» (pp. 14, 17, 21), while not as striking as the previous examples, evokes the past in that «time» is presented in the way the «months» were calculated by ancestors - a way still very much used today in traditional society. In this traditional system, the natives are not interested in knowing whether there are 28, 29, 30 or 31 days in a month. Rather, what is of importance is the face (shape) of the moon (i.e. quarter, half or full moon). Thus, according to the traditional system, a month stretches from one full moon to the next one.

However, because all the above-mentioned expressions are not central to the message of the stories and merely serve to give them an air of seriousness and credibility in the eyes of an African audience, I have

opted to use more familiar expressions in English to convey their meanings in context, rather than translate them literally. Thus, I have rendered «Mille tombes!» (p. 11) as «My God!», «Mille tombes!» (p. 14) as «Oh, my God!», «depuis que la terre est terre» (p. 33) as «since the dawn of history», «quand la terre était terre» (p. 36) as «in the good old days», «six lunes entières» (pp. 14, 17, 21) as «six whole months» and «Tombe des morts!» (p. 36) as «God forbid!...».

While I have accorded ideophones and culture-bound expressions a relatively free treatment for the reasons presented above, I have taken fewer liberties in the case of the numerous repetitions⁸ found in the

8 In the stories translated, the following words and phrases are repeated (X number of times) in successive clauses on the pages indicated:

pp. 11, 12 (il y a ...) 5 times; p. 20 (puisque...) 4 times; pp. 20, 21 (on y voyait...) 3 times; p. 21 (ils... Maria) 3 times; p. 21 (mais Maria la sainte vierge...) 3 times; p. 22 (Elles arrivaient...) 2 times; p. 22 (des villages...) 4 times; p. 23 (mais aussi...) 3 times; p. 23 (Elles sont là pour...) 2 times; p. 23 (par des...) 4 times; p. 23 (qui chuchotaient) 2 times; p. 26 (Qu'y a-t-il...) 2 times; p. 28 (il choisit de sortir...) 2 times; p. 32 (elles ...) 9 times; p. 32 (elles pleurèrent...) 5 times; p. 33 (on parle de...) 5 times; p. 34 (...force..) 3 times; p. 35 (de mon pyandomo...) 2 times; p. 40 (Elle...) 6 times; p. 42 (mais...) 3 times.

original. Repetition is one of the literary devices most frequently used by African story-tellers for rhetorical effect. Often, a word is repeated at the beginning or at the end of two or more successive clauses or sentences. The following passage illustrates repetition of a word at the beginning of successive clauses:

Quelques succès? Et comment!... Oui, il y en eu, puisque des bestioles horribles sortaient des ventres; puisque des rhumatismes hargneux se taisaient dans les articulations; puisque des grossesses impossibles se signalaient; puisque, enfin, tous les coeurs se sentaient vraiment renaître sous le soleil des vivants auprès du bon revenant de Mangata!... (p. 20).

In other cases, there is repetition of two different words at the beginning and at the end of successive clauses, as in the following passage:

Ils invoquaient Maria, ils louaient Maria, ils imploraient Maria!... Pas n'importe quelle Maria! ... (p. 21).

To a large extent, the rhetorical effect, produced by word repetitions occurring at the beginning, at the end, or both at the beginning and at the end of successive clauses has been maintained in the translation since in most cases these repetitions could be

carried over into the translation without affecting considerably the natural flow of the English version.

• However, the stories I have translated contain yet another type of repetition that is harder to retain in the translation without drawing too much attention to the form and making the English version seem unnatural. This type consists of a full phrase or clause which is repeated, often in immediate succession:

- Son arrivée fut saluée par des hochements de tête,... et par des voix qui chuchotaient, qui chuchotaient respectueusement... (p. 23)
- Qu'y a-t-il, qu'y a-t-il donc Monsieur le Commandant? (p. 26)

Six mois plus tard... il choisit de sortir de ce minuscule Etat sauvage, il choisit d'en sortir porteur d'une grande corbeille de poissons secs... (p. 28)

- si c'est moi Zibi Mendomo, ... l'auteur de la mort prématurée de mon nyandomo Belinga Mvondo, de mon nyandomo qui m'aimait... (p. 35).

In such cases, the repetition has been left out in the translation so as to make the translation read more naturally.

However, instances of the third type of

repetition are few compared to those of the first two types⁹ and the overall rhetorical effect produced by the various repetitions has been largely maintained in the translation by the relatively high proportion of the first two types that have been transferred into the translation.

Another literary device the author makes abundant use of is the affective pause - such pauses are introduced into the story by the use of exclamations which automatically interrupt the normal flow of the narrative - and by deliberate pausing at various points in the story. Like repetitions, these two types of pause are used by African story-tellers for rhetorical effect. When the oral device of the pause is transferred into written literature, it is marked by the use of the exclamation mark and suspension points.¹⁰

The first type of pause, that created by the

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- 9 More than three quarters of the repetitions consist of words and phrases repeated at the beginning of successive clauses.
- 10 It is interesting to note to what extent the author makes use of these two types of pause. Apart from the first page of the first story (which has just a short paragraph), every other page of the two stories translated contains several exclamation marks and/or suspension points.

exclamation, is used not only in dialogue but also in the narrative. Exclamations take on several forms: cries: «Hey!...» (p. 14); oaths: «Mille tombes!» (p. 14); expressions of self-pity: «Pauvre de moi!» (p. 10); ironical comments: «Bekamba qui ressuscite après six lunes entières, c'est du «jamais vu» et du «jamais oui!»» (p. 14). As these examples and numerous others in the stories show, the exclamation is used to indicate not only forceful utterance but also strong feeling.

The other type of pause - deliberate pausing, marked in writing by the use of suspension points - creates a different type of rhetorical effect. As was mentioned earlier in this section, a typical traditional African story-teller is an orator who addresses his audience directly and expects their direct and active participation in the story-telling; he expects his listeners to laugh when he purposely brings in something amusing or exaggerated; he makes statements and expects murmurs of support and agreement from them; he asks rhetorical questions and expects muttered rejoinders from them; and so on. Thus, a skillful story-teller often interrupts his narrative with pregnant pauses during which the audience is expected to respond suitably. Thus, when the author verbalizes old Adzi Manga's thoughts in the rhetorical question «L'appeler

ainsi, lui dont tout le pays sait où séjourne désormais son fils unique?...» (p. 11) and then pauses, he expects muttered rejoinders from the audience, expressing wonder, surprise or disbelief; when he asks «Quelques succès? Et comment!...» (p. 20) and pauses, he expects the audience to enumerate the various successes Bakamba has had, before he continues with «Oui, il y en eut, puisque des bestioles horribles sortaient des ventres; etc» (p. 20); after his rhetorical question «Quoi? Etre fier dans un poste de Gendarmerie?...» (p. 24), he pauses and expects the audience, who are familiar with the Gendarmerie, to shout «no» or to shake their heads in negative response, before he again cuts in with «Eh oui, pourquoi pas, surtout quand on porte le titre tabou de «revenant»?» (p. 24); when he says «Elles se disputaient non seulement la médecine de Bekamba; mais aussi ses sourires, mais aussi ses regards éloquents, mais aussi - oh là là...» (p. 23), he laughs and pauses and expects the audience to join in and laugh with him, before he ends the enumeration with the funniest item «son grand lit métallique qu'il venait d'acheter» (p. 23).

These examples illustrate only a few of the many ways the author makes use of pauses in his stories. If I have drawn my readers' attention to them, it is not only because of the abundant use made of them in the original, but also because most of them have been

retained in the translation. Because exclamation marks and suspension points come at the end of a clause or sentence, most of them have been easily and conveniently transferred into the translation without any need to modify the structure of the clause or sentence. But if the pauses in the translation are to have the same effect on Western readers as on an African audience, the former must try to figure out for themselves the type of response the story-teller (the author) expects from his audience each time he introduces a pause.

Personal appeals to the audience, ideophones, repetitions, rhetorical questions, and various uses of pause, these are the various literary devices of the African story-teller, devices that Philombe has incorporated into «Bekamba, le revenant» and «La route des amants maudits». While I have tried to retain many of these devices in the translation, I have not reproduced each instance of each device. The criterion I have used in deciding which device to reproduce and when is that of «naturalness» of the English version. For I believe firmly in Newmark's statement that «the translator should write within his own idiolect or his conception of the SL text author's, always provided the text appears to be written naturally. The translator

must not use a word or phrase that sounds intuitively unnatural or artificial to him.¹¹

¹¹ Peter Newmark, Approaches to translation
(Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981) pp. 128-129.

PART II

Translations, with background information
and notes intended for the North American public.

Background information required to understand
Philombe's culture-bound stories

Philombe's stories «Bekamba, le revenant» and «La route des amants maudits» are set within the Beti tribe, as are all the stories in the collection Histoires queue-de-chat, in which the former are included. The Beti, found in the Central South Province of Cameroon, comprise only one of the many different and small tribes in this country. However, in spite of the diversity and number of tribes that characterize the Cameroonian nation from an ethnographical point of view, they all have in common a number of cultural aspects, including those dealt with by Philombe in the two stories translated.

In these stories, Philombe has focussed mainly on three aspects of Beti society (and therefore of traditional Cameroonian society): spiritual and religious values, social customs, and administration. Although from his treatment of these aspects, it is often difficult to dissociate them one from the other, I will nevertheless examine them separately in order to convey more clearly to the reader their real nature and the relationship that exists between them. Because traditional religious beliefs are at the very basis of Cameroonian society, the religious aspect will be

studied first.

Basically, in traditional society people believe in the existence of a supreme and invisible being, who is the creator of the universe. This Supreme being is considered removed from the community and is only called upon to intervene in cases of great misfortune or as a last resort. However, people may gain access to Him through their ancestors who are believed to have life after death. Some of them are reincarnated in human form and are known as ghosts (cf. English title of first story: The Ghost of Mangata), but others remain in the invisible world in the form of spirits and act as demigods. The latter are the ones who act as His assistants, and it is through them that all prayers and sacrifices are offered to Him. They are the ones from whom Bekamba «le revenant» brings back messages and advice. In fact, it is around the belief in these ancestral spirits that the first story is centered.

The Supreme being and the ancestral spirits (generally referred to as «the gods») are believed to control the actions and destiny of man. While some ancestral spirits render services to man and are considered as good, there are believed to be other forces - evil spirits (generally referred to as «the devils») -

who cause him harm.¹ It is the belief in the latter that the author refers to in the first story («Bekamba, le revenant») when he says of one of his characters, «Il sait que certains fantômes se réincarnent la nuit, pour venir nuire à des vivants» (p. 11); in other words, «he had heard that some ghosts take on human form at night and come to harm the living».

The gods communicate with individuals and the community in various ways. They may, for example, choose to manifest themselves through nature, i.e. through the heavenly bodies, the wind, water, the soil, mountains, trees, snakes, birds, animals etc., which serve as intermediaries between the physical world and the invisible world of the gods. Nature is considered such an important and reliable channel of communication that the living constantly observe nature very closely in order to detect or pick up any messages sent by the gods. This important role of nature is revealed in the second story («La route des amants maudits») in the following passage: «Une grande calamité pèse sur le peuple d'Essam (...). Lisez vous-mêmes la colère

1 I will henceforth use the expressions «the gods» and «the devils» to refer to «good» spirits and «bad» spirits respectively. However, when both good and bad spirits are referred to, I will use the term «spirits».

des dieux dans le ciel...» (p, 36). («There is a great misfortune hanging over the Essam people. (...) Take a look at the sky yourselves and witness the manifestation of the gods' wrath...»)²

The spirits - both good and bad - may also communicate with the living through certain individuals. In the case of the devils, they may communicate or commit evil acts through individuals said to be possessed by the devil, who are called sorcerers. The sorcerer, referred to in the first story («Bekamba, le revenant») as «mauvais plaisant des matches occultes» (p. 11), and in the second story («La route des amants maudits»), as «Assassin occulte» (p. 29), is someone who derives pleasure from evil deeds: causing disorder and misunderstandings among people, transforming himself into animal form and frightening people at night, causing all sorts of harm to people through occult techniques and practices. He is often held responsible for death in the community, for in traditional society, the only kind of death considered natural is death through old age. Any other cause of death - accident,

2 In African traditional religion, there is complete union and intercommunication between the physical and the invisible worlds. So, when African writers describe the physical world (i.e. nature) or refer to it, they often intend to draw the reader's attention to its esoteric and mystic role.

drowning, suicide, disease, during birth, etc. - is regarded as unnatural and is attributed to witchcraft (i.e. sorcery). It is this fundamental belief and its criticism that underlies the second story («La route des amants maudits»).

If the devils use sorcerers as their intermediaries, the gods on the other hand, communicate or act through individuals considered to be their messengers and known as medicine-men. The medicine-man acts as a counter-force to the sorcerer. He exorcises and wards off all evil, danger, disaster etc. caused by the sorcerer. He thus ensures life, security and happiness. He also acts as priest for the society: he organizes and presides at rites and rituals; he offers sacrifices and absolves people of their sins. In short he is the one who re-establishes relations between the people and the gods when the wrath of the latter is provoked. It is the important and central role of medicine-men referred to in «Bekamba, le revenant» as «redresseurs du mauvais sort» (p. 19), that Bekamba, the main character, assumes in the first story.

However, communication between the spirits and the living is not unidirectional. The living too can get into contact with the spirits to express gratitude for services rendered by the gods, to appeal for help in difficult situations, to appease their anger, etc.

They can communicate with the spirits in various ways. One way is through medicine-men and sorcerers who, as already mentioned, have a special relationship with the gods and with the devils respectively. They are believed to be in constant and direct contact with the invisible world and are believed to have four eyes: two normal eyes and two invisible and more perceptive ones, which they use to see into the invisible world («L'oeil plus voyant» - «La route des amants maudits», p. 29). Both the medicine-man and the sorcerer are often referred to as «four-eyed-men»: «hommes-à-quatre-z-yeux» («La route des amants maudits», p. 29).

However, in any given community, the number of medicine-men and sorcerers is limited. For this reason, in their absence, the living can make contact with the spirits either through the family head (considered a representative of the family ancestors), or through the village elders, who, because of their old age, are considered not only to be closer to the dead but also to understand the silences or whispers of the latter.

All of these intermediaries - medicine-men, sorcerers, family heads and elders - communicate with the spirits by performing rites and rituals, which are thus very central to traditional religion. There are rites and rituals for all aspects of human life and all major activities: birth, puberty, marriage, illness,

hunting, war, death, etc. Depending on the reason for the rite or ritual, an appropriate rite or ritual is chosen. This is brought out clearly in the first story, «Bekamba, le revenant», when the supposedly accidental death of the two cousins, Bekamba and Edongo Kounou, is viewed as an unprecedented calamity requiring specific rites to ward off further calamity: «Cette calamité sans précédent ne laisse point indifférent les anciens et les sages. Pour tenter d'en limiter les effets, ils organisent des rites appropriés» (p. 13). In another incident, this time in the second story, «La route des amants maudits», the author refers to another rite, «Le rite de l'akus» (p. 32). This rite is normally performed on a widow upon the death of her husband. It is intended specifically to purify her by means of a public confession of her «sins», followed by appropriate rites - depending on the magnitude of the sins - to restore her to a morally pure state. It is also intended to protect her against her deceased husband's ghost, for it is believed that if a man dies an unnatural death or was annoyed with his wife before dying, his ghost could come back to take revenge on her by making her mad, sterile, etc. Finally, this rite also enables her to remarry later on if she so desires.

Apart from their protective and purificatory roles, rites and rituals also have other functions.

They bring all kinds of blessings to the community, for example, soil fertility, good harvest, successful hunting and fishing, fecundity, etc. They also mark the evolution of an individual from one stage of life to another: from adolescence to maturity, from celibacy to marriagehood, from life to death, for instance. Finally, they serve as invitations to ancestors to come and participate in various events.³

The traditional religious beliefs related to spirits, rites and rituals — and many others — have, since colonization, been attacked by foreign religions, mainly Christian and Muslim, which were introduced to replace traditional beliefs, considered primitive by missionaries. Conversion of the natives to these foreign religions has been accomplished by providing them with social services in return for their «souls». Since lip service has been paid to these religions by many in order to obtain social services, their successful implantation in traditional Cameroonian society is taken for granted and, in several areas, it is assumed that they have successfully replaced traditional religion.

3 In the event of a death, the ensuing rites and rituals are equally an invitation to ancestors to come and take the deceased along with them into the invisible world, thereby facilitating his journey from the world of the living to that of the spirits.

However, the contact between traditional and foreign religions in Cameroonian society has led to an underlying rejection of all foreign religious beliefs. This rejection is due to various reasons.

The first is that while many people accept conversion to foreign religions, their reasons for conversion are materialistic rather than spiritual. For most of them, these religions have come to mean educational institutions (primary and secondary schools, technical training centers), medical institutions (hospitals, dispensaries etc.), and other social services.

Secondly, some of the social services provided by missionaries are in direct conflict with the traditional ones. This is the case of modern medical treatment used by missionaries. Not only is such treatment radically different from that provided by the medicine-men, who, before the arrival of the White man, had always «treated» all the inhabitants' ailments, but it threatens the entire social fabric of traditional society. The missionaries attribute the success of their treatment to the power of their Christian God and use this success to condemn traditional medicine-men and their methods. This threatens not only the profession and social position of the medicine-men, but also, and above all, the very fundamental beliefs.

of native society. The medicine-men react to this threat by intensifying their own medical practices and by reinforcing their own position in order to prove to the natives that the power and secrets of their ancestors are more significant than those of the White man's God. The result of this struggle is that most of the inhabitants still firmly believe in and rely a great deal on traditional healing methods. Belinga Mvondo's attitude in the second story («La route des amants maudits») illustrates the situation very well. When advised by his eldest wife to go to the Efoke or Enongal hospital for treatment for his hernia, «(il) ne voulait rien entendre. Il objectait qu'avant l'arrivée des hommes blancs, ce n'était pas la maladie à tourmenter les coeurs! Car quelques racines de plantes, quelques oignons et quelques fruits sauvages grignotés à longueur de journée, suffisent à neutraliser le 'mal de noblesse'!» (p. 30).

A third reason why foreign religions are rejected is that inhabitants are usually shocked to discover that these religions, instead of bringing with them peace and happiness, create trouble by causing Africans to live in psychological and moral alienation. They are disappointed to find that, when converted, they are asked to abandon some of the traditional beliefs and practices that they are strongly attached to. This

places them in a difficult situation in so far as they can no longer meet certain obligations towards their ancestors and other traditional and social obligations,⁴ and thus causes them to eventually reject the foreign religions.

The negative, or at least indifferent, attitude of Cameroonians towards foreign religions is illustrated in two ways in the first story («Bekamba, le revenant»). First, when Bekamba sets up in business as a medicine-man, all flock to him for treatment; Christians and Muslims, despite their «new» beliefs, are as eager for

4 Christianity forbids converts in traditional society to worship false gods and idols (i.e. ancestors and totems). Converted polygamists are forced to send away all but one of their many wives, a situation which, from the inhabitants' point of view, only serves to disrupt social and interhuman relations in their society. Cf. «...j'ai vu ton père; il n'est pas content de la manière dont tu avais traité ses veuves. Pourquoi les avoir chassées alors qu'elles devaient perpétuer sa présence et son souvenir» («Bekamba, le revenant» p. 19).

Bekamba's treatment, amulets, protective charms, and «useful» advice brought back from dead relatives as are the non-converted. Secondly, the importance accorded to Bekamba, a man who is a link with the ancestors but not an official representative of a foreign religion is significant. The well-being of the native people depended not on priests or marabouts but «tous ils attendaient leur salut temporel d'un homme qui n'était ni marabout, ni pasteur, ni curé» (p. 21).

As a result of the indifference and even hostility of native Cameroonians to foreign religions, attempts to impose or implant them in traditional society⁵ often result only in a disruption of the traditional way of life in such a society and transform it into a «babel» (p. 21).

The traditional way of life is, as revealed above, dominated by the invisible presence of the ancestors. The cult of the ancestors plays a key role not only in traditional religion but also in the social organization and administration of traditional society.

5 Most government authorities authorize and actively encourage missionary activities in the rural areas because of the social services provided by the religious organizations.

At the family level (nuclear family),⁶ the man, considered a representative of family ancestors, is the religious and political head of the family. His wife or wives, children and servants regard him as lord and protector of their destinies. That is why in the second story the author refers to Avouzoa's husband as her lord: «Pour elle cette hernie se développant tranquillement entre les jambes de son maître après Dieu» («La route des amants maudits», p. 30). The family head lays down and executes all rules governing the family, in accordance with the will of family ancestors. All members of the family are expected to obey and respect him because failure to do so would imply disobedience and disrespect towards the gods.

Despite his great authority within the family, the family head is subordinate to the village head who is at the same time the priest, magistrate and educator of the village. Assisted by a council of village elders and medicine-men (i.e. intermediaries of the ancestors), he settles disputes between individuals and between families. He decides on the necessary measures to take

6 The nuclear family includes the polygamous family.

on all matters affecting the entire village. Since, in Cameroon, the village is an extension of the family (the village is a form of the extended family) and often consists of relatives spread all over a particular area, the village head, like the family head, is a representative of family ancestors.

The village head is in turn subordinate to the spiritual and political leader of the tribe who is regarded as the highest priest, administrator and supreme judge of the people. He too is assisted by a council of elders and medicine-men from various villages. In consultation with the latter, he settles disputes between individuals, families, and villages. He also takes decisions on important issues affecting the whole tribe, such as capital punishment, declaration of war, disaster etc.

The attitudes of both «rulers» and their «subjects» play a very important role in ensuring the stability of this tri-level administrative structure (family/village/tribe). On the one hand family, village and tribal heads are fully aware of their divine calling - to initiate children, family members and villagers to religious, social and political life; to initiate them to the secrets and wisdom of ancestors; and to ensure that all family members and villagers respect the customs and traditions of society. On the other hand,

members of the family, village and tribe regard themselves as belonging to one global group, and see tradition as the expression of the will of their ancestors; as a result, they normally accept and respect all that is laid down by tradition. And those who tend to be disfavoured by tradition, women and servants for example, cannot openly express their dissatisfaction, because enforcement of tradition is often very rigorous and any persons violating it are usually cracked down upon severely: «La coutume était la coutume. Elle était là pour mater les premières manifestations d'une révolte de femmes». («La route des amants maudits», p. 31). Punishment for revolting against tradition ranges from finer and beatings to exile and death.

Tradition is upheld and punishment for rebellion against it is invariably determined in this society by men, who hold all the power and who have the final word in decision making: «...la voix des hommes ayant toujours force de loi dans la société traditionnelle...» («La route des amants maudits», p. 30).

The traditional administrative structure controlled by the family, village and tribal heads is now encompassed by a more modern, powerful and sophisticated one introduced by the French during colonization and later maintained by the country after achieving independence. The modern administrative

structure consists of provinces⁷ headed by a Governor, which are sub-divided into Divisions administered by a Divisional Officer, which, in turn, are sub-divided into Districts headed by a District Officer. Two such districts, Ntui (p. 10) and Nanga-Eboko (pp. 29, 35) in the Central South Province are mentioned in the first and second stories respectively. The jurisdiction of the District Officer and of the Commandant de Brigade (head of the District gendarme station)⁸ covers all the villages and tribes of the District and both these officers have greater authority than the family, village

7 Administratively, Cameroon is divided into seven provinces: Eastern, Western, Northern, North-West Littoral, South-West, and Central South Provinces. Nkongsamba, Douala and Yaounde mentioned in the first story are thickly populated urban centers in the Western, Littoral and Central South Provinces respectively.

8 In Cameroon, enforcement of law and order is ensured by the Police force and the Gendarmerie. However, they differ in a number of ways. First of all, they have different jurisdictions. While policemen operate in urban centers, gendarmes operate out of town and in rural areas. Secondly, the training gendarmes and policemen receive is different. Whereas gendarmes are considered part of the nation's⁶ armed forces and are thereby given military training, policemen are not. Consequently, the methods used by the police force and the gendarmerie to enforce law and order are different.

and tribal heads. They represent the «authorities» referred to in «Bekamba, le revenant» and in «La route des amants maudits».⁹

These modern authorities have been instrumental in curbing certain cruel and inhuman practices in traditional society. Such is the case with the «Elonn» ritual¹⁰ referred to in the second story: «Il ose réclamer l'elonn.....parce qu'il sait que les autorités administratives de Nanga-Eboko en ont formellement interdit la pratique sous peine d'emprisonnement et d'amendes!» («La route des amants maudits», p. 36)

But because fines and imprisonment are often ineffective in persuading the natives to abandon these practices and others, which, from a modern standpoint are an affront to human dignity and social justice, the government is forced to resort to other methods. Some of these methods, especially those used by gendarmes on defaulters, are sometimes extreme. The methods used

9 Cf. «Les autorités administratives de Ntui», («Bekamba, le revenant», p. 10); and «Les autorités administratives de Nanga-Eboko» («La route des amants maudits», p. 35).

10 This ritual is explained in the notes at the end of the translation.

to extract information from suspects, for example, are sometimes so brutal that the natives have come to identify gendarmes and gendarme stations with brutality, such that the mere mention of them makes natives tremble with fear. This is brought out in the first story («Bekamba, le revenant») when Bekamba the main character is summoned to the gendarme station: «Quoi? Etre fier dans un poste de Gendarmerie? ...(...) Bekamba savait qu'il ne pouvait être invité en ces lieux qui donnent les frissons, ...» (pp. 23-24).

One may argue that the French administrative officers and the missionaries had no right to intervene in the social and religious practices of native Cameroonians, and certainly no right to be brutal in their actions. But it is nonetheless true that traditional society had - and still has - certain practices which may be considered undesirable or bad and which are, in themselves, «brutal».¹¹

First, medicine-men and sorcerers play on the religious beliefs of the natives and use their positions

11 In examining these practices, I will focus mainly on those mentioned or alluded to in the stories translated. This is because the practices are so many that a complete study of them can only be adequately handled in such works as anthropological text books.

and power to exploit them. They produce and sell, often at exorbitant prices, amulets, fetiches, talismans, etc., which they claim are capable of attaining the objectives desired by their owners (e.g. protection, revenge, good luck, restoring to health, pacification, etc.). People do not hesitate to turn to them when faced with a problem. This is illustrated in the second story when Belinga Mvondo's wives soon resorted to acts of witchcraft to influence their husband's love: «Elles eurent bientôt recours à de petits trucs magiques destinés à détourner le coeur de Belinga Mvondo» («La route des amants maudits», p. 31)¹²

12 In Cameroon, medicine-men are still very popular. They claim they can treat all kinds of illnesses, unravel all sorts of mysteries, provide protection, bring good luck, among many other things. The belief in their powers is still so strong and the use of talismans, protective charms, etc., that they produce so widespread in both villages and urban centers that very many people consult medicine-men, perform rituals prescribed by them and carry talismans, protective charms, etc., before, during or after incidents and events such as illnesses, deaths, accidents, thefts, games, competitive entrance examinations. In certain rural areas the influence of medicine-men and beliefs in traditional healing methods are still so strong that most patients stick obstinately to them and only agree to be taken to the hospital when it is too late. In other cases, patients' relatives come to the hospital and take them away to native doctors.

Unfortunately, in many cases, such as the one presented here, the charms prescribed do not work and the only ones who benefit are the medicine-men.

While rites and rituals are a necessary part of any society, the torture that usually accompanies certain traditional rites in Cameroon is looked upon as an abuse to human dignity. Even though the kinds of tortures practised vary from tribe to tribe, all are characterized by their brutality. They are generally designed to test an individual's resistance to pain, his courage, his strength, to prove his guilt or innocence, as in the case of the «elonn» in the second story («La route des amants maudits», p. 35), or to extort a public confession from a suspect, as in the case of the «akus» («La route des amants maudits», p. 32).

Religious beliefs also lead the natives to offer sacrifices to the gods as part of a rite or ritual. This practice, although not bad in itself, leads to abuses on the part of medicine-men, elders and traditional administrative heads who use it as a means to enrich themselves at the expense of the common people, by personally selling, at a handsome profit to themselves,

the articles required for sacrifices.¹³

Whereas religious practices are controlled and sometimes abused by medicine-men and, in some cases, the village elders, social practices are enforced - often harshly - by the elders in the family. The extreme control parents have traditionally had over children, and elders over youths, is an aspect considered undesirable by some today. The control of the elders is so strong that the young see the world mainly through their eyes. Philombe brings out this point in the second story «La route des amants maudits», when he says of one of his characters (Zibi), «A la bouche des Anciens du village et des sorciers, il a toujours cru. Comment n'y plus croire maintenant» (p. 42). The elders, and more particularly the parents, control the younger generation to the point of choosing a spouse for their children. This practice is alluded to in the first

13 Because in the rural areas houses are increasingly roofed with corrugated iron sheets (zink) instead of thatches, some medicine-men and traditional rulers now ask their patients and subjects respectively, to offer or contribute a certain number of corrugated iron sheets with which they eventually roof their houses. Others ask for goats, fowls, tins of palm oil, jugs of palm wine, crates of beer, etc., which they later on sell and pocket the money.

story by Bekamba, who supposedly brought back advice from a dead mother for one of his female patients:

«...ta mère te conseille de rejoindre le premier mari que ton père t'avait choisi...» («Bekamba, le revenant», p. 19).

Once married, the young couple has to submit to the norms of society by having many children, for marriage, as perceived in traditional society, is a sacred custom, a union between man and woman for the purpose of procreation. Procreation ensures the survival and continuity of the community. It also maintains a link between the community and ancestors living in the supernatural world: a new-born baby is seen not as the mere fruit of a biological act but above all as the reincarnation of an ancestor into the visible world. With procreation, continuity and establishment of link with ancestors as the basis of marriage, children are thus very central to marriage. Children are so important in married life that it is difficult for people to conceive of marriage without them. The result is that people have come to consider sterility as the worst thing that could ever happen to a Cameroonian woman. As Philombe puts it in his first story, sterility has become a mysterious scourge of all African women: «... cette maladie tranquille qui donne le plus d'insomnie à toutes les femmes noires:

la stérilité» («Bekamba, le revenant,» p. 23).

To fulfill the purpose of marriage, which is to have many children, men often practise polygamy in traditional society.¹⁴ In this way, they ensure legitimate lineage in spite of the possible sterility of one of the wives or the high infant mortality rate.

¹⁴ Apart from sterility and high mortality rate among new-born babies, there are a number of other reasons for the practice of polygamy. In traditional society a woman normally nurses and breast-feeds her child for at least two years during which the husband is not allowed to have sexual relationship with her. Unable to abstain from sex for such a long time, the man tends to marry a second, third and even fourth wife.

Another reason why polygamy is practised is that the workload of the traditional Cameroonian woman is heavy: she often has to cover several kilometers on foot to fetch water, wood and other necessities; in addition to this, her farm work is difficult because her farming tools are not modern. So, in order to make the tasks easier for his first wife, the husband is obliged to marry other women. The first (eldest) wife does not oppose it and in most cases she is even the one who demands that he does so.

Associated to the «economic» reason is the fact that the Cameroonian population was depleted during the slave trade period. In the post slave trade period people naturally resorted to polygamy because if the idealist philosophy of «one man, one wife»

In Cameroonian society, polygamy, far from being frowned on, is accepted and even approved as a mark of social prestige: the more wives a man has, the more he is respected. Polygamy is an essential pillar in the social organization of the society, where the eldest son normally inherits his father's wives and possibly, also, his brother's and his uncle's wives to ensure that they are looked after after their husband's death. In a society where prostitution is considered undesirable and the number of women exceeds that of men, the government sees polygamy as the solution to many problems and has legalized it: under the new family law, a man can legally marry a maximum of four

14 were practised, then there would not have been enough people to exploit the natural resources of the country. However, some men now see polygamy as a means to enrich themselves rather than to survive, their many wives and children constituting a non-paid labour force on their big farms (i.e. small plantations).

wives.¹⁵

The structure of the polygamous family (as originally conceived) is such that stability and happiness in the polygamous compound are ensured. In the second story («La route des amants maudits»), the lack of harmony and even the chaos that reigns in Belinga Mvondo's polygamous compound results from the marked failure to respect the organization and norms (i.e. structure) of the polygamous compound as outlined below.

In the normal structure of the polygamous family, the man's hut (the abāa) is built at one far end of the compound (the head of the compound), around a central post, a fig tree and other herbs believed to

15 Most of the leading Cameroonian writers think that, when considered objectively, polygamy has its raison d'être; that despite egoistic and evil practices by some polygamous husbands, it has certain social justifications; and finally that, even though the Christian religion tends to identify polygamy with immorality to the extent that the fight against immorality means a fight against polygamy, polygamy is not a sin against God.

Cf. Mongo Beti, Le roi miraculé, pp. 143, 197-8, 202-5.

_____, Pauvre Christ de Bomba, p. 231.

Ferdinand Oyono, Le vieux nègre et la médaille, p. 80.

_____, Une vie de Boy, p. 20.

Benjamin Matip, Afrique, nous t'ignorons, p. 96.

have protective powers and to enhance fecundity.

Lined up perpendicular to the man's hut are the women's huts. There are as many women's huts as there are women in the polygamous household. This is because each wife, according to tradition, is entitled to a kitchen hut which serves at the same time as a sleeping room. At the opposite end of the compound to the man's hut is that of the first (eldest) wife. She organizes the compound, and its reputation and prestige depend on her. Besides having authority over the other wives, she also has the responsibility of educating her husband's younger wives: she is expected to give them advice, disclose to them her experiences, her know-how, and set an example of virtue. According to tradition her husband must consult her and seek her advice before choosing his favourite wife. It would be difficult for her husband to make such a choice or even marry a new wife without her consent, especially as it is believed that his luck and prosperity depend on his first wife. She is like a mother reigning peacefully over the other wives.

The next wife in the hierarchy is the second wife. She would eventually succeed the eldest. Her hut is beside that of the eldest wife and nearer to the man's hut. Situated next to the second wife's hut and closer to the man's hut are the huts of ordinary wives

who, in terms of responsibilities held, are lowest in hierarchy. Next to the ordinary wives' huts and still nearer to the man's hut is that of the wife in charge of the water supply of the compound. She sees to it that there is always water in the man's hut. She also plays a role analogous to that of a housemaid who is always available when needed. Next to her hut and nearest to the man's hut is that of the wife who ensures the cleanliness of the man's hut and the entire compound. She is the one who accompanies her husband on journeys, fills his pipe with tobacco and peels his kola nuts.

Also nearest to the man's hut but situated opposite to the other wives' huts is that of the favourite wife. Assomo, the central character in the second story, is a favourite wife. She is expected to be trustworthy, serious, agreeable and prepossessing, because the husband normally spends most of his leisure time with her and it is in her hut that he may store his precious belongings. The favourite wife also attends to their husband's personal needs; for example, she sees to it that he eats well, brings him his pipe, the mace and keeps a calendar of the nights each wife is to spend with their husband. However, unlike the eldest wife, her role and position are not irrevocable. She could be replaced by another. Furthermore, her

role and position are not official like those of the eldest wife.

The practice of having several wives is still widely practiced in Cameroon, where over 80% of the population is still living in rural areas and where, therefore, the influence of traditional beliefs, customs and practices is still very great. Basically, native Cameroonians have remained loyal to their traditional beliefs and customs despite Western colonization, foreign religious influences, modern administrative structures, and increasing contact with the outside world. And their loyalty to tradition has tended to slow down the development of their society.

This is why more and more committed Cameroonian writers like Philombe are now joining forces with the government and foreign religious bodies to attack, and even hold up to ridicule, undesirable practices, abuses and injustices inherent in traditional society. While they do not want the Cameroonian people to abandon completely traditional beliefs, traditions and customs which are a vital part of their cultural heritage, they do hope that they will temper their «loyalty» with reason and will get rid of abuses and injustices in their society, which impede its social, economic and technological development.

BEKAMBA, LE REVENANT

Le petit village de Mangata dormait sagement, bercé par le mugissement lointain de la Sanaga.¹ Un silence sépulcral enveloppait les cases.² Tous feux éteints,³ elles ne laissaient filtrer aucun signe de vie..

Dans la cour⁴ envahie de ténèbres hideuses, les animaux domestiques semblaient avoir peur de faire du bruit. L'atmosphère était parfaitement sinistre. Les chiens eux-mêmes se tenaient cois; les chiens qu'enrage parfois le moindre balancement du feuillage au passage d'une brise inoffensive, lâchaient à peine quelques timides aboiements et, fidèles sentinelles, ils se rendormaient sur le seuil des cases, l'oreille au vent.

Soudain, il y eut comme un énervement général des gueules, des groins et des museaux. Les moutons et les porcs couraient bruyamment partout en débandade. Les chiens, lestement dressés sur leurs pattes et tournés tous vers une case, déchiraient le repos du petit village par un vigoureux concert de «gbo-gbo-gbo»...

Plus moyen de fermer l'oeil sous cette salve d'aboiements. Elle n'en finissait pas, alimentée par un bruit insolite. Quelqu'un frappait à la porte du vieux Adzi Manga. Les coups se faisant insistants, rendaient les chiens plus enragés. Mais personne à

l'intérieur ne répondait, et pour cause.

Les autorités administratives de Ntui⁵ avaient beau prêcher la solidarité qui devrait régner entre tous les citoyens et, en conséquence l'hospitalité due à des personnes qui se déplacent de nuit. Mais cette hospitalité nocturne s'étant parfois retournée contre celui qui l'avait donnée, tous les habitants de Mangata savaient à quoi s'en tenir désormais.

Ils se souvenaient surtout de ce voyageur d'origine congolaise. Après avoir passé la nuit chez Ateba Awata, il l'avait entraîné dans une scabreuse affaire de trafic d'or. L'innocent Ateba s'en était tiré avec trois mois d'emprisonnement injustifiables, et, depuis lors, tous les habitants de Mangata savaient à quoi s'en tenir désormais. Qu'un quidam vint frapper à leur porte à une heure avancée de la nuit, ils s'étaient juré de demeurer plus muets que des tombeaux.

Cependant, des coups de poing n'arrêtaient pas de secouer la ridicule porte d'écorce et une voix de répéter obstinément: «C'est moi Bekamba; c'est moi en personne! Ouvrez-moi!... Même toi, ô ~~ore~~re, tu ne reconnais plus ma voix? Pauvre de moi!».

Toutes les oreilles s'ouvrent largement. Elles tentent d'identifier les inflexions de cette voix tour à tour éraillée, gringante, sourde et haletante. Elle

ne ressemble à la voix d'aucune personne vivant cette nuit-là à Mangata. On dirait plutôt celle d'un malade qui vient de recouvrer l'usage de la parole après un long coma.

Cramoisi d'horreur, Adzi Manga croit d'abord évoluer dans les brumes d'un mauvais songe. Il retient par moments sa respiration dont le bruit, pourtant imperceptible, l'effraie. Les battements de son coeur l'effrayent aussi: ils prennent à ses oreilles les clameurs indiscretes d'une bamboula. Son lit de bambou est parfois si bavard au moindre mouvement. Les dents serrées, il s'évertue à le soumettre à la loi du silence et de l'inertie.

Le malheur ne visite jamais tous les hommes le même jour. A chacun son tour. Hier c'était Ateba Awata et bien d'autres. Aujourd'hui, c'est lui qui a été choisi... Adzi Manga ne peut s'empêcher de frissonner, chicotté par une peur blanche. Il sait que certains fantômes se réincarnent la nuit, pour venir nuire à des vivants. La consigne à suivre est de ne jamais répondre. Aussi, s'arrange-t-il pour garder ses lèvres hermétiquement cousues. Dans sa pensée, celui qui l'appelle «père, ô père», ne peut être qu'un méchant fantôme ou bien un mauvais plaisant des matches occultes... Mille tombes! L'appeler ainsi, lui dont tout le pays sait où séjourne désormais son fils unique?... Et puis de quel

Bekamba peut-il bien s'agir?, se demande-t-il intérieurement, en se rappelant que la tribu⁶ compte au moins une dizaine de Bekamba. Peut-être l'un deux lui apporte-t-il quelque message important!...

En effet, il y a Bekamba Edongo, Bekamba Nyimi et Bekamba Atangana ses cousins. Il y a Bekamba Ombédé, Bekamba Manga, ses neveux. Il y a Bekamba Alima et Bekamba Abouna, les neveux de son cousin Ovoundi. Il y a aussi Bekamba Koungou, son vieil oncle maternel condamné, pour jamais, au coin du feu par les rhumatismes. Il y a enfin Bekamba Okali, petit-fils d'un de ses frères. Mais ce dernier travaille à Nkongsamba.⁷ A supposer même qu'il ait bénéficié d'un congé, il aurait envoyé une lettre pour annoncer son arrivée. Et puis, aucun ~~payeur~~⁸ ne se trouvant plus sur le bac de Nachtigal à cette heure-là, qui est-ce qui aurait donc pu lui faire traverser le grand fleuve, à Bekamba Okali?...

Après ce petit recensement, il ne lui reste dans sa mémoire d'ancien du village, que l'image sinistre d'un seul Bekamba; d'un seul, dont le souvenir lui inflige un choc douloureux.

Ils étaient deux cousins de même âge. Partis pour une partie de pêche, personne ne les avait vus, le

lendemain, rentrer au village.

Avaient-ils osé passer la nuit sur l'une de ces nombreuses petites îles qui jonchent le lit, combien accidenté, de la Sanaga? C'était à peine croyable. En ce mois de septembre, les eaux en crue s'enflent d'une furie implacable et ravageuse. Les plus grands pêcheurs eux-mêmes se gardent bien de s'y aventurer la nuit.

Des hommes, lancés à leur recherche au petit jour, étaient revenus le soir, les yeux rouges de terreur. Ils avaient hélé dans toutes les directions; mais aucune voix humaine⁹ n'avait répondu! Seule, à moitié enfoncée dans les anfractuosités d'un rocher, une pirogue gisait quelque part.

Comment, après ce compte-rendu, pouvait-on écarter l'hypothèse d'une noyade? Du reste, deux jours plus tard, cette hypothèse devait être confirmée par la découverte, dix kilomètres plus loin en aval, d'un corps en décomposition. Après bien d'autres recherches demeurées infructueuses, tout le monde convenait que l'autre cadavre avait dû être enseveli dans la gueule famélique d'un caïman.¹⁰

Grande consternation à Mangata. On célèbre les funérailles pendant une lune. A longueur de journée et de nuit, les tam-tams d'essani¹¹ ajoutent des notes

troublantes à cette atmosphère de double deuil. Cette calamité sans précédent ne laisse point indifférent les anciens et les sages. Pour tenter d'en limiter les effets, ils organisent des rites appropriés. On pleure abondamment Edongo Kounou. Mais on pleure surtout Bekamba Adzi Manga dont le cadavre n'est jamais retrouvé.

Voilà que six mois plus tard, alors que l'oubli commence à remettre de l'ordre dans les esprits, quelqu'un vient frapper à la porte du vieux Adzi Manga, en répétant avec insistance:

- Père, ô père, ouvre-moi. C'est moi ton fils Bekamba que tout le monde croyait mort...!

Il est indigne à une personne de sexe mâle de trembler indéfiniment. Las de trembler de tous ses muscles séniles, Adzi Manga rassemble tous ses efforts et se lève; il se dit à lui-même qu'un homme ne meurt qu'une fois. Toutefois, il appelle ses voisins. Tous se lèvent, bien décidés, malgré leur peur, à voir pour la première fois un revenant de leurs propres yeux. Certains d'entre eux portent des tisons et des torches, et ont les yeux à fleur de tête, bouffis de sommeil autant que d'horreur. Bientôt, c'est tout Mangata sur pied autour de l'inconnu.

L'homme est âgé de quarante ans environ. Torse nu, il n'a, pour cache-sexe, que des lambeaux de filets de pêche noués autour de la hanche. Devant lui, sur le

sol, gît une grande corbeille d'où s'exhale l'odeur de poisson fumé. Chaque villageois lève-t-il bien haut sa lumière pour le reconnaître, qu'il l'appelle par son nom, en ajoutant :

— Hey! vrai que tu ne me reconnais plus, toi aussi!...

Ma foi, comment peut-on reconnaître si facilement un parent que l'on croit mort depuis six lunes entières et dont tout le pays a célébré les funérailles? Mille tombes! Bekamba qui ressuscite après six lunes entières, c'est du «jamais vu» et du «jamais ouf»!

L'homme paraît très fatigué. Jusque-là, il s'est appuyé sur un long bâton. Soudain, il s'affale brusquement sur le sol de la petite véranda de la case. Après un quart d'heure de silence rêveur, il déclare de sa voix tour à tour éraillée, grinçante, sourde et haletante :

— C'est moi Bekamba Adzi Manga en personne. J'étais mort, noyé en même temps que mon frère Edongo Kounou. Est-il besoin de vous le dire encore? Tout le bruit de nos funérailles, nous l'entendions chaque jour et chaque nuit au pays des fantômes. A notre arrivée, on nous enferma au fond d'une grotte obscure. Chaque jour, une femme nous nourrissait comme l'oiseau-mère nourrit ses petits. Notre ventre n'était pas assez gros pour emmagasiner tous les mets qu'elle nous servait, et

qui se composaient invariablement de poissons frais et de manioc macéré.¹² C'est l'unique plat dont se nourrissent les fantômes. Heureux peuple!

«Après neuf jours et neuf nuits, un gendarme-fantôme¹³ vint nous ouvrir les énormes portes de pierre de la mystérieuse prison. En vérité ni à Yaoundé,¹⁴ ni à Douala,¹⁵ ni nulle part ailleurs, mes yeux n'avaient jamais vu et ne verront jamais de ma vie autant de monde. Et quel monde! Des fourmilières d'êtres pareillement blancs des pieds à la tête; avec des yeux tout blancs comme la pleine lune... Là-bas, il n'y a ni noirs, ni rouges, ni albinos, ni métis. Rien que des êtres blancs, plus blancs que tous les hommes blancs que vous avez déjà vus... Des cases qui se succèdent à perte de vue; des cases grandes et blanches comme des montagnes de farine. Des bandes de marmots blancs qui s'ébattent dans la poussière blanche des cours, avec des buffles, des éléphants, des caïmans, des panthères et des lions inoffensifs pour eux!...

«Tous les jours, là-bas, sont jours de fête, mais aussi jours de travail. Tous ceux qui sont capables de le faire, travaillent pour nourrir cette immense collectivité où règnent harmonieusement les lois de la vraie fraternité. Et le travail est organisé de telle façon que personne ne se sent fatigué. Sans interruption, une musique douce vous enveloppe de

volupté; et elle sourd des mvets,¹⁶ des balafons,¹⁷
des tambourins et des algaïtas,¹⁸ qu'on ne voit guère!...

«On nous amena devant une grande assemblée de vieillards chauves comme des calebasses. Celui qui la présidait demanda nos noms. Il demanda nos noms et les noms de nos pères, ainsi que les noms de notre grand-père. A peine avions-nous décliné notre arbre généalogique qu'un vieillard se dressa brusquement de son coin, en vociférant un juron de guerre. C'était notre grand-père Manga Kounou en personne que nous eûmes ainsi l'occasion de voir pour la première fois. Il était mort, vous le savez, quelques jours seulement après notre naissance. Le vénérable aïeul vint nous embrasser. Il était fier et content de revoir les jeunes pousses du sang de son sang. Cependant, nous ayant tourné le dos, il se mit à fulminer contre tous les assistants. Il ne comprenait pas pourquoi les gendarmes-fantômes nous avaient arrêtés, mon frère Edongo Kounou et moi, au cours d'une paisible partie de pêche. Car ce n'était pas encore l'heure, pour nous, de quitter le soleil des vivants. Il tonna, fou de rage, affirmant que les autres fantômes travaillaient joyeusement à l'extermination de sa descendance. En terminant, il exigea que cessent immédiatement ces arrestations injustifiées des siens.

«Alors, s'éleva une grande palabre. «Les

eaux de la Sanaga, rétorquèrent plusieurs orateurs, engloutissent aussi bien des pêcheurs de Mangata que ceux des autres tribus. Car tous, ils bafouent les lois de la Mère-Déesse du grand fleuve. Désobéissants, ils continuent à pêcher sur le bief d'Okundi où, précisément, est fixée sa vénérable résidence. Egoïstes, ils se soucient peu de payer l'impôt qu'elle exige d'eux, et qui devrait être prélevé sur les premières captures de poissons de l'année...»

Quelques voix soutiennent les plaintes et les protestations du brave aïeul. Elles obtiennent qu'on nous rende à la vie naturelle.

«Cependant, avant hier, avant qu'on nous ouvre le chemin du retour, on s'aperçoit, hélas, que l'heure de la mort vient de sonner pour mon frère Edongo Kounou. Devinez mon désarroi. Je ne puis retenir mes larmes. Mais le bruit de mes sanglots douloureux irritent tout le peuple fantôme. Il ignore, à n'en pas douter, ce qu'on appelle douleur! Tandis que vous pleuriez ici sur notre perte tragique, lui, par contre, s'indignait. Il ne comprend pas pourquoi les vivants, pleurent tant ceux qui sont morts, les premiers étant, pense-t-il, moins heureux que ces derniers. Oui... en me voyant pleurer; tous les fantômes, y compris Manga Kounou, sont pris d'une grande colère. Alors, leurs gendarmes, après m'avoir chargé de cette corbeille de poissons

secs en guise de viatique, me chassent à grands coups de cravaches, jusqu'à la rive du grand fleuve.

«Voilà pourquoi mes pères et mères, mes frères et soeurs, je suis revenu seul aujourd'hui, seul sans mon frère Edongo. Seul, mais porteur d'importants messages et d'immenses pouvoirs. Je souhaite de tout coeur que les habitants de Mangata soient les premiers à en bénéficier. Un adage ne dit-il pas avec raison que «tout porte-bonheur¹⁹ est avant tout propriété d'une famille?»²⁰ Mais tant pis pour vous, si vous n'en voulez point! Déjà, vous refusez de me reconnaître, moi Bekamba Adzi Manga!... Combien de fois j'ai frappé à la porte et personne n'a voulu me répondre ni m'ouvrir? C'est bien vrai que j'étais mort, aïe, pauvre de moi! Tant pis pour vous, dis-je...».

La voix de Bekamba se fait tour à tour éplorée et menaçante. Du groupe de villageois massés à bonne distance autour de lui, et qui l'écoutent tout yeux et tout oreilles, montent de petites exclamations craintives: «Ekyé, ékyé! Pourquoi ce ton aigre pour les siens?».

Non, ce n'était pas facile de reconnaître Bekamba Adzi, fils unique d'Adzi Manga. Ses yeux grand ouverts et terriblement ahuris, ne pouvaient longuement fixer une seule personne. Ses gestes étaient gauches

comme ceux d'une personne envoûtée par le kong.²¹ Sa peau paraissait si dure, si coriace qu'elle semblait avoir été battue pendant six lunes entières. Oui, il était devenu presque méconnaissable. Mais ici et là, quelques marques indélébiles et particulières permettaient à tous ses proches d'identifier ce qu'il avait été auparavant.

Peu à peu, le doute se dissipa. Cette peau rouge de faux albinos, ces orteils en marteau et bien onglés, ce nez généreusement retroussé et ce visage parsemé de grains de beauté ne prêtaient nullement à confusion. Chacun examinait, s'approchant d'un pas, écarquillant les yeux, allongeant le cou. Et découvrait-on quelque part une bosse ou une cicatrice bien connue, on le désignait du doigt à distance en affirmant à haute voix: «C'est bien lui, Bekamba Adzi, fils unique d'Adzi Mangal!».

Il faut vous dire que dans nos petits coins de brousse, les histoires les plus farfelues sont monnaie courante et trouvent toujours des gens pour leur donner du prix. Rien donc d'étonnant à ce que les habitants de Mangata prêtèrent une oreille crédule à ce fantastique récit du pays des fantômes. Et tous, ils n'eurent qu'une crainte. C'est que les fantômes, attirés par les odeurs encore fraîches de leur pays, ne vinssent commettre un enlèvement sur la personne de

Bekamba Adzi Manga.

Les anciens et les sages se concertèrent. La même nuit, Bekamba Adzi fut criblé d'incisions et pétri d'exorcismes. Il s'en suivit des festivités grandioses. Elles effacèrent de tous les coeurs la moitié des blessures laissées par les funérailles d'il y avait six mois.

Bekamba n'attendit pas longtemps pour communiquer ses importants messages et exercer ses immenses pouvoirs.

Chaque jour, la petite case de son vieux père était pleine à craquer. Tous les villageois venaient s'informer des nouvelles d'un parent défunt, ou demander quelques conseils sur des ennuis personnels. Et Bekamba le revenant affirmait, le plus sérieusement du monde, avoir vu de ses yeux vu, tous les morts de la tribu, jusqu'au père du père de son grand-père.

— Toi ici, j'ai vu ton père; il n'est pas content de la manière dont tu avais traité ses veuves. Pourquoi les avoir chassées alors qu'elles devaient perpétuer sa présence et son souvenir?²² Et toi ici, ton frère jumeau t'interdit d'aller désormais à la chasse au caïman: tu risques de le tuer un jour sous cette forme!... Et toi là, ta mère te conseille de rejoindre

le premier mari que ton père t'avait choisi. Sans quoi, point d'espoir de devenir mère un jour!... Et toi là-bas, ta fille m'a confié un remède pour toi, ta maladie cesse d'être incurable.

Consulté, écouté et cru comme le sont généralement tous les «redresseurs du mauvais sort»,²³ Bekamba se vit constamment entouré des siens, et, avec le temps, auréolé d'une popularité sans pareille. Le bruit de son nom ne tarda pas à courir loin, bien loin de Mangata. Les habitants des villages voisins et ceux des villages lointains; ceux d'outre-Mbam²⁴ et ceux d'outre-Sanaga, tous y accoururent fébrilement, comme vers le berceau d'un messie nouveau-né. Puis ils s'en retournaient satisfaits. Car ils recevaient, celui-ci quelque avertissement bénéfique, celui-là une recette médicinale, et ce troisième un gris-gris protecteur...²⁵

Bientôt, un problème se posa. Il fallait abriter cette foule qui affluait, qui affluait sans arrêt. D'abord on ébaucha en hâte des hangars un peu partout dans la cour du village. Ensuite, pour les patients plus souffrants ou venus de très loin, on construisit une grande case en quelques jours.

Tout au début, Bekamba généreux à sa façon, n'exigeait de ses clients que le devoir de l'écouter, de suivre minutieusement ses ordonnances. Deux semaines

plus tard, il demanda une somme de cinq francs,²⁶ d'abord timidement, ensuite franchement. Enfin, encouragé par quelques succès, il n'hésita plus à percevoir des honoraires plus importants.

Quelques succès? Et comment!... Oui, il y en eut, puisque des bestioles horribles sortaient des ventres; puisque des rhumatismes hargneux se taisaient dans les articulations; puisque des grossesses impossibles se signalaient; puisque, enfin, tous les coeurs se sentaient vraiment renaître sous le soleil des vivants auprès du bon revenant de Mangata!...

Pour lui, des malades incurables n'existaient point, même parmi la tourbe patiente des aveugles et des paralytiques! Cependant, les opérations qu'il avait prescrites pour les tirer d'affaire se révélèrent si compliquées qu'elles ne purent jamais avoir lieu. Il fallait, par exemple, se procurer des «excréments de foudre», du musc de civette, du cerveau de léopard, de la graisse de crocodile, des os de chimpanzé...

Un vaste fleuve populaire n'arrêta plus de couler vers Mangata. Progressivement le petit village quitta sa sombre robe rustique pour s'endimancher, du matin au soir, de tous les fastes d'une foire et d'un lieu de pèlerinage. D'une foire où tous les prix avaient libre cours; d'un lieu de pèlerinage où tous les cultes

étaient permis.

On y voyait des musulmans dans leurs amples gandouras,²⁷ assis sur des peaux de mouton sacrées et qui, les yeux tournés vers la Mecque, murmuraient d'une voix mystérieuse des versets du Coran, en se cognant pieusement le front contre le sol...

On y voyait des protestants armés d'exemplaires de la Bible, et qui, les yeux mystérieusement levés vers l'infini, braillaient des cantiques par intervalles, de toutes leurs cordes vocales...

On y voyait des catholiques qui envahissaient tous les coins par leur nombre et qui, les yeux dévotement dirigés vers une statuette installée sous un hangar, psalmodiaient d'interminables chapelets, entrecoupés de chants. Ils invoquaient Maria, ils louaient Maria, ils imploraient Maria!... Pas n'importe quelle Maria! Mais «Maria la sainte vierge mère de Yesus», mais «Maria la sainte vierge fille des Yuden», mais «Maria la sainte vierge épouse de Yoseph, le vieux charpentier de Nazareth...».

A vrai dire, la cacophonie qui s'élevait de ce babel de voix était exemplaire. Et devant ce mélomélo de croyants de religions si différentes, l'on ne savait plus de quoi il retournait. Car tous, ils attendaient leur salut temporel d'un homme qui n'était

ni marabout, ni pasteur, ni curé; mais qui se disait avoir séjourné, pendant six lunes, au pays des fantômes.

Et Bekamba, submergé par cette mer humaine soumise à sa dévotion était devenu important, invisible, illustre... comme tous les grands personnages de la terre.

Après cinq mois de ce commerce cocasse, non seulement il s'était enrichi, mais encore il passait pour le plus riche paysan de la localité. Son troupeau de moutons et son poulailler croissaient à vue d'oeil. Chaque jour, ses poches s'engraissaient d'importantes sommes d'argent.

Et les femmes donc? Eh bien, Bekamba le revenant n'en eut que l'embarras du choix.

Est-il besoin de vous apprendre que les femmes sont les personnes au monde les plus soucieuses de leur bonheur? Allez à n'importe quel établissement de santé, vous y rencontrerez des femmes, nombreuses et envahissantes! Pénétrez dans n'importe quelle «maison de Dieu», vous y trouverez des femmes, nombreuses et envahissantes! Hasardez enfin vos pas sous le cagibi d'un sorcier,²⁸ vous y tomberez sans faute sur des femmes, nombreuses et envahissantes!... Et puis, dites-moi, quelle femme, même dotée de la meilleure santé du monde, ne bercerait-elle pas son «petit mal» à elle? Il n'y en a pas. Et elle vous remuerait tout un ciel et toute une terre pour s'en débarrasser, pour rester vierge de toute indisposition physique ou morale. C'est que les

femmes sont les personnes au monde les plus soucieuses de leur bonheur!...

Donc, aveuglément confiantes, des femmes et des femmes arrivaient à Mangata pour devenir heureuses. Elles arrivaient par petits groupes et par longues files. Elles arrivaient des villages voisins et des villages lointains; des villages d'outre-Mbam et des villages d'outre-Sanaga, avec des yeux presque éplorés, angoissés, grand ouverts.

Mais chacune d'elles tenait à être la mieux servie. Aussi bien ne manquèrent-elles pas d'offrir à tous les regards des scènes tragi-comiques. Les plus inquiètes, les plus impatientes et les plus nerveuses, montrèrent sans tarder de quel bois elles se chauffaient. Elles n'eurent crainte de profaner les prières publiques, et partout, on cria au scandale, on cria au sacrilège.

Tantôt on les entendait s'arroser copieusement d'injures et d'imprécations. Tantôt on les voyait se bousculer dans la foule, échanger des coups de poings, se faire des croc-en-jambes ou mordre la poussière, ou se déchirer fièrement les robes et les caleçons. Elles se disputaient non seulement la médecine de Bekamba; mais aussi ses petits sourires, mais aussi ses regards éloquents, mais aussi — oh là là... son grand lit métallique qu'il venait d'acheter. Le premier souci qui les animait toutes, semble-t-il, était de mettre fin à

cette maladie tranquille qui donne le plus d'insomnie à toutes les femmes noires: la stérilité.

L'évènement était d'importance, et toute la région s'en trouvait secouée. Il ne pouvait pas ne pas attirer les regards vigilants des autorités administratives. Elles sont là pour veiller au maintien de l'ordre social. Elles sont là pour protéger les plus faibles contre les plus forts, mais aussi les plus idiots contre les plus malins de la population. C'est pourquoi un beau matin, Bekamba pénétra dans les locaux du Poste de Gendarmerie de Ntui, suivi de loin en loin par ses nombreux admirateurs. Il était porteur, non plus d'importants messages, mais d'une petite, d'une toute petite convocation.

Son arrivée fut saluée par des hochements de tête, par des regards curieux, par des index pointés vers lui, et par des voix qui chuchotaient, qui chuchotaient respectueusement: «Le voilà, le revenant de Mangata».

Tout cela rendait Bekamba fier, de cette fierté qui confère à la tête le droit de tenir ferme sur les deux épaules.

Quoi? Etre fier dans un poste de Gendarmerie?...

Eh oui, pourquoi pas, surtout quand on porte le titre tabou de «revenant»? Pensez donc!... Avec tout le tumulte que son nom avait soulevé, avec tout le prestige dont il jouissait, Bekamba savait qu'il ne pouvait être invité en ces lieux qui donnent les frissons, que pour rendre l'un de ses services prodigieux qui faisaient de lui l'homme du jour.

«Monsieur le Commandant de Brigade,²⁹ se disait-il, se trouve certainement dans un sale pétrin. Ces fonctionnaires, ils ont chacun un cancer intime. Avec eux, je doublerai mes honoraires: ils ont de l'argent à revendre».

Bekamba fut introduit dans une pièce spacieuse où flottait comme un fluide de majesté brutale. Dans tous les coins dormaient tels des criminels vaincus, des flèches, des coutelas, des matchettes, des gourdins, des lances et des fusils de chasse, sur lesquels veillaient de petites étiquettes.

Le commandant de brigade était installé derrière un bureau encombré de dossiers et de carnets. Comme s'il n'avait vu entrer personne il ne se dérangea point. Il n'arrêta pas de parapher, d'un même geste attentif, diverses pièces étalées devant lui. Soudain, après avoir remis rapidement tous ses dossiers en ordre, il leva la tête et planta dans le regard malicieux de

Bekamba son regard rude et imposant. Puis, d'un geste de main négligé, il lui assigna une chaise.

En s'asseyant, Bekamba se sourit à lui-même. Sourire clément et protecteur de tous ceux qui se savent nantis d'immenses pouvoirs. Il entend son coeur galoper d'impatience comme un cheval lancé vers un pays merveilleux.

Tout à coup la porte s'ouvre et plusieurs fonctionnaires font leur entrée, avec des regards tour à tour méfiants, étonnés et furibonds. Le commandant pose une question. En réponse, Bekamba parle d'une voix ferme, avec l'assurance d'un mage infailible. Toutes les oreilles l'écoutent et aucune bouche ne le dément. Et parce qu'il se croit écouté avec intérêt, Bekamba se soucie peu des contradictions naïves dont il émaille son histoire «queue-de-chat».³⁰ A la fin, ce ne sont que sourires narquois, que regards sceptiques qui l'accueillent alentour.

Bekamba sourit lui aussi, béatement. Jusquelà, il ne s'est guère gêné. Mais bientôt un frisson glacé lui grignote les nerfs. Un gendarme vient de faire irruption. Non pas un gendarme-fantôme, mais un vrai gendarme, homme celui-là, armé d'une cravache bien portante! Il se met au garde-à-vous dans l'attitude d'un subordonné qui attend les ordres de son chef.

Bekamba, le revenant de Mangata, n'y comprend plus rien. Rien du tout, surtout quand un frémissement lui parcourt le dos et que, s'étant levé brusquement, le commandant le somme de se lever à son tour, de s'étendre à plat ventre sur le sol cimenté. Dire que Bekamba Adzi, fils de Adzi Manga n'a pas sué sang et eau ce jour-là, ce serait mentir. Un éclair horrible traverse ses yeux écarquillés dans une perpétuelle interrogation. Alors il commence à réaliser entre quelles mains il se trouve désormais.

Oh, les mauvais quarts d'heure ne conviennent vraiment pas à toutes les gueules! Devinez comment s'est transformée celle de Bekamba Adzi, fils d'Adzi Manga, le prestigieux revenant de Mangata. Son visage s'anime de tics, de grimaces et de rides, indignes d'un homme illustre. Ses lèvres, tantôt s'allongent, tantôt se rétrécissent hideusement comme celles d'un gorille bavant de terreur.

— Qu'y a-t-il, qu'y a-t-il donc Monsieur le Commandant?

— Il y a que tu dois mieux nous raconter tout ce que tu as vu au pays des fantômes! répondent les fonctionnaires en choeur en pouffant de rire.

— A plat ventre par terre, et vite! gronde le commandant.

Bientôt, de toutes les portes et fenêtres du poste de Gendarmerie fusent des abois de bête en détresse, ponctués de coups de cravache et d'énormes éclats de rire... Ce spectacle dure tant et si bien que n'en pouvant plus, notre Bekamba se résigne à supplier:

— Pardon, pardon, Monsieur le Commandant!
 Arrêtez, arrêtez, de grâce!... Je me méurs! Pardon!...
 Je vais vous expliquer, vous dire la vérité, toute la vérité ... Laissez-moi!...

On laisse Bekamba s'expliquer, et Bekamba raconte toute une autre histoire, la vraie.

Edongo Kounou et Bekamba Adzi avaient souvent eu des accrochages. Notamment au sujet d'une payse qui leur offrait son corps à tous les deux. Eh oui! certaines femmes aiment ça; dresser deux frères, deux amis, l'un contre l'autre, afin d'en rire toute leur vie!

Les anciens, soucieux de la tranquillité de la petite communauté, provoquèrent quelques conseils de famille. Cette discorde scandaleuse n'avait pas sa place entre deux branches d'un même arbre tribal. Suivant la procédure applicable en ce genre de conflit, on les fit boire publiquement un même gobelet de vin de

palme, en les faisant jurer de tout oublier. ils jurèrent de tout oublier; d'oublier surtout les charmes de cette femme de malheur.

Il fallait maintenant prouver qu'ils étaient réconciliés. Il fallait le prouver en se promenant ensemble comme autrefois; et comme autrefois, en allant ensemble à leurs occupations coutumières. La première fois qu'ils allèrent à la pêche, le poids de leurs querelles anciennes redevint, semble-t-il, assez lourd pour faire chavirer leur pirogue.

La furie des eaux grondait partout de façon implacable. Ils nagèrent, chacun de son côté. Ils nagèrent de toute l'agilité de leurs membres. Mais, plouf!... le courant emporta au loin Edongo Kounou.

Après bien des efforts, Bekamba mit pied sur une roche. Il s'y cramponna de tous les nerfs de ses orteils et de ses doigts. A la faveur de courtes accalmies, il se composa une meilleure position. Avec toutes les épaves qui flottaient à sa portée, il forma un appui de fortune qui lui permit de grimper à la branche d'un arbre à moitié noyé. De là, il héla, il héla jusqu'au soir dans l'espoir d'un secours. Mais personne ne lui répondit. De justesse, il parvint à une branche supérieure de l'arbre. C'est là qu'il passa la nuit; une nuit blanche et glacée, toute bourdonnante.

de moustiques...

Au petit jour, tout grelottant de froid, il reprit la lutte contre l'impétuosité des flots. Bon nageur, il plongea en direction d'une petite île perdue qui ne disparaît jamais entièrement, même à la saison des plus fortes crues de l'année. Il s'y était souvent rendu avec d'autres pêcheurs. Après deux heures de nage harassante, il parvint à la «petite terre promise».

Le rescapé y vécut sous une cabane, pêchant du poisson, s'empiffrant de poissons, et dormant seul, en bonne compagnie des moustiques. Six mois plus tard, au moment où les eaux se calment et se retirent, il choisit de sortir de ce minuscule Etat sauvage, il choisit d'en sortir, porteur d'une grande corbeille de poissons secs; et porteur aussi d'une histoire qu'il avait pêchée dans les eaux de son imagination craintive.

— Oui, j'avais peur, Monsieur le Commandant! avoua Bekamba en essuyant des larmes rares. J'avais bien peur qu'on ne m'accusât d'avoir noyé mon cousin Edongo Kounou, avec qui j'avais souvent eu des relations épineuses... J'avais peur d'être traduit, en conséquence, devant une cour de justice pour un crime que je n'avais pas commis.

— Et toutes ces richesses que tu escroques à la population? questionna le commandant.

Après avoir laissé entendre un rire tonitruant,
Bekamba, le bon revenant de Mangata s'écria:

-- Ooh, Monsieur le Commandant! Ainsi que
vous devez le savoir, la vie appartient aux débrouillards!...

THE GHOST OF MANGATA

The small village of Mangata slumbered peacefully, lulled by the distant moan of the Sanaga.¹ A sepulchral silence hung over the huts.² All fires were out³ and there was no sign of life indoors.

The compound⁴ was enveloped by such foreboding darkness that even the animals seemed to be afraid of making any noise. At another⁴ time the slightest rustling of leaves in a harmless breeze would have driven the dogs mad. Now there was such a sinister feeling in the air that they stayed still, uttering only a timid bark and going back to sleep. They lay like faithful guards in the doorway of the huts, with their ears pricked.

Suddenly, the silence was broken by an outburst of yaps, grunts and growls. The sheep and pigs ran around in circles making a lot of noise. The dogs briskly jumped up, facing a particular hut, and disturbed the tranquillity of the tiny village with their chorus of loud barking.

It was no longer possible to sleep with such an explosion of sound. The animal sounds were accompanied by an unusual noise. Someone was knocking at old Adzi Manga's door. He was knocking so insistently

that the dogs were driven even madder. Despite all this noise, however, no one answered the door, and everybody knew why.

Although the authorities at Ntui⁵ had preached about the solidarity that villagers ought to have among themselves and the hospitality that ought to be shown to all those who travel by night, such hospitality had unfortunately met with unpleasant results at times. So the people of Mangata now knew how to handle such a situation.

The most notorious case of abuse of hospitality was that of a traveller from Congo. After spending the night at Ateba Awata's house, he had involved the latter in a gold smuggling scandal. The innocent Ateba had been sentenced - unjustifiably - to three months in prison. Since then the people of Mangata knew what to do in a similar situation. They had each sworn to act as deaf as a doorknob should anyone come knocking at their door late at night.

Meanwhile, the stranger continued raining blows on the fragile door made of bark, and, as he did so, he shouted persistently: «It's me, Bekamba. It's me, in person! Let me in! Father, even you can't recognize my voice? Oh, dear me!»

On hearing these screams, everyone listened

attentively. They tried to make out the inflections of the hoarse, grating, muffled and gasping voice. No one living in Mangata spoke like that. It sounded, rather, like a sick man who had just regained the use of his voice after a long coma.

Adzi Manga was panic-stricken; at first he thought he was experiencing a nightmare. Although the sound of his breathing was imperceptible, it seemed so loud to his ears that he was scared and held his breath every now and again. His heartbeat frightened him too; it sounded to him like the beat of a bamboula. With teeth clenched, he struggled to keep his bamboo bed silent and still — it was a bed that tended to creak at the slightest movement.

As the saying goes, calamity does not befall everyone at the same time; each of us has his day. Yesterday it was Ateba Ewata's turn, as well as that of many others; today it was his turn... Adzi Manga could not keep himself from trembling all over with a terrible fear. He had learned that some ghosts take on human form at night and come to harm the living. It is advisable in such cases never to answer them. To make sure he did not answer, he kept his lips tightly sealed. In his opinion, whoever it was that was shouting «Father, Father» could only be a malicious ghost, or a wicked adept of some cult, a sorcerer... My God! Who could

be calling him «father» when everyone knew what had happened to his only son?... Which Bekamba could it be, anyway, he wondered. There were at least ten people by that name in his tribe,⁶ anyone of whom could be bringing him an important message!....

He knew Bekamba Edongo, Bekamba Nyimi and Bekamba Atanga, all of them his cousins. He also knew Bekamba Ombedé and Bekamba Manga, who were his nephews, and Bekamba Alima and Bekamba Abouna, his cousin-Ovoundi's nephews. There was also old Bekamba Koungou, his maternal uncle, who was house-bound by chronic rheumatism. Finally, he knew Bekamba Okali, who was the grandson of one of his brothers; but he had a job at Nkongsamba.⁷ Even if he had been granted a leave, he would have written to inform the family that he was coming. Besides, no boatman⁸ could be found at the Nachtingal ferry at such a late hour. So who could possibly have ferried him across the big river?...

After having mentally gone through the list of those bearing the name of Bekamba — and as an elder of the village, he should know them all — the only other Bekamba that came to mind brought sinister, sad and painful memories.

They were cousins of the same age. They had gone fishing and no one had seen them returning to the village the following day. Had they dared to spend the night on one of the many tiny islands scattered in the terribly turbulent Sanaga river? No! Surely not! During the September rains, the waters rise so high and are so rough that even the most expert fishermen do not dare to go there at night.

Men who had been sent out at dawn to look for them returned at nightfall very worried. They had called in every direction, but no human voice⁹ had answered them! The only sign of human life was a canoe partly thrust into a rock cavity.

This evidence led people to believe that the cousins might well have drowned. This was confirmed two days later by the discovery of a decaying body ten kilometers downstream. After many other fruitless search efforts everyone was convinced that the second body had been devoured by a starving crocodile.¹⁰

Everybody in Mangata was struck with dismay at the outcome of the search. The two men were mourned for a period of one month. All day long and throughout the night the beating of the essani¹¹ drums added to the sadness caused by this double loss. Such a calamity was unprecedented and the wise men of the village had to

do something about it. Arrangements were made for appropriate rites designed to ward off any further tragedy to the village. Edongo Kounou was greatly mourned; and Adzi Manga, whose body was never found, was mourned even more.

And now, six months later, when everyone was beginning to forget the sad incident, someone came knocking insistently at Adzi Manga's door and shouting, «Father, please Father, let me in. It's me, Bekamba, your son, whom everyone believes to be dead...!»

It is shameful for any man worthy of the name to tremble endlessly with fear. Adzi Manga could no longer bear to let his old muscles go on trembling the way they were. Mustering all his courage, he got up. «You only die once,» he said to himself. Still, he called out to his neighbours, who all got up, determined, despite their fear to see a ghost for the first time in their life. Some of them came out carrying burning brands and torches, their eyes heavy with sleep and bulging with fright. In no time, all the people of Mangata were standing around the stranger.

The man was about forty years old. He was stripped to the waist and all that concealed his private parts were the tattered remnants of a fishing net knotted around his waist. On the ground before

him lay a large basket that gave off the smell of smoked fish. As each spectator raised his light high to see him better, the stranger called him by his name, adding, «Hey! So even you cannot recognize me?...»

Well, how on earth can anyone easily recognize a relative whom everyone has believed to be dead for six whole months, and whom the whole tribe has mourned? Oh, my God! No one had ever seen or heard of anything remotely like Bekamba's resurrection after six whole months!

The man before them looked worn out. All this time he had been leaning on a long cane. He suddenly slumped to the ground on the narrow veranda of the hut. He lay there for about fifteen minutes, silent and looking dreamy. Then, in a hoarse, grating, muffled and gasping voice, he said, "It's really me! Bekamba Adzi Manga, in person. I was dead; my brother Edongo Kounou and I drowned together. Do you need to be reminded of that? All the noise made night and day during our funeral rites could be heard even in the land of the dead. When we got there, we were shut up in a dark cave. A woman fed us daily, like a bird feeds its young. But our stomachs weren't large enough to hold all the food she gave us. Our meals consisted invariably of fresh fish and tapioca in water.¹² That is all ghosts live on. How fortunate they are!»

«After nine days and nine nights, a ghost gendarme¹³ opened the heavy stone doors of the mysterious prison and let us out. Never in my life have I seen, nor will I ever see, such a crowd — not in Yaounde,¹⁴ or Douala,¹⁵ or anywhere else. And what a strange-looking crowd it was! The people milling around were all white, from head to toe. Even their eyes were as white as a full moon... In the land of the dead, there are no black people, or red people, or albinos, or metis. Everybody is white, whiter than any of the white men you have seen... Their large, white huts stretched to the horizon. They looked like mountains of flour. Groups of ghost kids played about in the white dust of the courtyard with harmless buffalos, elephants, crocodiles, panthers and lions!...»

«In the land of the dead every day is filled with fun, but every day is also very busy. Everyone who is strong enough works hard to provide for this huge community, in which true harmony reigns. Work is organized in such a way that no one gets tired. The air is filled with continuous soft music which wells up from invisible mvets,¹⁶ balafons,¹⁷ tambourines and algaïtas¹⁸!...»

«We were then led before a large assembly of elders, who were as bald as a calabash. The chief of

the elders asked for our names, the names of our fathers and those of our grandfathers. As soon as we had finished stating our family tree, an old man sprung up from the corner where he was sitting, blurting out a war cry. It was our grandfather, Manga Kounou himself, whom we had the opportunity of seeing for the first time. As you all know, he died just a few days after we were born. Our venerable ancestor came over and embraced us. He was happy and proud to see his offspring again. When he had finished greeting us, he began to rage against the rest of the assembly. He wanted to know why the ghost gendarmes had arrested my brother Edongo Kounou and me, when we were merely out on a harmless fishing expedition. He insisted that it was not yet time for us to leave the world of the living. He thundered, in rage, against the others for taking pleasure in exterminating his descendants. He concluded by demanding that such unjustified arrests of his descendants cease immediately.»

«Our grandfather's intervention sparked off a long palaver. 'The Sanaga does not only devour fishermen from Mangata; it also devours fishermen from other tribes', several of them argued. 'They are all guilty of infraction of the laws of the Mother-Goddess of the great river. In defiance of her laws, they continue to fish in the Okundi bay, the very place where her Majesty's venerable residence is situated.

Greedy as they are, they don't bother to pay the taxes due to her on each year's first catch of fish...»

«But a few voices spoke in support of our worthy ancestor's arguments and they succeeded in having us returned to the world of the living.»

«Unfortunately, two days ago, as they were about to release us, they discovered that it was time for my brother Edongo Kounou to die. You can imagine how grieved I felt. I couldn't hold back my tears. But my sobbing only annoyed the ghost community. They certainly don't understand what sadness is! While you mourned our tragic death here on earth, they got mad instead. They don't understand why the living mourn the dead so much, when in fact, according to them, the dead are happier than the living. So, on seeing me cry, all the ghosts, including Manga Kounou, were infuriated. After giving me this basket of dry fish as provisions for the journey back, their ghost gendarmes horse-whipped me right to the banks of the great river.»

«My elders, brothers and sisters, you'll understand now why today I have returned alone without my brother Edongo. Although I have returned alone, I have been entrusted with important messages and vast powers. It is my ardent wish that the people of Mangata should be the first to benefit from them. After all,

there is truth in the saying that a charm¹⁹ is first and foremost the property of its owner's family.²⁰

So much the worse for you people if you refuse to take advantage of my gifts; you'll be the losers! Already, you don't want to recognize me, Bekamba Adzi Manga!... How many times did I knock at that door and yet no one would let me in? Sure enough, I was dead! Lord have mercy on me! But let me repeat that you'll be the losers if you don't listen to me...».

One moment Bekamba spoke in a tearful voice and the next in a threatening voice. The villagers, grouped around him although a good distance away from him, were all eyes and all ears. They asked apprehensively, «But why is he speaking with such a sharp tongue to his own people?»

To tell you the truth, it was not easy to recognize Bekamba Adzi, Adzi Manga's only son. His wide open, terribly stupefied eyes could not stay fixed on any one person for long. His movements were awkward, as if the «kong» spell²¹ had been cast upon him. His skin was as tough and as hard as bricks that had been baked for six whole months. It really was almost impossible to recognize him! However, there were a few special and indelible marks by which all his relatives could identify him, as Bekamba Adzi.

Gradually doubt gave way to belief. They were no longer put off by that red skin which made him look like an albino, those claw-like toes with long nails, that extremely upturned nose, and that face covered with moles. Edging closer to him, each of them examined him carefully with wide open eyes and outstretched neck. And if someone recognized a bump or a scar on any part of his body, he would point at it from a distance, declaring aloud, «It's really him, it's Bekamba Adzi, the only son of Adzi Manga!».

It should be noted that in remote areas of our country there are many weird stories in circulation, and there are always people to believe them. It is therefore not surprising that the people of Mangata came to believe the cock-and-bull story about the land of ghosts. Now they had only one fear. They were afraid that the ghosts, attracted by someone just back from ghostland, would snatch Bekamba Adzi Manga away again. To prevent such an eventuality the elders decided upon a course of action, and the same night Bekamba Adzi's body was covered with incisions and he was exorcised extensively. This was followed by magnificent celebrations, which made everyone forget a good deal of the pain caused by the deaths six months earlier.

It was not long before Bekamba started transmitting his important messages and putting his immense powers to use.

Every day his old father's tiny hut was bursting. Each person in the village came to see him, either to inquire after a dead relative, or to seek advice on some personal problem. Bekamba claimed with the utmost seriousness that he had actually seen with his own eyes in ghostland everybody who had died in the tribe, even his great-great-grandfather. He said, for example, to one person, «I saw your father, and he isn't pleased with the way you treated his widows. He blames you for sending them away instead of letting them stay with you in order to keep his memory alive».²² To another he declared, «Your twin brother forbids you henceforth to go crocodile hunting because you might kill him if he appeared in the form of a crocodile!... To yet another he announced, «Your mother advises you to go back to the man your father chose for you. If you don't, there isn't any hope of your ever bearing any children!... To someone else, he proclaimed, «I have a remedy for you from your daughter; your chronic disease can now be cured».

Everyone consulted, listened to, and believed Bekamba, in the same way as they do all those who ward off evil.²³ His help was constantly sought by people

from his village and soon he was enjoying unprecedented popularity. It was not long before word about him spread far and wide, far beyond the village of Mangata. People from the neighbouring villages and beyond, including those beyond the Mbam²⁴ and the Sanaga, all rushed to see him as if he were a new-born Messiah. They all went home satisfied, taking back with them either a useful warning of some kind, or a prescription, or a protective amulet²⁵, or some other remedy.

Soon, there was a problem of providing shelter for this ever-swelling crowd. At first hastily-constructed shelters were set up all over the village courtyard. Later on a large hut was rapidly built for patients in serious condition and for those from distant villages.

At first Bekamba was generous in his own way. All he required of his patients was their undivided attention, and total compliance with his instructions. Two weeks later he asked for a fee of five francs²⁶, at first timidly, then in a bolder manner. Finally, encouraged by a few successes, he went on to exact higher fees.

Success he certainly had, since horrible creatures were exorcised from people's stomachs, serious cases of rheumatism were cured, and sterile women got

pregnant! At last there was a ray of sunshine in the lives of those people in the world of the living who came and sought help from the Ghost of Mangata!...

As far as he was concerned, there were no patients who couldn't be cured of their disease; even the hordes of blind people and paralytics could be healed. But the treatment he prescribed was so complicated that no one ever succeeded in following it, for it required such elements as «thunder excrement», civet cat musk, leopard brain, crocodile fat, and chimpanzee bones.

There was a continuous flow of people to Mangata, and gradually the tiny village was transformed from a rustic place into a magnificent market place where the most exorbitant prices were charged and into a place of pilgrimage where people were at liberty to practise any religion.

There were Moslems there in their large gandouras,²⁷ crouching on their sacred goatskins and, with their faces turned towards Mecca, reverently touching their foreheads to the ground muttering verses from the Koran in a mysterious voice! There were Protestants there, armed with their Bibles, singing hymns at the top of their voices, with their eyes raised mysteriously towards the heavens! And there were Catholics there, filling the place with their large

numbers. They had their eyes riveted devoutly on a miniature statue set up in a shed. Their endless rosaries were punctuated by songs as they invoked, praised and implored Mary again and again. It was not just any Mary! It was «Mary the holy virgin and mother of Jesus», «Mary the holy virgin and daughter of Yuden», «Mary the holy virgin, the wife of Joseph, the old carpenter of Nazareth, ...».

The clamour that rose from this Babel was unequalled. The jumble of worshipers made it difficult to understand what was going on. They were all expecting salvation in this world from a man who was neither a marabout, nor a pastor, nor a priest, but a man who claimed to have sojourned in the land of the dead for six months.

Engulfed by this overwhelming crowd that worshipped him, Bekamba had become important, inaccessible and renowned, just like any important personality on earth...

After five months of carrying on with his bizarre business, not only did he become rich, but he was considered the wealthiest man in the area. His herd of sheep and his flock of poultry were expanding visibly, and large sums of money flowed into his pockets everyday. As for women, Bekamba had only too many to choose from.

You do not need to be told that, of all people on earth, women are the most concerned about their well-being. Go to any health centre, to any religious institution, or even to some medicine-man's hut,²⁸ and you will find women there in overwhelmingly large numbers! What is more, all women, even those in excellent health, nurse some petty ailment. And they will move heaven and earth to get rid of it so as to remain pure, untouched by any physical or moral blemish! This, of course, is explained by the fact that women, of all people on earth, are the most concerned about their well being!...

With blind confidence, therefore, women flocked to Mangata to find happiness. They came in small groups and in long files; they came from neighbouring villages and from distant villages, including those beyond the Mbam and the Sanaga rivers; and they came in tears, distressed and expectant.

And, since each of them expected special attention, there were many tragi-comic scenes staged in public. The most restless, the most impatient and the most irritable among them did not wait long to start showing what stuff they were made of. They had no scruples about profaning public prayers and they were accused of causing scandals and committing sacrilege everywhere. They were constantly cursing profusely and

calling each other bad names. Or else they were pushing each other in the crowd, exchanging blows, tripping each other over, falling in the dust and savagely tearing each other's dresses and underpants. They vied not only for Bekamba's attention as a doctor, but also for his attention as a man — for his smiles, for his significant looks, and for the pleasure of sharing the iron bed which he had just bought! Apparently, what motivated them all was the desire to get rid of that mysterious scourge of all African women — infertility.

What was going on in Mangata was significant enough to cause repercussions in the entire region, and this attracted the attention of the vigilant authorities. It is their duty to maintain order, to protect the helpless from the tyrants, as well as the naïve from the cunning. One morning, therefore, Bekamba was seen walking into the Ntui gendarme station, with his fans trailing behind him. This time he was carrying, not important messages, but a very insignificant summons.

x
x

Bekamba was greeted by nods, curious looks, fingers pointing at him and respectful murmurs which seemed to say, «That's him; that's the Ghost of Mangata». This made him proud, so proud that he was able to hold his head high. Can you imagine anyone exhibiting his pride in a gendarme station, of all places?...

Certainly, if that person bears the taboo title of

«Ghost»!

With all the furor generated by his name and all the prestige he enjoyed, Bekamba was sure that he had been invited to this place that gives people the creeps for no other reason than to have him render one of those extraordinary services that had made him so famous.

«The commandant²⁹ must be in a fine mess», Bekamba thought to himself. «Every civil servant has a deep-rooted personal problem. They have money and to spare, so I'll charge them double», he said to himself.

He was shown into a spacious room where an atmosphere of solemnity and brutality reigned. Lying in every corner, like vanquished criminals, were arrows, cutlasses, machettes, clubs, spears and shortguns, and they all bore small labels.

Behind a desk crowded with files and writing pads sat the Commandant. He sat still, as if he had not noticed anyone entering the room. With unbroken concentration he continued signing the papers before him. After he had finished putting them in order, he suddenly looked up at Bekamba, returning the latter's malicious look with a hard and solemn one. Then he waved Bekamba casually to a chair.

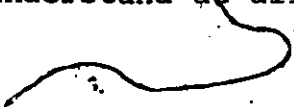
As Bekamba sat down, he smiled to himself. It

was the compassionate and patronising smile of those who know they are gifted with tremendous powers. He could hear his heart galoping with impatience, like a horse racing towards a wonderful country.

The door suddenly swung open and several civil servants walked in with expressions of suspicion, astonishment and indignation on their faces. In answer to a question which the Commandant asked him, Bekamba spoke firmly with all the confidence of an infallible magus. Everybody listened attentively and no one contradicted his story. So, thinking his audience was completely taken in by what he was recounting, he did not watch what he said, and his tall story³⁰ was full of naive contradictions. When he had finished, there were quizzical smiles and sceptical looks on the faces of his listeners.

Bekamba smiled too — complacently. Up to this point, he had felt at ease. But soon a cold shiver ran through him when a gendarme burst into the room. This time it was not a ghost gendarme, but a real one, armed with a solid crop; who snapped to attention in the manner of a subordinate officer waiting for his superior's orders.

Bekamba the Ghost was totally confused; he did not understand at all what was going on. When the



Commandant suddenly stood up and told him to get up and lie face down on the cement floor, a shiver ran down his spine. To tell the truth, Bekamba Adzi, son of Adzi Manga sweated blood that day. A terribly startled look appeared in his wide-open, eternally questioning eyes and it started to dawn on him that he was now in a very difficult situation.

Unfortunately, not everyone can face up to such situations - certainly not Bekamba Adzi, son of Adzi Manga, the renowned Ghost of Mangata! His face was contorted by twitches, wrinkles and grimaces, in a manner unworthy of a distinguished personality like him. He pushed out his lips and then pulled them back, making hideous faces like a gorilla seized with panic.

«What is it you want, Commandant?» he cried.

«We want you to tell us the truth about what you saw in the land of the dead!», the civil servants replied in a chorus, as they burst out laughing.

«Down on your stomach, quickly!», ordered the Commandant.

Soon, through all the windows and doors of the gendarme station, you could hear Bekamba screaming like an animal in pain. These screams were punctuated by the sound of lashing and loud outbursts of laughter. This went on for so long and got so hard for our dear friend to bear, that he gave in and began to plead.

«Please, Commandant, please! Stop, for heaven's sake, stop!... I'm dying, please stop!... I'll explain, I'll tell you the truth, everything... Please, stop beating me!...»

They let him explain and Bekamba told a completely different story, this time narrating what had actually happened.

* * *

Between Edongo Kounou and Bekamba Adzi there had often been friction, especially over a wench from the same village, who gave herself to both of them. Some women enjoy setting two brothers or friends against each other and then sitting back and laughing over the consequences!

The elders of the village were concerned about maintaining peace in the little community and they convened a number of meetings of the family council. It was not right for such scandalous conflict to exist between two families of the same tribe. According to the established procedure for resolving such conflicts, the two brothers were made to drink palm wine from the same cup in front of everybody. They were made to swear that they would forget all bones of contention, including the beauty of this ill-fated woman...

Next, they had to prove that they had reconciled. To do this, they had to go about together as before, both for work and for leisure activities. The very first time they went fishing, the weight of their past disagreements was so heavy that their canoe capsized.

The water was extremely turbulent. They swam in different directions. They swam as well as their limbs would allow. But Edongo Kounou could not make it: the current carried him away.

After a lot of struggling, Bekamba landed on a rock to which he clung as firmly as his toes and fingers allowed. Taking advantage of brief moments when the water was calmer, he found himself a better position. Using the debris floating around him he succeeded in climbing on to the branch of a tree half-submerged in the river. He stayed in that position till evening, calling at the top of his voice for help which he hoped would come, but no one answered him. Just before the branch went down he succeeded in getting to a higher one. This was where he spent a cold and sleepless night, with mosquitoes buzzing all around him...

At daybreak, shivering with cold, Bekamba, who, was a good swimmer, faced the relentless current again.

He made for a tiny island which is known never to be completely submerged, even when the waters are at

their highest level. He had been there several times with other fishermen. After two hours of difficult swimming, he got to the «tiny promised land».

Our survivor lived here in a shack, fishing, eating nothing but fish, and sleeping alone with mosquitoes as his only companions. Six months later, when the flood had subsided and the current was no longer strong, he decided to leave this tiny primitive country. He left carrying a large basket of dry fish; he also brought with him a story that he had drawn from the depths of his fear-dominated imagination.

«You see, Commandant, I was afraid. I feared I would be accused of drowning my cousin Edongo Kounou, since I didn't get along well with him... I was afraid of being accused of a crime I hadn't committed».

Bekamba confessed, wiping away the few tears in his eyes.

«What about all the money you have been swindling from the people?» the Commandant asked.

Bekamba, the Ghost of Mangata, laughed loudly and then exclaimed: «But, Commandant, you know as well as I do that the world belongs to those who are smart!...».

LA ROUTE DES AMANTS MAUDITS

Il est certainement devenu banal de dire que chez nous, en Afrique Noire, personne ne meurt de mort naturelle. En effet, qu'il s'agisse d'un accident ou d'une maladie décelable à l'oeil nu, l'oeil plus voyant des «hommes-à-quatre-z-yeux»³¹ découvrira toujours le ou les assassins occultes!...³²

C'est justement ce qui se passa à la mort du vieux Belinga Mvondo, grand planteur du grand village d'Essam, caché là-bas au coeur d'une savane de Nanga-Eboko.³³

Tout le ciel et toute la terre avaient bien vu Belinga Mvondo traîner sa hernie comme un sac de trésor. Elle était de celles qu'on ne peut plus emprisonner au fond d'un caleçon, ni dissimuler dans les replis bouffants d'un ample pagne. Non! La hernie de Belinga Mvondo était, disait-on, aussi vieille que sa première épouse Avouzoa. Elle était devenue un véritable phénomène social qui l'avait rendu célèbre autant que ses richesses. Les petits enfants en avaient peur, les plus pleurnicheurs devenaient sages quand on leur faisait croire qu'ils allaient y être enfermés sans retour. Les grandes personnes, elles, la considéraient avec étonnement et respect; elles chuchotaient même que c'est en contrepartie de cette hernie monstrueuse

que les Dieux avaient comblé Belinga Mvondo de tant de fortune.

De bonne heure, Avouzoa lui avait bien conseillé de se rendre à l'hôpital d'Efok ou d'Enongal. Mais Belinga Mvondo ne voulait rien entendre. Il objectait qu'avant l'arrivée des hommes blancs, ce n'était pas là maladie à tourmenter les coeurs! Car quelques racines de plantes, quelques oignons et quelques fruits sauvages grignotés à longueur de journée, suffisent à neutraliser le «mal de noblesse»! La voix des hommes ayant toujours force de loi dans la société traditionnelle, Avouzoa s'était tue sagement. Elle savait que la vie conjugale impose parfois des répugnances... Pour elle, c'en était bien une, cette hernie se développant tranquillement entre les jambes de son maître après Dieu.

D'ailleurs avec le temps Belinga Mvondo prouva qu'il n'y a de maladie répugnante que sur un homme pauvre. Il épousa une deuxième femme, puis une troisième, puis une quatrième puis... au bout de trente ans environ, sa concession vaste d'une dizaine de cases-cuisines,³⁴ s'enorgueillissait joyusement de dix-sept co-épouses qui se supplantaient successivement à la faveur de leur date d'arrivée, de leur jeunesse et de leur beauté...

En fait de beauté, il faut avouer qu'Assomo, la dernière venue, était ce qu'on appelle une jeune et

belle femme. Armée de ses charmes juvéniles, elle conquiert littéralement le cœur du vieux hernieux. C'est elle, désormais, qui séjournait sous l'abâa³⁵ aux côtés du mari commun. C'est elle qui lui chargeait la pipe! C'est encore elle qui lui servait à boire et à manger!... passe encore tout cela. Mais là où le bât blessait le plus, c'est que les «tours de lit» n'étaient plus respectés. La favorite devenait ainsi l'élue d'un cœur qui appartenait à parts égales à seize autres femmes. Non, ça n'allait vraiment pas!...

Assomo étant demeurée seule à chanter et à rire de joie, le harem de Belinga Mvondo sombra dans une atmosphère de deuil. Les autres femmes parlaient à peine, chantaient à peine, et riaient encore moins. Un martyre commun les minait toutes et les unissait désormais dans une étroite fraternité. Naturellement, murées dans leur amertume et leur rancune, elles bougonnaient à longueur de journée. Elles ne pouvaient que bougonner entre elles, pareilles à un peuple mécontent mais désarmé, qui se résigne, l'oeil triste, à mijoter un coup d'état impossible. La coutume était la coutume. Elle était là pour mâter les premières manifestations d'une révolte de femmes.

Elles eurent bientôt recours à de petits trucs magiques, destinés à détourner le cœur de Belinga Mvondo. Les unes servirent des mets truffés de hachures

de chiendent.³⁶ Les autres, au plus fort de la nuit, enterrèrent des balais éculés dans la cour. Et les autres enfin, cachèrent discrètement sous le lit du mari commun, quelques moustaches et griffes de fauve!... Il y en eut même qui pensèrent à un empoisonnement qu'elles avaient l'intention de coller au dos de l'innocente Assomo. Oui! à un empoisonnement! Que personne n'élève aucun doute à ce sujet. Elles sont capables de tout, les femmes mal aimées.

Elles y pensaient encore lorsqu'une nuit, elles entendent une voix éplorée vriller le silence de la concession déjà plongée dans le sommeil. Elles se réveillent, elles écoutent un moment, puis croyant que le vieil homme inflige quelque correction à sa favorite, elles veulent se rendormir... Mais non, les lamentations d'Assomo ne laissent planer aucun doute... Elles écoutent mieux, elles se décident enfin à se lever, à sortir... Bientôt, comme dans un rite, elles font chorus à leur plus jeune co-épouse,³⁷ en se disant bien dans leur for intérieur: «bon débarras».

Belinga Mvondo qui les avait toujours considérées comme des épouses de second ordre, voire inexistantes, les plaquait là, toutes, sans exception, pour un voyage solitaire et sans retour.

Quoi qu'il en soit, elles pleurèrent à chaudes

larmes; elles pleurèrent aux abois; elles pleurèrent en se roulant par terre, les cheveux en bataille dans des gestes affolés... Cruel trompe-l'oeil qui n'a qu'un but: prévenir et atténuer ces cancans et ces tortures qui accompagnent toujours le rite de l'akus.³⁸ Elles pleurèrent donc toutes laborieusement, déversant sur le cadavre de Belinga Mvondo toutes les larmes de crocodile de leurs yeux. Elles pleurèrent et s'acquittèrent merveilleusement de ce devoir de pleurer qui, suivant les nobles coutumes de chez nous, veut que la femme pleure sur le cadavre de son mari, aux abois, en se roulant par terre, les cheveux en bataille, dans des gestes affolés...

Le mort enterré, se tint la solennelle palabre qui clôture habituellement les obsèques d'un grand personnage.

En cette journée de la grande saison sèche, le soleil brille de sa plus belle colère de feu. Il arme les orateurs d'une verve et d'une nervosité peu communes: «Comment se fait-il que Belinga Mvondo, fils de Mvondo Kuma, suspende la cuillère si prématurément; si prématurément avec toutes ses dents dans la bouche et une tête à moitié chauve seulement? Comment se fait-il, hein? N'est-ce pas là un véritable prodige? A-t-on jamais vu pareil événement depuis que la terre est terre?»

A ces questions classiques et fort embarrassantes posées par les porte-parole des allogènes, répondent les porte-parole de la tribu d'Essam. Il y a des explications, des éclaircissements et des mises au point. On parle de la naissance de Belinga Mvondo et de ses jeux d'enfant. On parle de l'adolescence de Belinga Mvondo et de sa majorité. On parle de l'esprit d'entreprise et du courage qui permirent à Belinga Mvondo de gravir l'échelle sociale, jusqu'à la célébrité. On parle de ses plantations³⁹ de cacaoyers, de ses troupeaux de bestiaux, de son harem qui faisait honneur à toute la tribu d'Essam. On parle de tout et de tout, sauf de cette énorme hernie qui, pendant plus de trente ans, s'est développée tranquillement entre les jambes de Belinga Mvondo.

Et les porte-parole d'Essam, à bout de souffle, en viennent à conclure d'une voix pathétique et douloureuse: «Que faire, fils-de-nos-pères quand le malheur a élu domicile sur la tête d'un peuple»!

Des conciliabules succèdent à des conciliabules. A la fin, on laisse la parole à un homme qui attire l'attention publique, autant par ses paroles que par son accoutrement richement paré de plumes rouges et tout bruyant de coquillages d'escargot:

— Non, ne perdons pas notre temps ici

inutilement! commence-t-il sur un ton de réprimande. J'ai consulté mon ngam;⁴⁰ et comme vous le savez tous, mon ngam est infallible!. Et tous, autant que vous êtes ici, sachez que Belinga Mvondo, fils de Mvondo Kuma était déjà mort bien avant qu'il ne le fût réellement aujourd'hui! Imaginez une tige de maïs au milieu des ronces et des sissongo.⁴¹ Où avez-vous vu une tige de maïs vivre longtemps au milieu des ronces et des sissongo? Où l'avez-vous vu? dites-moi. Et sachez que si Belinga Mvondo n'avait pas été un homme vraiment de sexe mâle, il y a longtemps qu'il aurait suspendu sa cuiller.

Cet orateur vénérable, pour qui seul tous les yeux et toutes les oreilles se sont ouverts, s'interrompt soudain et regagne sa place. Vous pensez qu'il en a terminé? Eh bien, non! Après avoir grignoté force tranches de kola, avalé force gorgées de vin de palme et fumé force pipes, il se lève à nouveau et reprend la parole en ses termes:

- Ne nous faites pas perdre de temps, dis-je. Belinga Mvondo aimait sa plus jeune épouse comme on aime un gris-gris.⁴² Belinga Mvondo aimait le fils-de-sa-soeur comme on aime un membre de son corps. Belinga Mvondo se croyait aimé de ceux qu'il aimait!... Et alors? Pourquoi vouloir perdre notre temps inutilement ici? Ah, pauvre Belinga, victime de son coeur débordant

d'amour pour les siens!...

Des murmures éloquents courent parmi l'assistance, puis des regards ahuris, à la recherche de la jeune épouse et du fils-de-la-soeur de Belinga Mvondo. Ce sont eux, et non l'énorme hernie, qui ont causé la mort «prématurée» du défunt. Le ngam étant infailible, il ne peut en être autrement.

Les deux accusés ne tardent pas à réaliser le sort qui les attend. Ils vont être mis à l'index par toute la population. Et quoi encore? Hélas, on ne sait jamais de quoi la coutume de chez nous est capable pour punir les coupables.

La jeune épouse de Belinga Mvondo explose en sanglots indignés. Elle proteste de son innocence, pleurant aux abois, se roulant par terre. Cependant, personne ne la prend au sérieux. Tout le monde sait qu'elle joue la comédie. De son côté, le fils de la soeur de Belinga Mvondo fait irruption dans la cour. Il va et vient en vociférant un flot de paroles inconsistantes; il réclame sur le champ l'épreuve de l'élonn.⁴³

— Oui, qu'on me donne vite à boire de l'élonn; et les Dieux feront connaître si c'est moi Zibi Mendomo, fils de Mendomo Mvondo, l'auteur de la mort prématurée de mon nyandomo⁴⁴ Belinga Mvondo, de mon nyandomo qui m'aimait tant, que j'aimais tant!

Des protestations et des éclats de rire moqueurs se font entendre partout. Zibi Mendomo non plus n'est pas pris au sérieux. On ne voit en lui qu'un mauvais plaisant qui joue, lui aussi, la comédie. L'homme du ngam se lève encore et, dans un rire impitoyable, il déclare :

— Haaa!... Bien malins, ces petits bambins d'aujourd'hui! il ose réclamer l'élohn, Zibi Mendomo, parce qu'il sait que les autorités administratives de Nanga-Eboko en ont formellement interdit la pratique, sous peine d'emprisonnements et d'amendes!... Tombe des morts! Les petits morveux de son espèce ne se moquaient pas si impunément des hommes et des Dieux quand la terre était terre. Mais ce n'est qu'aux hommes blancs que nous devons nous en prendre, car ce sont eux qui ont mis ainsi notre pays à l'envers.

Un grand recueillement s'abat sur l'assistance à ces mots. Le ciel est bas et l'atmosphère surchauffée. La chaleur tape dru sur les nerfs et fait transpirer à flots. On dirait que les Dieux vont faire tomber la boule de feu sur la terre. Mais tout à coup, une étrange masse d'ombres se forme dans l'espace et l'astre du jour ne devient qu'un oeil de lumière, qui disparaît complètement.

Alors, l'homme du ngam⁴⁵ se redresse brusquement de sa chaise longue. S'adressant à la population sidérée

par l'inexplicable phénomène, il clame d'une voix forte et fatidique:

— Et voilà, ne l'ai-je pas bien prédit tout à l'heure? Une grande calamité pèse sur le peuple d'Essam. Vous pleurez aujourd'hui Belinga Mvondo; savez-vous, hommes sans expérience, combien de morts il vous reste à pleurer? Lisez vous-mêmes la colère des dieux dans le ciel...

Et tous les yeux effarouchés se lèvent, pour lire la colère des Dieux dans le ciel qu'assombrit une éclipse de soleil.

— Le seul moyen de la conjurer, cette calamité, c'est d'éloigner d'ici sans tarder Zibi et sa complice Assomo. Sans tarder, dis-je, sans quoi...

Sur ces entrefaites, une meute de jeunes gens furieux se rue sur Zibi et Assomo, et les chasse, à grands coups de bâtons et de pierres, à plus de trois kilomètres du village d'Essam.

Zibi Mendo s'engouffre dans un sentier peu fréquenté, ne sachant où il va le conduire. Il s'arrête tout suffoquant. Il lui faut trouver un refuge; mais où? Suivre la route carrossable et traverser les villages? Impossible. Partout, la même hostilité l'attend; et de

partout, il se verrait chassé. Les tam-tams d'Essam n'arrêtent pas de répandre dans l'espace la sinistre nouvelle:

le ciel en colère, les dieux en colère
 un malheur, un grand malheur
 pèse sur le peuple d'Essam
 un neveu ingrat et une épouse infidèle
 ont fait suspendre la cuiller
 au fils de Mvondo Kuma
 oh prodige!
 les voilà chassés, les voilà chassés
 ils arrivent et point d'hospitalité
 pour ces deux amants de malheur...

Zibi écoute les tam-tams charrier ces vociférations venimeuses, tandis que le ciel, en colère, s'assombrit davantage. Tout un peuple de nuages hideux à même la chevelure hideuse des arbres. Une nuit subite où ne perce le regard rassurant d'aucune étoile. Prenant conscience du désastre, les oiseaux ont prudemment tu leurs gazouillis laborieux. Pas même le hululement téméraire d'un hibou. Le moindre buisson semble cacher un gouffre gorgé de monstres muets, qui imposent le silence aux êtres.

Tout pantelant d'émotions, Zibi se tient debout. Il se demande, perplexe, ce qu'il convient de faire. Depuis sa naissance, il n'a jamais vu mourir si

brusquement le soleil en plein jour, pour donner naissance à une nuit quasi miraculeuse. Il a grandi au village d'Essam et n'en est jamais sorti. Son enfance, choyée par son oncle maternel, n'a été troublée que d'une seule année scolaire. Le plus grand planteur du grand village d'Essam n'avait pas longtemps admis que la chicotte du moniteur égratignât continuellement la tendre peau bronzée de son neveu bien-aimé.

Zibi pense à la fin du monde. N'avait-il pas appris, en effet, de la bouche d'un pasteur, que Dieu détruirait un jour la terre? Mais il n'était nullement dit que ce serait lui, Zibi Mendomo, qui la provoquerait, cette fin du monde! Il n'était nullement dit que ce serait à cause de son amour pour la plus jeune épouse de son nyandomo, amour, qui, du reste, n'était qu'une fredaine d'adolescent et bien admissible par la coutume! Quel homme n'a-t-il pas le droit de courir après la femme de son nyandomo?

La tête enflée de toutes ces réflexions bouleversantes, il sent pour la première fois la présence d'Assomo à ses côtés. Elle est toute grelottante de peur, la jeune veuve. Les bras croisés sur la poitrine, elle se tient contre lui, pareille à une agnelle qui cherche une chaude protection sous le ventre de la mère-brebis. A son tour, il se met à grelotter. Une angoisse et une terreur communes les étreignent

sans merci. En ces instants critiques, leur amour perd tout son sel et prend un goût de metet.⁴⁶ Zibi s'affale sur un tronc d'arbre mort. Assomo aussi.

Longtemps, pendant bien longtemps, il garde la tête dans ses mains, les yeux cloués au sol tapissé de ténèbres. Il plonge une sonde invisible dans les profondeurs de son existence. Pour les beaux yeux d'une femme, il se voit précipiter dans la détresse. Son nyandomo, qui n'avait point d'enfant de sexe mâle, ne cachait point ses dernières volontés. Une vaste cacaoyère, des troupeaux de bestiaux, un harem de dix-sept femmes, un immense prestige! Perdre tout cela pour les beaux yeux d'une femme. Quel malheur! L'amour joue parfois de ces mauvais tours aux amoureux!

Mais qui s'empêcherait de perdre la tête en vivant tous les jours à côté d'une belle femme? Du reste, ne pourrait-on pas dire que c'est Belinga Mvondo lui-même qui avait préparé sans le savoir le malheur de son neveu bien-aimé? Car cette imprudente habitude de manger tous les jours dans le même plat que sa jeune épouse et Zibi, n'était pas très recommandable. A force de la contempler, à force d'en avoir plein les yeux, Zibi ne pouvait se contenter de refouler indéfiniment ses élans amoureux. La patience, dit-on, a ses limites. Il en est de même du courage et de l'indifférence d'un honnête homme en face d'une belle femme. Oh, fatalité!

Deux regards bavards et pétillants d'envie réciproque, puis deux sourires entendus et complices, et voilà comment se prépare la plus grande révolution qui secoue les familles humaines: l'adultère.

Les co-épouses furent les premières à surprendre cet amour clandestin, à leur grande satisfaction.

D'abord elles murmurèrent entre elles en poussant — oh là là!, l'un de ces énormes éclats de rire qui font croire aux passants qu'un groupe de femmes noires vient d'accoucher de la huitième merveille du monde! Ensuite, trouvant là le plus sûr moyen de hâter la disgrâce de la jeune favorite, elles l'encouragèrent perfidement dans l'infidélité. Enfin, profitant de leurs rares «tours de lit», elles n'oublièrent pas de glisser à l'oreille du mari ces mots propres à révolter un cœur qui aime:

— Ta femme à toi, ta femme que tu adores comme Dieu, pour notre malheur, la voilà trimballée dans la boue et la poussière par ton fils bien-aimé, derrière nos cases, pareille à l'une de ces vieilles corbeilles que les enfants traînent pour s'amuser.

— Quoi?, Quelle femme? Quel fils? demandait furieusement Belinga Mvondo qui ne voulait pas en croire ses oreilles.

— Combien de femmes adores-tu, et combien de

fils aimés-tu, hein? rétorquaient-elles.

Belinga Mvondo ne se tint pas de jalousie. Au plus fort d'une nuit il demanda des explications à sa préférée.

Quelle femme aurait-elle assez de courage pour avouer son infidélité? Il n'y en a pas, quand bien même on la surprendrait, toute palpitante encore, sous le poids voluptueux d'un complice!

Assomo fut bien effrayée. Elle se troubla, elle se gratta le corps. Elle se répandit en protestations énergiques, elle jura sur toutes les tombes de sa tribu Yemvela, elle insulta copieusement ses co-épouses et elle fit admettre que seule, la jalousie était à l'origine de leur dénonciation «calomnieuse»!

Elle aurait voulu encore ouvrir la bouche, après une pause, pour parler, élever sa voix irritée, s'indigner à cette heure tardive de la nuit. Mais avec tendresse, une voix paternelle intervint:

— Ne te tracasse pas, Assomo bien-aimée! Je les connais toutes, mes autres épouses. Oui, elles sont jalouses de notre amour! Penses-tu que j'aie cru un seul instant à leurs petits commérages? Toi, l'amante de mon neveu, je m'en serais étonné!...

Pour ne pas donner raison aux soupçons du

maître, Assomo mit Zibi en garde... Dorénavant, les rendez-vous s'espacèrent. Ces périodes creuses, loin d'étouffer leur amour, l'aiguisèrent de plus belle. Dorénavant aussi, la jeune épouse fut torturée par l'insomnie. Elle ne parvint plus à fermer l'oeil de toute la nuit, près de ce corps boucané par les ans et sentant le pourri avec une hernie monstrueusement répugnante!... «Pourquoi ne fuyons-nous pas?» proposait-elle un jour. Les hommes, en amour, sont loin de faire preuve des mêmes audaces que les femmes. «Non, lui répondit Zibi en tremblant, mieux vaut attendre patiemment la mort de mon vieux nyandomo!». Il croyait ainsi éviter un scandale qui, hélas, finit par éclater malgré tout, et de la manière la plus brutale, et la plus inattendue.

* * *

Le soleil réapparaît peu à peu. Comme par enchantement. Un beau soleil rond et jaune, qui verse sur la nature un immense sourire de lumières rassurantes. Zibi et Assomo se regardent avec des yeux hébétés. Quelques minutes plus tard, la nuit descend barométriquement. La vraie nuit, protectrice des voleurs et des amants clandestins. Elle déploie sur la terre son voile de fraîcheur, de silence et de mystère.

— Que comptes-tu faire, Assomo, maintenant

que?... murmura le jeune homme sans regarder sa compagne de malheur.

— Et toi?

— Moi je m'en irai n'importe où! Mais l'ennui c'est que... c'est que force m'est de t'abandonner.

— Quoi? éclate la jeune veuve d'une voix altérée par la stupeur. M'abandonner, te séparer de moi? As-tu bien réfléchi avant de me cracher ça à la figure? Non Zibi, on n'assassine pas un cadavre. Or j'en suis un. Que t'ai-je fait, Zibi, pour m'assassiner une deuxième fois? Oh, vrai que les hommes ont un coeur de pierre!..

Le jeune homme écoute ces jérémiades, les lèvres serrées et le corps tout frissonnant. Il sent un poids mystérieux peser sur ses épaules, sur sa tête et sur son coeur. A la bouche des Anciens du village et des sorciers, il a toujours cru. Comment n'y plus croire maintenant. Tous l'ont maudit et il sait qu'un grand malheur plane désormais sur son existence. Ce n'est pas un ou deux habitants d'Essam qui l'ont maudit et chassé; mais tout un village, mais toute une tribu, mais toute une population... Se séparer d'Assomo, objet de son malheur. Oui, il le faut, afin de tenter d'alléger le poids d'une si accablante malédiction.

— Non, Assomo, je n'ai pas un coeur de pierre. Mais, vois-tu, il est devenu impossible pour nous de vivre ensemble désormais. Hanté par le fantôme de mon oncle, miné par un remords obsédant qui me brûle les entrailles, je ne puis...

— Si, nous pourrons! interrompit-elle sur un ton persuasif. Rien n'est impossible sur la route de ceux qui s'aiment. Dans quel pays veux-tu, Zibi, que j'aie me réfugier, maintenant que la colère des hommes et la colère des Dieux ont voulu que je t'appartiennne? Où irai-je, seule et sans toi? Ne me fais pas pleurer toute la vie, Zibi! Je pleurerais et sur le cadavre de Belinga Mvondo mon époux, et sur le cadavre de notre amour. Deux cadavres pour un faible coeur de femme, c'en serait trop.

Elle s'était mise à pleurer. Elle s'approcha davantage de Zibi et lui passa un bras autour du cou en répétant:

— Oserais-tu m'abandonner, Zibi! Que deviendrais-je sans toi? Par pitié... Par pitié...!

Des sanglots sourds soulevaient par intervalles sa petite poitrine; et ce mouvement imprimait sur celle de Zibi le frôlement de deux seins ivres d'amour et mal cachés par une robe réduite en lambeaux. Ce contact pourtant charmant donna des nausées au jeune homme.

Aussi, se leva-t-il brusquement en repoussant d'un geste de main énergique la jeune veuve. Celle-ci se leva elle aussi et marcha derrière lui. Alors, sous le regard témoin des oiseaux de nuit, tous deux s'enfoncèrent dans les broussailles tissées de ténèbres. Ils s'y enfoncèrent désespérément pour arriver n'importe où, s'avançant à tâtons et frayant au hasard leur route à eux: la route des amants maudits.

THE PATH OF CURSED LOVERS

It has certainly become a commonplace to say that here, in Black Africa, no one ever dies a natural death. And indeed, the extra-perceptive eyes of the «four-eyed-men»,³¹ will always unmask the assassin or assassins who have done away with a life through witchcraft,³² even if the death results from an accident or a disease easily discernible by the naked eye.

This was precisely what happened upon the death of old Belinga Mvondo, a renowned farmer from the renowned village of Essam, hidden in the heart of the grasslands of the Nanga-Eboko³³ area.

The whole world had clearly seen Belinga Mvondo dragging his hernia around like a big bag of treasure. It was one of those hernias that was so large it could no longer be concealed in briefs or in the loose folds of a large wrapper tied between the legs and knotted around the waist. Yes indeed! Belinga Mvondo's hernia was said to be as old as his eldest wife, Avouzoa. It had become a real social marvel, which was as responsible for his fame as was his wealth. Little children were afraid of it and the more peevish ones instantly stopped whimpering when they were told they would be shut up in Mvondo's big bag with no possibility of ever getting out again. As for the older people, they regarded it

with awe; and even whispered that it was as compensation for this dreadful hernia that the gods had showered Belinga Mvondo with so much wealth.

In the early stages of the disease, Avouzoa had advised him to go for treatment to the Ekok or Enongal hospital. But Belinga Mvondo would not heed such advice. He argued that, before the arrival of the white man, hernia was not a disease to worry about! After all, a few plant roots, a few onions and a few wild fruits, nibbled on throughout the day, were enough to get rid of this «disease of the aristocracy»! In this traditional society where men always had the final word, Avouzoa very wisely dropped the matter. She knew that, in her married life, a woman must sometimes put up with loathsome aspects in her husband ... For her, this hernia, which steadily grew between her lord's legs, was one of them.

However, as time went by, Belinga Mvondo proved that only poor people have loathsome diseases. He married a second wife, then a third, then a fourth, then ... after about thirty years, his large compound of ten kitchen-huts³⁴ boasted seventeen wives, all sharing the same husband, with each new wife, who was the youngest and the most beautiful, superseding the others as their husband's favorite...

. Assomo, the most recent wife, was certainly very young and radiant with beauty. Armed with her youthful attractions, she literally conquered the heart of her old and hernia-stricken husband. She was the one who lived henceforth with their husband in the «abâa»³⁵, the men's hut. She was the one who filled their husband's pipe with tobacco! She was the one who served him with food and drinks! ... All this might have been overlooked by the other women. But what upset them most was the fact that Belinga Mvondo no longer respected the right of his other wives to «share his bed» in turn. Assomo, the favorite wife, had become the sole object of his devotion - a devotion which sixteen other wives each had equal right to. Things were just not going well anymore! ...

Since Assomo was now the only happy wife in his compound, Belinga Mvondo's harem soon plunged into an atmosphere of mourning. The other wives hardly chatted anymore, scarcely sang, and laughed even less. They were all afflicted by a common anguish and this united them in a close bond of fraternity. Naturally, bitter and resentful as they were, they grumbled all day. But they could only grumble amongst themselves like discontented and unarmed subjects, who resign themselves dejectedly to nursing impossible schemes of rebellion. Tradition was tradition. It was designed

to crush any outbreak of rebellion by women.

They soon resorted to petty acts of witchcraft intended to turn Belinga Mvondo's attention away from Assomo. Some served him food stuffed with blades of couch grass.³⁶ Others, buried local broom stumps of palm fronds in the yard of the man's hut in the middle of the night. Still others discreetly hid whiskers and claws of wild cats under their husband's bed! ... Some of them even went as far as thinking of poisoning him and having the crime attributed to the innocent Assomo. Yes indeed, they actually thought of poisoning their husband! There is no doubt about it. A woman scorned is capable of anything.

They were still turning this possibility over in their minds when, one night, they heard a wailing voice pierce the silence of the sleeping compound. They woke up, listened for a moment, then, thinking the old man was probably chastising his favorite wife, decided to go back to sleep ... But it was evident from Assomo's wailing that the situation was more serious than they thought... They listened more attentively, finally decided to get up and came out of their huts... And soon, as if in a ritual, they began wailing along with their young co-mate,³⁷ while inwardly they said: «good riddance!». Belinga Mvondo, who had always considered them second-rate wives, not even worthy of

notice, had abandoned them one and all and gone off on a solitary journey from which he would never return.

Be that as it may, they wailed with tears streaming down their faces; they wailed making raucous sounds; they wailed rolling on the ground, their hair dishevelled by wild movements ... All this display of grief was nothing but heartless make-believe designed to attain one goal: avert and attenuate the scandal and torture that usually accompanied the «akus»³⁸ ritual. So, all of them wailed laboriously, shedding on Belinga Mvondo's corpse all the crocodile tears in their eyes. They thus performed admirably their duty of mourning which, in accordance with our noble customs, requires the bereaved wife to shed copious tears over her deceased husband's corpse, to wail making raucous sounds, and to wail rolling on the ground, with her hair dishevelled by wild movements ...

After the burial, there were the solemn deliberations normally held to mark the end of an important person's funeral.

It was our major dry season, and on that day the sun blazed wrathfully ^{down} on everyone. It imbued orators at the deliberations with unusual inspiration and vigour: «Why did Belinga Mvondo, son of Mvondo Kuma, draw his last breath at such an early age, when

all his teeth were still intact and his head only half bald? Why did he die before his time, eh? Isn't it really inexplicable? Who has ever heard of such a thing since the dawn of history?»

These fundamental and very perplexing questions asked by spokesmen of other tribes were answered by spokesmen for the Essam tribe who provided explanations and clarifications. They recounted Belinga Mvondo's birth and childhood. They recounted Belinga Mvondo's teenage years and his coming of age. They recounted how Belinga Mvondo's sense of enterprise and courage had enabled him to climb right to the top of the social ladder. They spoke of his cocoa farms,³⁹ his herd of livestock, and his harem, which was a credit to the entire Essam tribe. They spoke of all sorts of things, except the huge hernia which had slowly developed between Belinga Mvondo's legs over a period of more than thirty years. And finally the Essam tribe spokesmen, out of breath, concluded by saying in pathetic and mournful voices, «Oh, poor son of our forefathers, what can we do when misfortune has befallen our tribe?».

There was a whole series of confabulations. Finally, a man who attracted public attention, both by his words and his attire which was richly decked with red feathers and clattering snail shells, took the floor. «No. Let's not waste our time here for nothing!», he

began, in a reprimanding tone. «I have consulted my 'ngam'⁴⁰; and, as everyone of you knows, my 'ngam' is infallible! All of you present here should know that Belinga Mvondo, son of Mvondo Kuma, was already dead well before he actually passed away today! Imagine a maize plant in the midst of blackberry bushes and 'sissongo'⁴¹ bushes. Who amongst you has ever seen a maize plant survive long in the midst of blackberry bushes and 'sissongo' bushes? Who has ever seen such a thing happen? Tell me. Let me tell you that if Belinga Mvondo hadn't really been a man worthy of the name, he would have died long before now.»

This venerable speaker, on whom everyone had focussed their attention, suddenly interrupted his speech and went back to his seat. You would have thought he had finished speaking. Quite the contrary! After nibbling at many pieces of kola nut, after gulping down many mouthfuls of palm wine and after smoking many pipefuls of tobacco, he got up again and resumed his speech: «Let's not waste our time here for nothing, I repeat. Belinga Mvondo loved his youngest wife as much as one would love an amulet.⁴² He also loved his sister's son as much as one would love one's own flesh and blood. He believed they loved him too. And what did they do to him? Why do we go on wasting our time here for nothing? Poor Belinga fell victim to those he

loved so dearly».

These words led to eloquent murmurs from the crowd and, with dumbfounded expressions on their faces, their eyes searched in all directions for Belinga Mvondo's youngest wife and his sister's son. It was they and not the huge hernia that had killed the deceased «before his time». The 'ngam' was infallible and it had said they were the cause of his death.

The two accused quickly realized the fate that awaited them. The whole tribe would put them on the blacklist. And there could be even more serious repercussions, for it is unfortunately impossible to foresee the punishments that our local customs may impose on the guilty.

Belinga Mvondo's youngest wife burst into indignant sobs. Declaring she was innocent, she wailed making raucous sounds and rolling on the ground. But nobody took her seriously. Everyone knew she was simply putting on an act. Belinga Mvondo's sister's son, for his part, burst into the midst of the crowd and bawled out a series of incoherent words as he paced up and down; then he demanded the 'elonn' ritual there and then in order to prove his innocence. «Give me the 'elonn'⁴³ to drink right away», he cried out. «And the gods will prove to everybody that I, Zibi Mendo, son,

of Mendomo Mvondo, did not send my 'nyandomo'⁴⁴ to an early grave. How could I have done such a thing to my maternal uncle who loved me so dearly and whom I loved so dearly too?»

This only brought shouts of protest and outbursts of derisive laughter from the whole crowd. Zibi Mvondo was not taken any more than Assomo seriously. He was simply looked upon as an impudent fellow putting on an act in his turn. With a merciless laugh, the 'ngam' fortune-teller⁴⁵ got up again and said, «Ha! ha! ... The young today think they are very clever. Zibi Mendomo dares to ask for his innocence to be proved by the 'elonn' ritual because he knows that the Nanga-Eboko authorities have officially prohibited it. He knows full well that the penalty for anyone caught performing the 'elonn' is imprisonment and a fine. God forbid!... In the good old days brats of his kind did not make fun of us and the gods with such impunity. But then came the white men who upset all our customs and traditions and they are to blame for this unfortunate state of affairs.

At these words, the crowd became completely silent and pensive. The sky weighed down on them and the atmosphere was unbearably hot. The intense heat jarred everyone's nerves and made them sweat profusely. One would have thought the gods were about to drop the

fiery sun on the earth's surface. But suddenly, a strange mass of dark clouds appeared in the sky and the sun, transformed into a mere glowing dot, soon disappeared behind them. The crowd was completely flabbergasted by this strange phenomenon.

The 'ngam' fortune-teller, suddenly rising from his reclining chair, proclaimed in a loud and foreboding voice: «Now you see I was right. Didn't I warn you just a while ago? There is a great misfortune hanging over the Essam tribe. You are mourning Belinga Mvondo today. But do you, poor, simple folk, know how many more sons and daughters of Essam you will yet mourn before long? Take a look for yourselves at the sky and see the manifestation of the gods' anger.» In response, they all looked up, with scared expressions on their faces to witness the gods' anger in the sky, over which an eclipse of the sun had cast a dark shadow.

Then, the «ngam» fortune-teller went on, «The only way to avert this great misfortune is to banish Zibi and his accomplice Assomo from Essam without any further delay. Do it right away, I repeat, or else ...»

At this, a mob of angry young men flung themselves at Zibi and Assomo and, using clubs and stones, chased the two more than three kilometers away from Essam.

Zibi Mendozo rushed down an abandoned forest path, not knowing where it led. He felt so exhausted he could hardly breathe, so he halted. He knew he had to find refuge; but he didn't know where. He did not even know which direction to take. It was completely out of the question for him to follow the untarred road that ran through the different villages. The same fate awaited him everywhere. Everywhere he went, he would be treated with the same hostility and chased away. The Essam drums were relentlessly spreading their ominous message far and wide. Mercilessly they announced:

There is fury up in the sky, the gods are in a fury.

Misfortune, great misfortune hangs over the people of Essam.

An ungrateful nephew and an adulterous wife have caused our native son to die.

Oh, poor son of Mvondo Kuma!

Banished, from here

they find no shelter,

these evil lovers, source of our misfortune ...

As Zibi listened to the drums beating out this message filled with hatred, the angry sky darkened even further. Masses of menacing clouds descended over the menacing canopy of the forest, and all of a sudden there was total darkness everywhere. Not a single star

was visible. Realizing the impending disaster, the birds very wisely stopped their incessant chirping, and not even the daring hooting of the owl could be heard. Silent monsters seemed to lie hidden behind the smallest bush and impose silence on all. Perplexed and trembling with fright, Zibi remained standing, wondering what to do. He had never seen the sun disappear so suddenly in the day time giving way to this almost miraculous darkness — not once since the day he was born. Born and raised in Essam village, he had never left his native soil. The only interruption in his pampered childhood with his maternal uncle was when he attended school for one academic year. But Belinga Mvondo, the most renowned farmer in the renowned village of Essam, not wanting the tanned and tender skin of his beloved nephew to be bruised by the instructor's ever-lashing whip, had soon withdrawn him from school.

Zibi was convinced the world was coming to an end. After all, had he not heard a pastor say God would destroy the world one day? But the pastor had certainly not indicated that the person responsible for the destruction of the world would be Zibi Mvondo nor had he indicated that the reason for the destruction would be Zibi's love for his «nyandomo's» youngest wife? After all, was his love not a more adolescent escapade allowed by tradition? Didn't every man have the right to go after his «nyandomo's» wife?

While his mind was still very preoccupied with these rather disturbing thoughts, he suddenly felt

Assomo's presence beside him, for the first time. Trembling with fright and with her arms folded around herself, the young widow huddled against him like an ewe-lamb nestling under its mother in search of warmth and protection. This set him shivering in turn. They were both in the pitiless grip of terror and great distress. At that critical moment all the charm and sweetness of their love completely vanished and was replaced by a bitterness more bitter than the metet plant.⁴⁶ Then Zibi slumped down on a fallen tree trunk. Assomo did likewise.

For a very long time Zibi sat there in the darkness, holding his head in his hands, his eyes nailed to the ground. He took a long searching look at his life, examining every detail. He realized that he had ruined his life just for the sake of a woman's looks. He knew he would have inherited his maternal uncle's property. His uncle had no male child and made no secret about his intention to make his nephew his heir. The large cocoa farm, the large herd of livestock, the harem of seventeen wives and the unequalled prestige that crowned all this could all have been his. But now he had lost everything because he had fallen victim to a woman's good looks. What a tragedy! It's ironical the way love can sometimes play lovers nasty tricks.

But what normal man exposed everyday to the

charms of a beautiful woman wouldn't fall for her? In fact, wasn't it Belinga Mvondo himself who, unwittingly of course, had led his beloved nephew to such a pass? It was imprudent of him to have let his wife and his nephew Zibi take their meals together everyday. With her irresistible beauty constantly before him, Zibi could not carry on hiding his feelings for her. As the saying goes, patience has its limits. And so does the courage and indifference a virtuous man can show when exposed to the irresistible beauty of a woman. What a tragedy! Such affairs, which always start off with a mutual exchange of telling looks and smiles between the accomplices, culminate in adultery, that revolutionary act instrumental in splitting up families.

* * *

The other wives, to their great satisfaction, were the first to discover this clandestine love affair between the two culprits. At first they whispered about it amongst themselves; the whispers were punctuated by such peals of laughter that a passer-by would have thought this group of African women had just performed a miracle. Then, realizing that this affair offered them a golden opportunity to make their young co-mate fall out of favour with their husband, they perfidiously encouraged her to pursue her romance. And, on the rare occasions when they shared their husband's bed, they

whispered to him words that could not fail to shock him.

«Your own wife, the one whom, to our distress, you adore as if she were a goddess, is letting herself be dragged through the mud and dust behind our huts by your beloved son, just like those old cane baskets children drag about to play with».

Belinga Mvondo, infuriated and refusing to believe his ears would ask, «What are you talking about? Which woman and which son do you mean?» And they would retort, «How many women do you adore, and how many sons do you love, eh?»

One day, unable to contain his jealousy any longer, Belinga Mvondo questioned his favorite wife, right in the middle of the night, about the rumours he had been hearing. But then, which woman, even when caught in the act, would have the courage to admit her infidelity? Assomo was terribly frightened. She became agitated and started scratching herself. She protested strongly against the accusations, swearing that she was innocent by all the dead of Yemvela, her native tribe. She levelled a string of insults at her co-mates and made her husband admit it was because his other wives were jealous of her that they made up such hideous lies about her. After a short pause for breath she would have continued to express her anger and indignation in

a loud voice at that late hour, but her husband interrupted her saying very tenderly and in a paternal tone, «Stop worrying, my sweetheart! I know what my other wives are capable of. Yes, they are jealous of our love! Do you think I believed their gossip even for a moment? I know you couldn't possibly be my nephew's mistress».

In order to avoid confirming her husband's suspicions, Assomo warned Zibi ... Henceforth their rendez-vous were less frequent, but meeting each other less frequently only increased their désiré for each other. From then on, Assomo was tortured by sleepless nights. She found it impossible to fall asleep beside that aged, wrinkled body which exuded a rotten stench and which bore a hideous hernia. «Why don't we run away to some place where we can live together?», she asked Zibi one day. But since men are not anywhere near as daring in love as women, he replied trembling, «No, it is better to be patient and wait for my old maternal uncle to die.» He thought that this way he would avoid a scandal, but alas, the scandal erupted nevertheless and in the most abrupt and unexpected manner.

* * *

As if by magic, the sun gradually reappeared in the sky. It was a beautiful round yellow sun and it

shone radiant and reassuring over the earth. Bewildered, Zibi and Assomo looked at each other. A few minutes later, night started falling gradually. This time it was normal night, that night which haunts thieves and clandestine lovers. With it came a cool, calm and mysterious atmosphere.

«Assomo, what do you intend to do, now that ...?», the young man muttered without looking at his accomplice. «What about you?», she replied. «Oh, I'll go anywhere! But the problem is that ... that I will have to abandon you», said Zibi. «What are you talking about?», the young widow burst out in a voice full of disbelief. «You want to abandon me? Have you really thought the matter over carefully before springing it on me like that? No, Zibi, you can't do that to me. I am already a corpse and you know very well that you can't kill a person twice. Zibi, please, what wrong have I done you for you to kill me a second time? Oh my God, so it is true, then, that men have a heart of stone!...»

The young man listened to these lamentations with his lips pressed shut and his body shivering. He felt a strange burden weighing down his shoulders, his head and his heart. He had always believed in what the village elders and Medicine-men said, and he could not stop believing now. Now that all these people had cursed

him, he knew there was henceforth great misfortune hanging over him. It wasn't merely one or two Essam villagers who had cursed him and chased him away; it was the whole village, the whole tribe, the whole population ... He had to leave Assomo, the cause of his misfortune. Yes, it was necessary for him to do so in order to try to alleviate the burden of this overwhelming curse. So he said to her, «No Assomo, I do not have a heart of stone. But you see, it is henceforth impossible for us to live together. Haunted by my uncle's ghost, tortured by remorse eating away at my conscience, I don't think I can ...» «Sure we can!», she cut in persuasively, «There is no insurmountable obstacle in the path of two lovers. Zibi, please, where do you expect me to go, now that men's anger and the anger of the gods have placed me in your care? Where can I go alone without you? Zibi please, don't let me spend the rest of my life with a broken heart. Don't make me shed tears both over my husband's corpse and over that of our lost love. A weak heart like mine would not be able to bear the double sorrow.»

She had started crying. Moving closer to Zibi, she put her arm around his neck, saying, «Zibi, would you dare to abandon me? What would I do without you? Have mercy on me ... Please, have mercy....!»

As she sobbed her heart out, her bosom rose

and fell at regular intervals, and her breasts, exposed by her torn dress, brushed lewingly against Zibi's chest. But, repulsed by this display of love, the young man stood up abruptly and pushed away the young widow firmly. She, too, stood up and walked after him. Then, under the watchful eyes of night birds, the two of them penetrated into the dark forest. Desperately, they made their way deeper and deeper into the forest, groping, randomly making their own path - the path of cursed lovers - not caring where this path would eventually lead them.

NOTES

1. The Sanaga is one of the major rivers in Cameroon which runs through certain towns and villages of the Littoral and Centre-South provinces.

2. The word «case», as used in the African context, refers to a native dwelling as opposed to a Western one which is normally referred to as «maison» - a distinction which was probably made by French colonials during the colonial occupation, in order to distinguish between the native and Western types of houses. The term «case» is defined by the Petit Robert as «habitation sommaire dans les civilisations dites primitives» and is commonly used in works written in French (geography, history, anthropology, literature etc.) to designate the African dwelling. It is normally translated into English as «hut» (cf. Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary; Ferdinand Oyono, The Old Man and the Medal, Trans. John Reed (1969): «Engamba passait des journées dans la case à palabre» p. 55, rendered as «Engamba used to spend his day in the indaba hut»; and David Diop, «Ten Poems», in New African Literature and the Arts, 2 (New York: Apollo Editions, 1970), pp. 98-119, Trans. Paulette J. Trout and Ellen Conroy Kennedy: «Et la case de ta grand'mère» p. 106, rendered as «And your grandmother's hut» p. 107).

However, the word «hut» may not give the right idea to non-African English speakers, since it is defined in Webster's Third New International Dictionary as a «small temporary dwelling of simple construction». In Cameroon, most the the native dwellings are not only of a permanent nature but are large. The man's hut, for example, normally has two or three rooms: a central room where the man receives friends and guests, an adjacent room for sleeping and another for guests or for storing things. Some of the richer men's hut even have verandahs (i.e. roofed extensions attached to the exterior of the building and used for sitting out of doors). The wife's hut is similar to that of the man, but may or may not have partitions. It serves as a kitchen as well as a living and eating area for the woman and her children. The translation of «case» as «hut», thus, often fails to convey the permanent nature and size of traditional African dwellings. However, given the fact that the African concept of «case» (native dwelling as opposed to Western dwelling) does not exist in Western cultures, it is difficult to find an exact equivalent in English. And since the tradition of rendering «case» by «hut» is well-established in both literary and anthropological works, I have chosen to continue that tradition.

The problem of finding exact equivalents to designate native constructions resurfaces when the author (Philombe) uses the terms «hangars» (p. 19), «cagibi» (p. 22) and «cabane» (p. 28) to refer to other types of African buildings.

A «hangar» is a large temporary construction roofed with mats or woven palm fronds, whose walls are covered with mats, bamboo or wood and whose whole structure is propped by poles. This type of construction, normally put up to house large numbers of people at a wedding, a funeral ceremony or any other traditional feast lasting several weeks or months, is destroyed at the end of the occasion for which it was constructed. «Hangar», in the context in which it is used in the stories, refers clearly to temporary housing («D'abord on ébaucha en hâte des hangars un peu partout dans la cour du village», p. 19), i.e. the type of construction described above. I have therefore rendered «hangar» by the term «shelter», (cf. Webster's Third New International Dictionary: shelter = temporary housing), which is an adequate equivalent, even though it does not cover the entire reality presented by «hangar».

However, the term «shelter» is also listed in Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary as one of the English equivalents for «cagibi» (the other English equivalent presented is «hut»). But a «cagibi»

is very different in both function and construction from a «hangar» or a «case». A «cagibi» is a small construction (house) which is either built against a larger house or in an isolated spot. It is of a semi-permanent nature and is used by medicine-men for consultations and for concocting herbs used for medical purposes. Generally, it is not used as a dwelling. Since «cagibi» is obviously not temporary housing as is «hangar», this eliminates «shelter» as a suitable English equivalent. On the other hand, since «hut» (the other English equivalent proposed in Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary) has already been used to render «case», this complicates the issue. However, since there is really no one term in English to convey the type of construction designated by the term «cagibi» and since this reality would require a lengthy explanation difficult to integrate within the translation, I have decided to use the word «hut», however approximate an idea it gives of the reality in the translation, and provide a more precise description of it in this note.

Finally, Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary again proposes the terms «hut» and «shanty» as the English equivalents for «cabane», another type of hut found in certain farming and fishing areas in Cameroon. In the rural areas in Cameroon, some crops

are considered to grow well only in certain valleys or hills far away from the villages. Similarly, fishing is considered abundant in those portions of the river far away from the villages. Usually, these farming and fishing areas are situated so far away that farmers and fishermen prefer to stay there for a few days or weeks and do all their farming and fishing once and for all for the season, in order to avoid commuting daily between the village and the farms or fishing areas.

Small roughly constructed and often crudely furnished houses are therefore built in these areas to serve as temporary residences during farming, harvesting and fishing seasons. However, even though these houses serve only as temporary residences, they are often built of durable material and last several years. I have translated «cabane» as «shack», a term that seems to adequately designate the type of house described above (cf. Webster's Third New International Dictionary:

shack = a small, roughly built and often crudely furnished house).

3. Most villages in Cameroon do not have electricity, and while a few houses are lighted by hurricane lamps, the majority of them are still lighted by fires glowing in hearths. Burning brands and torches are also used, but only to prepare food or to go from one house or village to another, after which they are put out. So

ordinarily, light filtering into the yards and village compound comes from fires in fireplaces. The villagers usually put out these fires before going to sleep.

In a village setting, therefore, it is normal to talk of fires, instead of lights, being lit or put out in houses (huts). To preserve local colour and also convey this reality, I have rendered the sentence «Tous feux éteints, elles ne laissaient filtrer aucun signe de vie» by «All, fires were out and there was no sign of life indoors».

4. The word «cour» in traditional Cameroonian society designates any open space between huts - whether the group of huts belongs to different families and constitutes a village or whether it is comprised of a polygamist's hut surrounded by those of his wives. However, the term «cour» can be used to designate different types of open spaces between the huts. 1) The huts are normally built close to each other and in two rows facing each other. There is a stretch of open space between the rows, in the middle of which is a road. This open space between the rows is sometimes designated as «cour». 2) The open space between the two rows being quite large, there is a yard in front of each hut, where flowers and vegetables may be planted. These individual yards, which may or may not be surrounded by hedges, are also designated as «cour».

3) At one end of the rows is the hut of the village chief or the head of the polygamous family, in front of which is an open space containing a drum used for transmitting messages, which is also called «cour».

4) Towards the center of the rows but nearer the chief's hut which is at one end of the rows, is a «palaver hut» used for deliberations, meetings, dispute, arbitration etc., in front of which there is an open space which belongs to the whole village and not to any particular individual. This is also termed a «cour».

When the author first uses «cour» in the first story, in «Dans la cour envahie de ténèbres hideuses, les animaux domestiques semblaient avoir peur de faire du bruit», «cour» refers jointly to the individual yards in front of each hut, the open space between the rows used as a road, the area in front of the chief's hut, and the area in front of the palaver hut. In other words, the author is describing the atmosphere in all the open spaces in the village and not just a specific open space. I have thus rendered «cour» in this context by «village compound» with the word «compound» intended to convey the idea of all open space in the village.

At another point in the story, when the author says, «D'abord on ébaucha en-hâte des hangars un peu partout dans la cour du village» (p. 20), the «cour», this time, refers specifically to the area in front of

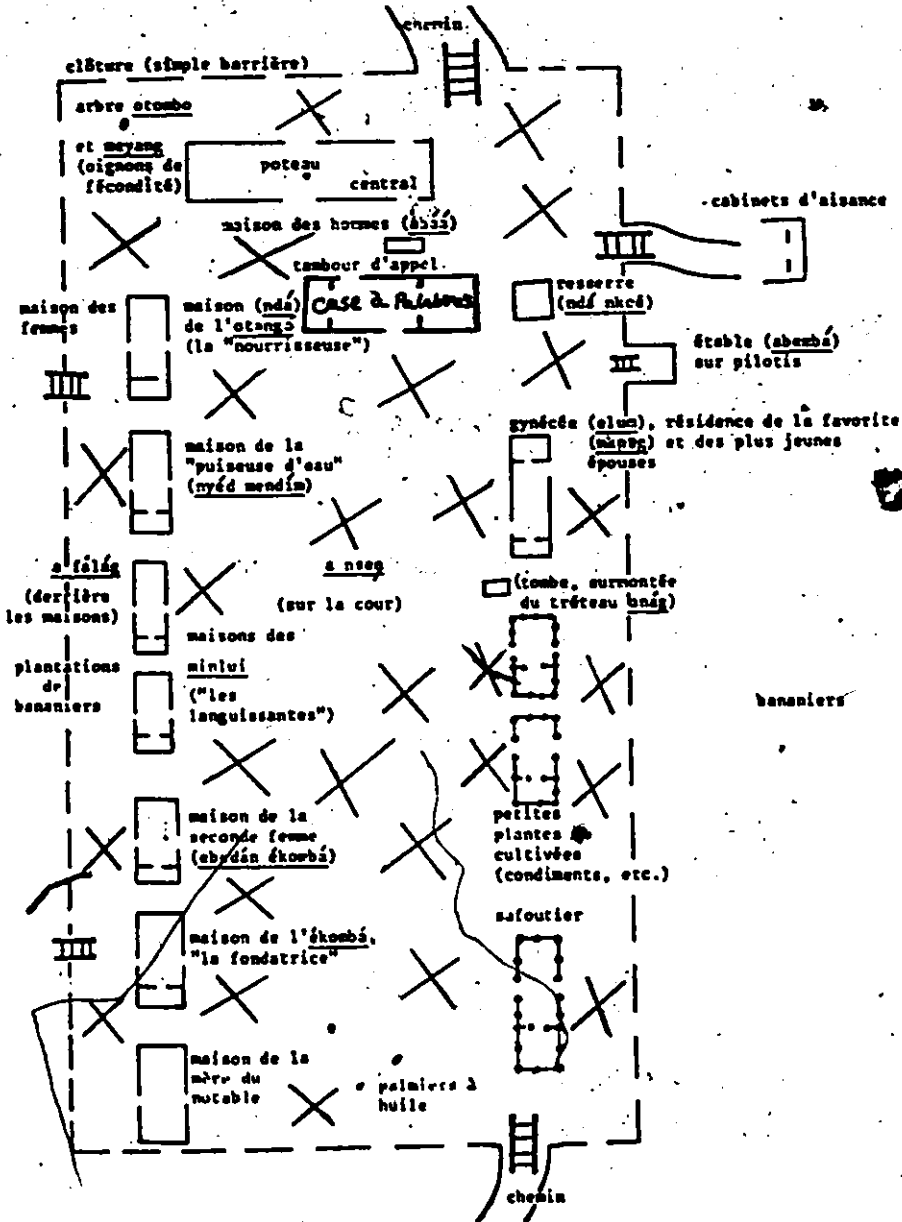
the palaver hut which belongs to the whole village and to no particular individual. This can be deduced from the fact that it is unlikely that the shelters were constructed on the road (thereby blocking it), or in individual yards (in which case, flowers and vegetables would have been destroyed), or in the limited space in front of the chief's hut (for many shelters were constructed). To convey the idea of a specific, but neutral location belonging to no one individual, I have rendered «cour du village» by «village courtyard», with the word «courtyard» being narrower in meaning than «compound».

The word «cour» occurs in yet another sense in the second story, where some of the main character's co-wives resort to acts of witchcraft to influence their husband's love. The author says, «Les autres, au plus fort de la nuit, enterrèrent des balais éculés dans la cour» (p. 31). In this situation, we are obviously in a polygamous compound, and since the magical acts are aimed at the head of the polygamous family, it is logical to assume that the broom stumps were buried in the area in front of the man's hut or the women's huts and not on the road (i.e. in the middle of the rows). However, since according to traditional practices, broom stumps meant to bring harm to someone must be planted close to the person for whom the harm is intended,

it is obviously in the area in front of the man's hut that the broom stumps were planted in this case. So what the word «cour» designates here is the individual space in front of the man's hut. Since the word «yard» is used in North America to designate individual gardens, that is the term I have used to render «cour» in this context. But to indicate more precisely to Western readers the location of the «cour», which would be obvious to Cameroonians, I have made «yard» more specific in this case by adding «of the man's hut».

Presented below is a layout of a typical grouping of huts in Cameroon, with all the areas considered «cour» clearly indicated.

LAYOUT OF A TYPICAL GROUPING OF HUTS IN CAMEROON



Reconstitution d'un village de notable bâti au sud du Nyong, vers le fin du XIX^e siècle

X = all areas considered «cour»

The above diagram is a reproduction, though with a slight modification, of the one presented by Philippe Toïra in Les Seigneurs de la forêt (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1981) p. 257.

5. One of Cameroon's administrative districts, situated in the Central South province (cf. chapter on background information).
6. The tribe is made up of more than one village (cf. chapter on background information: relationship between family, village and tribe).
7. Cameroonian urban centre (cf. chapter on background information).
8. The Nachtigal ferry is a powered boat that transports both vehicles and pedestrians across the Sanaga river. And yet, strangely enough, the author uses «pagayeur» in the context of the Nachtigal ferry. This could perhaps be explained by the fact that, at this point in the story, we are in an internal frame: old Adzi Manga's thoughts and fears are being verbalized by the author. It is therefore possible that the Nachtigal ferry has been presented by Philombe from the point of view of old Adzi Manga who, having probably never left his native village and being familiar only with small canoes used by fishermen on a portion of the Sanaga in his area, might imagine the Nachtigal ferry to be a sort of bigger fishing canoe handled by a paddler. If this were the case, the author's use of «pagayeur» could be considered justifiable.

However, since in ordinary English usage «paddler» is rather specific (cf. Webster's Third New International Dictionary: 1. one that paddles, 2. paddle steamer), and its use in the context of the stories would have likely misled the reader, I have rendered «pagayeur» by the generic word «boatman». Apart from eliminating any possibility of confusion, this modulation (i.e. the generic for the specific or the whole for the part - cf. Vinay and Darbelnet, Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais, #75-76), certainly conveys the general reality adequately - that of a man in charge of a boat.

9. Even though speech is characteristic of humans, it is necessary in this context to qualify «voice» by «human» (both in the original as well as in the translation), given that in traditional society people believe in ghosts who can speak (cf. chapter on background information).

10. The author seems to use the terms «crocodile» (p. 20) and «caiman» (p. 10) interchangeably to refer to the same referent. While it is a fact that both crocodiles and caimans are carnivorous aquatic reptiles belonging to the order Crocodylia, they belong to different genera, the former to the genus *Crocodylus*, the latter to the genus *Caiman*. Crocodiles may be distinguished from other crocodylians by the shape of

the snout which, being long and triangular, is intermediate between the long narrow snout of the gavial and the short, oval snout of the alligator. «Caïman» is the name given to the five species of tropical American alligators, which differ from the typical alligators in that they are armoured with overlapping bony plates, which cover their bellies as well as their backs. In addition to belonging to different genera, caïmans and crocodiles are found in different parts of the world, the former being restricted to the American continent.

According to Cameroonian geographers and zoologists, the Sanaga and Djerem rivers abound with crocodiles and hippopotami (cf. Cameroon in Brief, p. 24). Since it is the Sanaga river that is referred to in the stories we are translating, it seems obvious that Philombe has used «caïman» as a rough synonym of «crocodile», without paying particular attention to the referent. While this is not a crucial point in the stories, I feel that it would be contradictory to my intention of presenting the cultural background of Cameroon through the translation if I were to render each of the French terms by their normal equivalents (Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary proposes as English equivalents for «caïman», the terms «cayman» and «caiman», and for «crocodile», the term

«crocodile»). Since «crocodile» correctly designates the referent found in Cameroon and since it is also used as the generic name for all types of crocodilians, I have rendered both «caïman» and «crocodile» by «crocodile» to get rid of any terminological ambiguity or inconsistency.

11. A war dance staged exclusively at the death of an important person and normally performed as part of a ritual (cf. Chapter 2).

12. A staple food in the Beti area and most forest regions of Cameroon. It is a preparation of cassava starch processed into a pudding or paste and served with fish or vegetable soup.

13. In Cameroon, enforcement of law and order is ensured by both the «gendarmerie» (part of the army) and the police force, which are, however, separate and distinct corps (cf. chapter on background information). A «gendarme» is thus a law enforcement officer who belongs to the «gendarmerie». So, even though Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary gives as English equivalents for «gendarme» the terms «gendarme» and «police constable (approx)», the latter term is certainly not a suitable one to render «gendarme» in the Cameroonian context, because it would cause confusion between «gendarmes» and the police. On the other hand,

the borrowed term «gendarme», which is the other option I have, can also lead to confusion on the part of Western readers, for it evokes the typical French policeman.

However, since «gendarmes» (army personnel) in Cameroon are called «gendarmes» in Cameroonian English, I have maintained the term and have tried to clarify the type of force they belong to in the section on background information.

Moreover, it is important to specify in the context of Philombe's story that it is the gendarmes and not the police that are being referred to, for, in his stories, the author has chosen to portray the role played by the gendarmerie (and not the police force) in enforcing law and order in Cameroonian rural communities and to criticize the methods they use.

I have tried to maintain the distinction between gendarmes and the police not only when the actual corps are being referred to, but also when the «ghost world» is being discussed. I have rendered «gendarme» in the lexical syntagm «gendarme-fantôme» (p. 14) by «ghost gendarme» in order to remain terminologically consistent and also to maintain the contrast made later on in the story (p. 28) between ghost gendarmes and real (i.e. human) ones.

14. Thickly populated urban center and political capital of Cameroon (cf. chapter on background information).

15. The most populated urban center and commercial capital of Cameroon (cf. chapter on background information).

16. A traditional Cameroonian musical instrument with chords, used in the Beti area (cf. chapter 1: René Philombe's life and works).

17. West African xylophone with gourd resonators.

18. Single-reed wood-wind instrument used in the northern part of Cameroon.

19. «Porte-bonheur» is defined by the Petit Robert as «objet que l'on considère comme porteur de chance» (it also gives as synonyms for «porte-bonheur» the terms «amulette» and «fétiche»). However, in Cameroon, a «porte-bonheur» is not limited to an object. It may include not only secret and sacred words which, when pronounced by certain individuals, bring good luck as well as provide protection to them (cf. Note 20), but also incisions on the individual's body which have been treated with various traditional herbs or liquids designed to provide him with good luck and permanent protection against all harm.

Harrap's New Standard French and English

Dictionary proposes as English equivalents for «porte-bonheur» the terms «amulet» and «charm», which, according to anthropologists, are synonymous to talisman, gris-gris, fetiche, and medicine (cf. J. Wilbois, Le Cameroun, p. 86, and Philippe Tolra, Annales de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Yaoundé, p. 60). While all these terms (i.e. amulet, charm, fetiche, gris-gris, medicine, and talisman) are used for «porte-bonheur» on various occasions in Cameroon, medicine is regarded as the most neutral and socially acceptable term (fetiche, gris-gris, and talisman are considered to have pejorative connotations - cf. J. Wilbois, Le Cameroun, p. 86, and Philippe Tolra, Annales de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Yaoundé, p. 60).

However, although «medicine» is the most frequently used term in Cameroon, I have opted instead for «amulet» and «charm» to render «porte-bonheur» (p. 17), «gris-gris protecteur» (p. 19) and «gris-gris» (p. 34). The main reason for this is to avoid the confusion that the use of the term «medicine» may cause. It would be difficult for a non-African to make a distinction between modern medicine (with which he is familiar) and traditional medicine (exercised by Bekamba). While «amulet» and «charm» are not the most

neutral and socially acceptable terms in Cameroon, they do not have the pejorative connotations attached to fetiche, gris-gris and talisman.

The terms «amulet» and «charm» are synonymous to a certain extent. According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, a charm is «something worn about the person to ward off evil or ensure good fortune: amulet»; while an amulet is «a charm (as an ornament, gem, or relic) often inscribed with a spell, magic incantation, or symbol and believed to protect the wearer against evil or to aid him». Thus, when referring to an object of good luck either «amulet» or «charm» can be used. However, the term «charm» has an additional, more general meaning that is not found in «amulet»: an action, process or thing (as a word, phrase or verse) believed to have magic or occult power: a magic spell (cf. Webster's Third New International Dictionary). To avoid confusion between these two terms, I have decided to use «amulet» as a translation of «gris-gris protecteur» (p. 19) and «gris-gris» (p. 34) every time I was sure that an object of good luck was referred to, and I have used «charm», the more general term in all other instances.

Both «terms» convey the idea of protection and good luck. However, because in Africa and Cameroon in particular, amulets or charms are usually qualified to

indicate the specific purpose for which they are intended, for example, protection, love, victory, fertility etc., I have used the accompanying qualifier, if it is found in the French text.

20. «Tout porte-bonheur est avant tout propriété d'une famille» is a Beti saying translated literally into French by the author: As indicated in note 19, a «porte-bonheur» in the Cameroonian context is anything (an object, sacred words pronounced etc.), considered to bring good luck or provide protection to its owner.

In Cameroon, particularly in the Beti area, medicine-men and even certain prominent village elders are believed to possess specific supernatural powers (derived from «porte-bonheurs»), which are identified with their families. Although their children very often have to undergo initiation rites before acquiring such powers, both these powers and the accompanying «porte-bonheurs» - all the property of the family - are usually passed on to their children.

Bekamba, a son of Mangata village, claimed the ancestors of the village had passed on their specific powers to the entire village through him, a son of the village.

21. A ritual in which a set of words, when pronounced, are believed to have occult powers and, if

directed at a person, cause the individual to behave abnormally.

22. Perpetuating the family and the memory of family ancestors by delivering children who would bear dead relatives' names (cf. chapter on background information).

23. i.e. medicine-men (cf. chapter on background information).

24. The Mbam is one of the major rivers in Cameroon and affluent of the Sanaga.

25. Protective amulet (cf. note 19 on «porte-bonheur»).

26. There is a difference between the French franc and the Cameroonian franc. The latter is normally qualified by the letters CFA (Communauté Financière d'Afrique - Franc Zone). One franc CFA = .02 French franc = \$.004 (Canadian). Therefore five francs mentioned in the story would be approximately equivalent to \$.02 (Canadian) i.e. less than one cent.

27. The «gandoura» is a long loose gown with or without sleeves that is worn chiefly by Moslems in Cameroon. Even though the word «gandoura» is found in the Webster's Third New International Dictionary, it is not found in dictionaries of everyday usage such as

the Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English
or the Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.

28. I have translated «sorcier» by «medicine-man» rather than by the more general and better known term «sorcerer», for modern anthropology now makes a clear distinction between medicine-man and sorcerer (cf. chapter on background information), although, in the past, they were broadly grouped together and called «sorcerers». Medicine-men work for the well-being of the community, whereas sorcerers do harm to it. It is only the context and familiarity with the cultural background that can enable one to say with certainty which of the two groups is being referred to. Here, it is the term «cagibi» associated with medicine-men, and the idea of seeking help for ailments found in this paragraph that led me to believe that «sorcier» stood for medicine-man in this instance.

29. Head of a gendarme station (cf. chapter on background information).

30. In the Beti area of Cameroon the cat is considered a very intelligent animal. It can hypnotize its prey merely by wagging its tail gently to lull it and then pouncing on it. Its tail is therefore a very effective weapon. «Hoistoires queue-de-chat» are, thus, stories which are so incredible and so entertaining

that, like the cat's tail, they are capable of amusing and hypnotizing the audience. The author has also used the expression «Histoires queue-de-chat» as the title of his collection of short stories from which the two stories translated are drawn. This title was probably given to entice the public to read his book.

31. Medicine-men and sorcerers (cf. chapter on background information).

32. Sorcerers (cf. chapter on background information).

33. District in the Central South province of Cameroon (cf. chapter on background information).

34. These are not «huts» used exclusively as kitchens but huts (i.e. houses) used both as a kitchen and a place for sleeping (cf. note 2 on «case» and chapter on background information).

35. The man's hut (cf. chapter on background information). Since in this context I could conveniently and without lengthy explanation, make explicit part of the information contained in the word «abāa» (cf. Vinay and Darbelnet, Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais, #151) by a discreet explanation within the text (cf. Peter Newmark, op. cit., p. 174; George Mounin, op. cit., pp. 52, 82; and Eugene Nida, Towards a Science of Translating, p. 172), I have rendered

«abâa» as «abâa», the man's hut».

36. A grass with creeping rhizomes found in grass-land areas of C  meroon.

37. The institution of polygamy, that of a man having several wives, is a well-known one. The wives involved in a polygamous marriage are designated as «co-  pouse» in French anthropological works and French literature (cf. Hermann Hochegger, La polygamie dans les mythes Sakata, pp. 9, 11, 12, ...; Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, Les seigneurs de la for  t, pp. 237, 248, 255-9; etc.). The word «co-  pouse» is found neither in the Petit-Robert nor in Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary.

The same concept (that of different wives of one man) is expressed in English African literature and anthropological books by the terms «plural wife» or «co-wife» (cf. Eugene Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered, pp. 116, 119, 122, ...; Ir  ne Assiba d'Almeida, «Literary Translation: The experience of translating Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God into French», in Meta, Sept. 1982, p. 287). «Co-wife» is not found in the Webster's Third New International Dictionary. While «plural wife» is found in it, it is defined as «a wife in a plural marriage; especially a wife in unlawful polygamy who is not the lawful one», and, since polygamy

is legalized in Cameroon (cf. chapter on background information), I could therefore not use the expression «plural wife» to render «co-épouse».

In any case, neither the term «co-wife» nor the term «plural wife», as normally used in the English African works referred to above, are general enough to be used to designate the reality of several wives from the point of view of both the husband and the wives. While a man would normally refer to his women as «my wives» or «my co-wives», it is not usual for one of the women to refer to the other(s) as «my co-wife» or «my co-wives». I have therefore avoided both «co-wife» and «plural wife» and rendered «co-épouse» as «co-mate». This term is the one used most in Cameroon to designate the many wives of one man (although the simple term «mate» is also used, if less frequently). It is also a term that is used both by a man in reference to his wives and by a wife when alluding to the other wives of her husband.

38. Rite performed on a widow (cf. chapter on background information).

39. In Cameroon, there is normally a distinction made between a plantation and a farm.. Whereas a plantation normally refers to an extensive plot where agriculture is mechanized and which is usually exploited

by a corporation, a farm on the other hand refers to a small plot of land exploited by indigenous inhabitants, without the help of mechanization. Since the story I have translated is set among one of the native tribes, and it is unlikely that the tribe owns a «plantation», «plantations» mentioned in the story seems to refer to the indigenous farms. I have therefore rendered «plantations de cacaoyers» by «cocoa farms».

40. «Ngam» is the art of fortune-telling using a trap-door spider of the same name (i.e. ngam).

41. Plant of the graminaceous family known under the botanical name Pennisetum purpureum. It grows all over the southern part of Cameroon.

42. Cf. note 19 on «porte-bonheur».

43. The elonn is a tree known under the scientific name arythrophaleum guineense, whose poisonous bark was used in a ritualistic ordeal of the same name (i.e. elonn) to exercise justice. In this ritual, the suspect was made to drink the poisonous sap extracted from the tree and, if he/she did not die after a certain length of time, he/she was declared innocent. If, on the contrary, the suspect died after drinking the poison he was considered to be the criminal. However, the elonn ritual was not a very sound basis for judging the guilt or innocence of a person, for, since the sap from the

elonn tree is extremely poisonous, almost every suspect obliged to drink it died.

44. «Nyandomo» means «maternal uncle», as the author explains in the story (p. 38). After this explanation, Philombe goes on to use the term «nyandomo» three more times, preferring it to the more transparent French term «oncle maternel», no doubt for reasons of local colour. In keeping with what seems to be the author's intention, I, too, have maintained the Cameroonian word in the translation, while also explaining it within the text.

45. In traditional Cameroonian society, the duties and functions of the medicine-man are so many and so diverse that most medicine-men tend to specialize as healers, fortune-tellers etc. The fortune-teller, by using various means, such as the 'ngam' (cf. note 40), detects wrong-doers/criminals, casters of spells; explains mysterious causes of misfortune; predicts dangers; foretells the future; and so on.

I decided to make at least part of this information explicit in the translation by rendering «l'homme du ngam» as «the ngam fortune-teller», since I could conveniently make the exploitation in this context without any lengthy explanation (cf. Vinay and Darbelnet, op. cit., #151).

46. Plant with very bitter leaves, found in most regions of Cameroon. I decided to make part of this information explicit in the translation (cf. notes 35 and 45) since I could conveniently do so without lengthy explanation. I therefore rendered «metet» as «metet plant».

CONCLUSION:

Translation may be viewed as a type of «reading»¹ in which the translator performs a two-phase operation. He reads the text and comprehends it, and then produces in the target language a text embodying his «reading» of the original.

In the first phase of this operation (i.e. reading the text and comprehending it) the translator must bear in mind that the text cannot be adequately analyzed without considering the circumstances involved in the original communication situation. A text (which constitutes the starting point of the reading) is the product of a given source (author) whose purpose normally is to transmit a certain message to a group of intended receptors. As Aryeh Newman puts it, «it cannot be too often stressed that the message of the utterance or text constitutes a constructive creation of both author and reader, each interacting within their own total

1 The term «reading» is borrowed from Aryeh Newman who explains it as follows: «The second result of the text's duration through time - the existence of a cumulative and constantly growing body of interpretation - the responses of successive generations of readers we shall henceforth term «readings». These readings may be realised in the form of criticism, commentary, paraphrase and translation». Cf. Aryeh Newman, Mapping translation equivalence (Belgium: ACCO, 1980) p. 21.

interpersonal time-space situations»². In other words, author and readers play equally constructive and dynamic roles in their respective communicating and deciphering of the message.

The source, as a part of the total communication situation is often so involved with the elements referred to in the text that he may not only «designate» but also «evaluate»; in other words, he rarely produces a totally objective text.. The translator must thus be familiar not only with the subject dealt with in the text, but also with the relationship of the source to the message. He must therefore analyze such factors as the background of the source (for knowing something about the author is of great importance in attempting to decode his message), and the circumstances in the life of the source which may have prompted that particular communication. This is what I have tried to analyze in Part I, Chapter 1, René Philombe's life and works, in an attempt to explain my source's leitmotivs and the genesis of the short stories I have translated. I have also indicated in Part I, Chapter 2, who constitute the normal readers of Philombe's works: Philombe writes about African society for African readers.

2 Aryeh Newman, ibid., p. 24.

However, in the second phase of the translation operation (i.e. when the translator produces in the target language a text embodying his reading), the communication situation is no longer the same as that which resulted in the production of the original. The translation is in effect a new text produced by a different source (the translator) for a different set of receptors. This variability in the communication situation can contribute to the existence of «ambiguities»³ in the translated text, for the translator does not necessarily have the same knowledge, ideology or style as the original author, while the readers of the translation may not have the same background knowledge as the readers of the original text. In the case of my translations, the fact that I am a Cameroonian, sympathetic to Philombe's beliefs and sensitive to the subtleties of African style, should help to reduce the «distance» between the original source and the source of the translated text. However, since my intended receptors (English-speaking North Americans) are very different in background and culture from those of the original text, the risk of «ambiguities» for them is

3 The term «ambiguities» as used here covers both vagueness and indeterminateness, as well as multiple meanings in the text.

great. Since, as Aryeh Newman points out, the extent of readers' ability to decipher a text is largely determined by the pre-existent knowledge they bring to it, I have endeavored to provide in a sort of preface to the translations (see Part II) background information on Cameroonian culture and society required by North Americans to understand the content of the stories and have also included notes on specific words and expressions at the end of the translations. This should help eliminate many possible «ambiguities» for readers of the translations.

While my primary purpose as translator was to provide my North American readers with a clear idea of Philombe's thoughts and ideas (cf. Part I, Chapter 2), I could not, however, ignore the fact that these thoughts and ideas are presented, not in the form of a more or less neutral-style report, but in the form of short stories enlivened by narration, dialogue, description and many rhetorical devices. Any true «reading» of these short stories would thus include analysis and reproduction of the stylistic devices used by Philombe. Since Philombe's style is typically African - and therefore difficult perhaps for a North American to appreciate - I have analyzed it in some detail in a separate chapter (Part I, Chapter 3), where I have also indicated how I have dealt with various stylistic

aspects in my translations.

I hope that by reading my translations, along with the accompanying chapters and notes, my North American readers will fully grasp the message that Philombe wishes to present and the form in which he presents it. In fact, I would like to go further and express the hope that the «reading» of Philombe that I have presented in my translations will make even African readers more aware of Philombe's ideas and style.

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