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**“The Cockroach and the Rooster”: A Translation,
with Preface, of Tchicaya U Tam’Si’s *Les cancrelats***

Francesca Worrall

A Thesis

in

the Department

of Études françaises

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ABSTRACT

**“The Cockroach and the Rooster”: A Translation,
with Preface, of Tchicaya U Tam’Si’s *Les cancrelats***

Francesca Worrall

This is a translation, accompanied by a preface, of the first published novel by this Congolese writer. Although U Tam’Si’s prose is classical, the novel’s form is far from being linear, the narrative veers off and is subsequently woven into a complex narrative of stories, dreams, songs, proverbs, mores, imagery and symbols, some of which have their origins in African oral tradition and others that are part of U Tam’Si mythical universe. The translation is done in a literal, “foreignizing” manner according to approaches advocated by translation studies theorists such as Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti. This foreignizing approach rejects the prevalent requirement for fluency in translation, in order to give prominence to the alterity of the novel and the author’s style. The preface describes the translator’s quest for a translative position through her application of these approaches.

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PREFACE

The Author

Any attempt to summarize, classify or categorize Tchicaya U Tam'Si and his work is constantly confounded by the contradictions that run through the poet's life and work. Born Gerald-Felix Tchicaya in 1931 in what was then Middle Congo, part of colonial French Equatorial Africa, he was taken by his father to France in 1946, at the age of 15. Apart from a brief period in the early 1960s, he never lived in Africa again. U Tam'Si said in an interview that "je suis en rupture avec l'Afrique" (qtd. in Bekri 57). He also claimed to be "en rupture donc d'avec l'Afrique des petits rois nègres licencieux et sanguinaires (qtd. in Bekri 58)," and certainly one of his plays was a vicious satire on contemporary African politics (*Le destin*). He wrote in a classical French style and cited late 19th and early 20th century French poets such as Rimbaud, Apollinaire and Verlaine as his principal influences.

Yet his connections with Africa clearly run deep. His father was the first representative of Middle Congo in the French National Assembly. In 1955 Tchicaya published his first collection of poetry under the name Tchicaya U Tam'Si, which means literally "little leaf that relates his countries' stories."¹ His deep attachment to Africa and its cultural traditions shows clearly through all his writing in the content, the form and the subject matter. In the 1960s he compiled and edited a collection of African legends (*Légendes*). And in 1960 U Tam'Si moved to Congo-Kinshasa to work alongside his

¹ It would be incorrect to call this a "pseudonymn, because acquiring new names or giving oneself new names at various stages of one's life was part of the tradition of the Kongo people, of which the Vili,

friend Patrice Lumumba. Later, as a writer and as part of his work with UNESCO, he travelled all over the continent, attending conferences and forging links with writers from Africa and from other former colonies, such as Caribbean countries. As he put it, “je disais que le Congo m’habite à l’inverse de ne pas habiter le Congo” (qtd. in Maximin 91).

The novel I am translating, *Les cancrelats*, is his first novel and was published in 1980 as part of a trilogy. But it was written in 1954 and took a full 26 years to see the light of day. The first full length study of any of his work (this was of his fiction) only appeared in 1994 (Vincent), and there is only one other (Mabana, *L’univers mythique*). Among his four novels, several short stories, a collection of tales, seven collections of poetry and three plays, only one novel, one play, one collection of poetry and a selection of his poetry have been translated into English. The most recent translation of his poetry was published in 1970.

The Novel

The novel tells the story of the fates of two children born in the Congo of Thomas Ndundu, who had returned home in 1900 after having been in the service of a Frenchman in Europe. He does not feel at home in this milieu any more, and he can no longer navigate the esoteric traditional discourse, having spent so many years in Europe. His alienation mirrors that of the reader, who is forced to negotiate the strange culture along with him. However, after Ndundu’s death, his children Sophie and Prosper, formerly Christians, are adopted by their pagan uncle and are forced to adopt the traditional African ways. Later, Jean de l’Escaut, the son of Ndundu’s former employer, arrives. Sophie becomes his mistress.

Tchicaya’s ethnic group, were a part.

After de l'Escaut leaves the country, Sophie and Prosper are left with enough money to buy a house. Sophie gets Prosper a job working in the warehouse of a Portuguese importer. In a typical example of colonial injustice, he is accused of stealing and taken away by the military police. Earlier that same day Sophie had an encounter with cockroaches, which the chickens eat except for one, which is "so brazen and nasty that even the big rooster did not dare attack it" (*LC* 111). She sees this as a dark premonition of what is to come.

Eventually, Prosper comes back and marries Malila. Not very long after their marriage Malila dies in mysterious circumstances.

The last part of the novel takes place in Brazzaville in 1945. Prosper is now an *evolué* and has changed his name to Pobard. He works for the colonial administration and has local political aspirations. Sophie comes to stay with him and his second wife, Juliette. From the world of African traditions we now enter the urban colonial world and pidgin, or "francongo." U Tam'Si satirizes the petty politics of colonized subjects who have no real power. On a personal level, Prosper finds some redemption by managing to overcome his helplessness through politics and reunites with his wife. We get an introduction to Poto Poto, the African district of Brazzaville.

The Translation of African Literature: Theories and Practices

There are a few models of literary translation, whether theoretical, pragmatic or descriptive, that relate directly to the African literary context. Since the field of translation studies as it relates to Africa is still relatively undeveloped, some of the models I shall describe come from other postcolonial situations. In the quest for approaches that seem to be a good fit for my translational practice, I reject some and

adopt others, and in the process construct my own translative position and translation project.

If we look at the discourse surrounding postcolonial translation, at least three approaches to the topic can be isolated. First, a considerable number of writers have examined metaphors of postcolonial translation. Many of these take the term to have meaning beyond its purely linguistic framework to include any kind of cultural exchange. Prominent examples are Eric Cheyfitz's *The Poetics of Imperialism*, in which translation is primarily a metaphor for historical and contemporary domination and subjugation of cultures, languages and peoples, starting with the Roman empire and concluding with 20th century colonialism.

A second type of approach is to look at the social and political context of translation, which includes the political economy of translation, the power relations inherent in North-South translation, both historically and, more recently, the general micro-context of translation. An example of this approach is Sengupta's discussion of the British 19th century hegemonic translation of Indian texts.

Finally, some studies describe, analyze or prescribe postcolonial translation practices. Examples are Else Vieira's study of Haroldo de Campos's radical translations (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999) and the case of Indian writers, who "use different strategies to make their works sound like translations" in a "conscious 'thickening' or defamiliarization of English " (Bassnett and Trivedi 14). Some critics have characterized Europhone African writing as translation, which I will look at below in articles by Bandia ("Translation as Cultural Transfer"), Adejunmobi and Zabus. Kwame Anthony Appiah advocates "thick translation," i.e., with paratext, as a worthy approach to translating

African literature. Indira Karamcheti looks at Aimé Césaire's writing and proposes a foreignizing approach she describes as "opaque translation" (presumably in contrast with "transparent" translation).

The view that Europhone African literature is inherently translation because many authors write in what is their second language has been around since at least the 1970s. It is argued that these authors reproduce in their English, French, or Portuguese texts the grammatical and syntactical patterns of their vernacular language, thus appropriating the European language and writing into it a uniquely African flavour. Writers in this style in English include Amos Tutuola and Gabriel Okara, and in French Ahmadou Kourouma. Chantal Zabus maintains that since there is no physical original, it cannot be called translation, and instead calls it "relexification."

Paul Bandia has theorized the translation of such literature as a "two-tier approach to intercultural translation" involving a "primary" level in which the African writer transposes his thoughts from the vernacular African language, the oral "text" into an alien European language, and the secondary level, where the translator transfers "the African thought from one European language to another" ("Translation as Cultural Transfer" 61). Because the translator of African works into another European language is indirectly dealing with the vernacular language and culture, the translator, being "thrice removed from reality" (63) is that much further from the original text and culture, which is the African oral text in the vernacular language.

He advocates a source-text oriented approach which balances a consideration of the meaning and the form of the original, and thus "is not a literal translation per se, but translation written at the level of the source-text culture, in order to ensure that both the

translator and the reader are receiving the message at the level of the source text culture” (58). This figure of translation in African literature has been criticized by Adejunmobi. What he calls “compositional” translation compares with Bandia’s “intercultural translation” or Zabus’s “relexification,” and is ultimately a translation with no physical source document (perhaps it could be called pseudo-translation). Adejunmobi describes this characterization of writing as translation as the author attempting to create the illusion of authenticity (authenticity here meaning written in an African vernacular language) by positioning themselves as translators or “mediators,” thus abdicating responsibility for their authorship. This abdication is in response to criticism by those who proclaim that true African literature must be written in vernacular languages. By positing the writers as translators, the “source document” in the vernacular language can be seen as the real document, and the “writer” as a translator. The main problem with this approach, he says, is that it “diverts attention from the real impediments to publishing literature in languages like Ijo or Malinké” (169).

Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his article “Thick Translation” looks at the translation of African proverbs. Examining the Gricean mechanism, he maintains that proverbs are an example of utterances that have meanings beyond their literal meaning and are extremely context dependent (815). He advocates “thick” translation, in which translation has a primarily pedagogical function, as a way to increase understanding of African orature and literature. He believes that such translation, which “seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context, is eminently worth doing” (817).

Indira Karamcheti advocates a sort of “thick” translation in “Aimé Césaire’s

Subversive Geographies,” albeit motivated by the desire to produce a kind of translation that is radically different from what Appiah has in mind. In his writing project, she says, Césaire set out deliberately to subvert the colonial, exoticizing discourse about Martinique and create a decolonizing one. This subversive writing practice calls for a subversive translating practice.

No translation is innocent. Whether unconsciously or consciously, every decision we make as translators is partially determined by our pre-existing ideas about translation, about literature and language. In his preface to *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne*, Antoine Berman outlines the method of critiquing translations that he followed. He advocates that one not only undertake a thorough reading of and research into the source document, but also that one find out about the translator, specifically, their “position traductive” and “projet du traduction.” Since this is my first literary translation, I invented myself as a translator as I wrote this preface. I found Berman’s rubrics coming to mind, and the process has become a quest for my own “position traductive” and defining my “projet du traduction.” I therefore adopt his concepts of the translation project translatable position.

Translation Project

I interpret Berman’s concept of “projet du traduction” as describing the physical form that the translation will take. For this thesis I chose to translate the first part of *Les Cancrelats* by Tchicaya U Tam’Si, with paratext (a preface and translator’s notes). I see translating French African literature as a way to allow more people to read it, to make it more accessible, both in terms of a larger audience and in terms of the accessibility of the

work as such. I hope, however, to find a publisher that will market the book in English-speaking Africa, because if I have any philanthropic goal in translating African literature, it is that through literature perhaps speakers of the two major European languages in Africa will get an increased appreciation of the other group's literature, background and experience across the linguistic divide.

Based on Berman's concept, I see the translative position as a sort of autobiographical portrait, focusing on the aspects of my background, education, and outlook as they contribute to defining my literary translation practice. I was born in South Africa and lived for most of my youth up until my young adulthood in ex-British Africa, first Rhodesia and then Kenya.

This background in Africa determined to a large extent my decision to translate African literature. The process of translating Africa has been an affirmative one for me. As a white African translating black African literature I am satisfying an urge to get to know my African "other." Translating Tchicaya has been a challenging creative process, if not frequently disillusioning because his hermetic style does not yield to interpretation easily. His work appeals to me in its syncretic blend of traditional African and French literary influences, allowing me to immerse myself in both and to expand my literary and linguistic horizons

Translative Position

Ethnocentric versus Foreignizing Translation

[a fluent translation] is written in English that is current ('modern') instead of archaic, that is widely used instead of specialized ('jargonisation'), and that is standard instead of colloquial ('slangy'). Foreign words ('pidgin') are avoided, as are Britishisms in American translations and Americanisms in British translations. Fluency also depends on syntax that is not so 'faithful' to the foreign text as to be 'not quite idiomatic,' that unfolds continuously and easily (not 'doughy') to insure

semantic 'precision' with some rhythmic definition, a sense of closure (not a 'dull thud'). A fluent translation is immediately recognizable and intelligible, 'familiarised', domesticated, not 'disconcertingly foreign...' Under the regime of fluent translating, the translator works to make his or her work 'invisible,' producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems 'natural,' i.e., not translated. (Venuti 4-5)

"The translator's invisibility is thus a weird self-annihilation . . ." (Venuti 8)

Since this is my first literary translation, writing this paper has been a large step in the process of defining my own translative practice. In terms of my guiding principles and influences, I am most inspired by the foreignizing approach of Lawrence Venuti and the scrupulous respect for form advocated by Antoine Berman (1984). I ground my discussion of how I am trying to disrupt the fluency of my own translation in Venuti's description of fluency. Berman/Schleiermacher's outline of the relationship between ethnocentric/hypertextual translation is also useful.

Berman defines ethnocentric translation as that which transforms according to the translator's own cultural norms and values. Ethnocentric translation involves considerable textual manipulation by the translator. As Berman says, the principles of ethnocentric translation "font de la traduction une opération où intervient massivement la littérature, et même *la littérisation*... Pour qu'une traduction ne sente pas la traduction, il faut recourir à des procédés littéraires" (114). The extent of the massive literary intervention required to do an ethnocentric translation becomes clear when one reads about Robert Graves' translation practice, which Venuti calls "assimilation." To do a "radically domesticating translation" of Suetonius, a writer of Imperial Rome, Graves describes how, in addition to turning the author's sentences and groups of sentences "inside out," he added explanations in the text instead of in footnotes, changed the dates

from the pagan to Christian system, modernized the names of the cities, and translated the monetary values into something that was more recognizable to his readership of 1957 (qtd. in Venuti 29).

The hypertextuality of a text defines the type of relationship it has to an anterior text. Along a sort of pole of hypertextuality, Berman proposes that “un texte peut en imiter un autre, le pasticher, le parodier, le recréer librement, le paraphraser, le citer, le commenter, ou être un mélange de tout cela...du point de vue de la structure formelle, ces rapports sont très proches de la traduction” (“Traduction ethnocentrique” 115). Imitation and pastiche are the closest to translation, the difference being that the latter reproduces an existing text, while the former create new texts based on the stylistic features of another text. Most of these hypertextual forms feature in the history of translation. Venuti describes this variability in historical translation approaches as “canons of accuracy” (37).

It is not clear where what Venuti calls “foreignizing” translation fits into the hypertextuality framework. Clearly we have to differentiate between the goals of foreignizing translation as he describes them, i.e., to reign in the violence that ethnocentric translation commits on foreign texts, to look at “translation as a locus of difference, instead of the homogeneity that widely characterizes it today” (42), and how these goals are achieved in terms of translative practices. He says that he wants to “develop a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text” (23), and as his example cites Philip Lewis’s concept of “abusive fidelity, “a translation that values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies or

plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own" (qtd. in Venuti, 24).

This is where I am not sure what Venuti's concept of "foreignization" means in terms of translating a work of fiction. Where is the dividing line between domesticating violence and foreignizing violence? Today the distinction between these types of hypertextual relationships is becoming blurred, as people create all kinds of hypertextual works in the name of translation. For me, as a translator looking for a translative position, the difficulty has been to translate the theory into practice.

Berman admits that what he considers to be translation includes elements of ethnocentricity and hypertextuality (to avoid being servile; "Traduction ethnocentrique" 118), the problem is then "chercher à situer la part nécessairement ethnocentrique et hypertextuelle de toute traduction" (119). In seeking to locate "l'espace littéraire" occupied by translation, he sees a clear demarcation line between these various literary forms. In order to qualify as translation, a translation must observe the "*contrat fondamental qui lie une traduction à son original. Ce contrat – certes draconien – interdit tout dépassement de la texture de l'original*" (Berman's emphasis, 118). It stipulates that the creativity required by translation must be harnessed to the purpose of rewriting the original in the other language, and never to produce an over-translation in the service of the personal poetics of the person translating (118). The poetic practices of Jacques Brault, Erin Mouré, Haroldo de Campos, Luise Von Flotow, at the creative edge where translation meets rewriting meets anthropophagia and nontraduction, would probably not meet Berman's criteria to be translations.

One well-known aspect of the dynamics of the manipulative operation involved in

ethnocentric translation is the constant attempt to find equivalence in difference, the “synonym syndrome.” In translating this novel, resisting this syndrome was part of the process of resisting fluency. The following passage by Milan Kundera, an appeal by a writer to his translators, expresses this syndrome from the perspective of the author of the manipulated source text:

the translator “wants...to invest the text with his own creativity; as if to give himself heart, he chooses a word that does not obviously betray the author but still arises from his own initiative...I write ‘author’ and the translator translates it ‘writer’; I write ‘writer’ and he translates it ‘novelist’; I write ‘novelist’ and he translates it ‘author’; where I say ‘verse,’ he says ‘poetry’; where I say ‘poetry,’ he says poems.’ Kafka says ‘go,’ the translators ‘walk’... This practice of synonymization seems innocent, but its systematic quality inevitably smudges the original idea. And besides, what the hell for? Why not say ‘go’ when the author says ‘gehen’? O ye translators, do not sodonymize us! (108)

In ethnocentric translation the translator tries to make the target text as different from the source text as possible, to stamp it with her own personal imprint. However, in order to create the illusion that the translation is not a translation, these literary interventions (significant changes to the structure, syntax, and vocabulary) have to be carried out invisibly. Fluent translation demands that the translator be invisible, anonymous. This contradiction can be explained by the fact that ethnocentric translation depends on duping the reader to accept the deception that it is not a translation. As Berman says, “la traduction doit se faire oublier” (“Traduction ethnocentrique” 114).

In contrast, a foreignizing translation that does not exceed the author’s “sound” and “texture” perhaps requires letting go of one’s ego. Does this mean that by adopting a foreignizing approach the translator has to suppress her creativity in favour of the author’s? The answer is no, the opposite is true. In fact resisting fluency is not easier than succumbing to fluency; it entails constant vigilance and self-consciousness on the part of

the translator who, most likely, has been educated in the norms of writing fluently. By resisting fluency and invisibility I am refusing to be invisible as a translator, I am exploring my creativity as a translator, but without supplanting the author.

I see my role as a foreignizing translator as to give the reader as direct access to the experience of the author's milieu as possible by translating literally whenever I can, including the proverbs and metaphors, unless this produced an English that was not sonorous. In contrast with ethnocentric translation, my foreignizing translation means allowing the reader to have access to the text in as unmediated a form as possible, to see the translation as a sort of diaphanous film through which one can read the original. Tchicaya U Tam'Si was primarily a poet and he wrote poetic prose, so preserving his "sound" is all the more important. Literal translation is made easier by the fact that French and English are closely related, in many places the source document "contains" its translation. By attempting to preserve, in sonorous English, the integrity of Tchicaya's prose and poetry style, I want to allow the reader to fully appreciate the strangeness of its form and its content and the aesthetic appeal of his style, the originality of his images and symbolism.

Translating *Les Cancrelats*: Challenges and Strategies

U Tam'Si's Hermeticism and Untranslatability

The most pervasive of all the criticisms levelled at U Tam'Si's work is that of hermeticism, and obscurity of style that was a trademark of his writing. That characteristic may explain why so little of his work has been translated. It is especially notable in his poetry, but it is also true of his fiction. This novel is said to be his most accessible (Sellin xxi). Nevertheless, much of Tchicaya's prose in *Les Cancrelats* can be

described as poetic, his writing style dense with symbolism, metaphors, maxims, zoomorphism, tellurism, assonance and alliteration. This is combined with discourse that is almost defined by proverbs, obscure (to me) cultural references, dreams, fantasies and superstitions and a plot line that meanders chronologically and geographically into cul de sacs and digresses into subnarratives.

We might therefore equate hermeticism in the source text with untranslatability, which, according to Berman, is a positive attribute of a work. To say that a poem is untranslatable is to say that it is a true poem, untranslatability is “l’un des modes d’*auto-affirmation* d’un texte” (“Traduction ethnocentrique” 120). I take this to be a subjective judgment, in praise of hermeticism. Untranslatability, according to Berman, is a feature of all texts, but is present in a much greater extent in poetry, because of the intimate relationship between its “sense” and its “sound.” “Sound” being synonymous with “form,” “texture,” or poetry. “Sense” and “sound” must not be separated, but in translation sometimes they have to be, “pour l’existence même des échanges et de la communication” (120).

Proof that hermeticism and obscurity were a standard to aspire to among poets that influenced U Tam’Si can be read in this encomium to obscurity entitled “Poésie et l’obscurité” that appeared in *Tropiques*, the short-lived journal that Aimé and Suzanne Césaire produced in Martinique in 1940. The author says that “quand on considère les différentes écoles poétiques qui se sont développées en France, depuis la fin du dix-neuvième siècle...Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, André Breton, Paul Eluard...on découvre chez tous ces poètes un point commun, un lien unique, une même notion fondamentale: l’obscurité” (Maugée 7). U Tam’Si cites

Rimbaud as a major influence on his work, but also Aimé Césaire.

One only has to read the first page of *Les Cancrelats* to find an example of his obscure imagery. The first lines of the novel read:

Le voyage avait un peu voûté le dos de Ndundu. Les épaules basses, il tournait en rond devant la porte de sa cabine, jetant par moments un coup d'oeil à l'intérieur, où les enfants, ses deux enfants, étaient pétrifiés par l'attente. Une fille et un garçon...assis près des deux malles cerclées et d'un baluchon de toile grise ventru.

"C'est ton pays, papa?" questionna un crowman, qui disparut dans le branle-bas général, sans attendre la réponse de sa question à Ndundu. (LC 9)

What is a "crowman"? Why is it in English? After some research, the meaning of the reference was still elusive. Perhaps it was a typographical error, and should have been "crewman"? I translated the passage thus:²

The journey had bent Ndundu's back a little. With his shoulders stooped, he turned around in front of his cabin door, glancing briefly inside where the children, his two children, were sitting tense with expectation. A girl and a boy, sitting next to a couple of round trunks and a fat grey canvas bundle. "Is this your country, papa?" questioned un crowman, who disappeared in the general commotion without waiting for the response to his question. (CR 43)

By substituting the English word with a French word, I switched the code, as U Tam'Si did. Why U Tam'Si used an English word, and whether his use of the term "crowman" was a deliberate error, is a subject for further research.³

Undoubtedly in the first part of the novel, the obscurity of the traditional African discourse was a deliberate strategy on Tchicaya's part to reflect the cultural alienation Ndundu experiences on his "retour au pays natal" from France, the author's attempt to stage a foreign experience for the reader (Venuti 20). He is no longer party to the repartee, the proverbs, the riddles that form an integral part of daily life. And some

² I am grateful to Professor Sherry Simon for this idea.

³ I discuss the issue of U Tam'Si deliberately introducing errors into his work in the section of this thesis entitled "Surplus Translation."

readers of the French novel, perhaps most, on encountering this foreign culture would be as at sea as Ndundu was. When Ndundu says of his brother's way of talking: "The essential remained to be said. Tchiluembh avoided it, went around it using hackneyed parables, a string of innuendoes that had no relation to essential issue" (CR 72), he is admitting his profound sense of alienation on returning to his native land.

The novel's title is another example of a symbol that is ambiguous in Western culture, and also difficult to convey in English. I could not find any specific references to cockroaches in African sources. The cockroach appears epigrammatically as follows "The cockroaches went to plead a case in the hens' court!" and the cockroach also appears throughout the novel. Just before Prosper is arrested, when Sophie opens up a rolled up mat, she finds a mass of cockroaches, drops the mat in disgust and runs to get the chickens in to eat the cockroaches. When she comes back, there is only one left: "it was brazen and nasty, and even the big cock did not dare confront it with its vermilion beak" (LC 111). This occurs just before Prosper is arrested for stealing, and is seen by Sophie later as a sort of bad omen.

Later in the novel (not part of the thesis), Prosper, now a true *assimilé*, writes a petition to the French governor, who at the time (in 1945) was Felix Eboué. The narrator says:

But, when you get right down to it, it is not to the hens' court that you should direct the cockroach, for whatever offence, no! And if he, Eboué understood, he was the cockroach that could keep the most voracious hen at a respectful distance. Where could he get such power? He had legions of cockroaches behind him. (LC 293)⁴

⁴ Felix Eboué from Guyana was the first black man to be appointed a governor in French Africa. In 1940 he threw his support behind de Gaulle and the Free French in defiance of de Boisson, his Vichy-appointed superior, and the official policy of neutrality. This was a victory for the allies and resulted in the rallying of Congo-Brazzaville to de Gaulle, and the pro-Vichy administration in Gabon being ejected by force. He undoubtedly became a hero to many Black Africans.

To Tchicaya, the cockroach represented colonized Africans, who despite their seeming powerlessness, through their strength in numbers could stand up to the colonial master if only they would try. Perhaps, like the “brazen” cockroach Sophie saw, they would also have the advantage of surprise. However, as a title, “The Cockroaches” would not immediately transmit any of this meaning to English speakers. In any case, it did not seem desirable, especially in a foreignizing translation, to replace this symbol, which appears throughout the novel, with another. Also, as a title, “The Cockroaches” does not have the euphonic quality of *Les cancrelats*. Eric Sellin proposed “The Roaches” (xxxvii), but that word has come to mean something very specific in Western culture (the stub of a joint). I finally decided to play on the fable-like qualities of the novel and call it “The Cockroach and the Rooster,” a title that sounds rather like something out of *Aesop’s Fables*, to reflect Sophie’s dream and the epigraph of the book.⁵ This title is somewhat of an adaptation, because the bird in the epigraph is actually “une poule.” However, in the dream or vision that becomes the parable of the novel, Sophie sees a cockroach defy “un gros coq” (LC 111), so there is justification in the novel to adopt the word “rooster.”

As Paul Bandia says, the translation of African Europhone texts into another European language is “*thrice removed from reality*” (“Translation as Cultural Transfer” 63). Therefore, my translation is the translation of a translation. This distance from the original “source”; combined with the obscurity inherent in Tchicaya’s poetic prose, and the fact that to translate poetry one really has to be a poet, which I am not, compound the text’s untranslatability. This has made my experience similar to what Steiner described as “la tristesse qui accompagne... l’acte de traduire” (Berman, “Traduction ethnocentrique”

⁵ I am grateful to Professor Sherry Simon’s 2002 FTRA401 class for this idea.

119). Berman says “Si lettre et sens sont liés, la traduction est une trahison et une impossibilité”: one cannot be true to both the “sense” and the “sound,” to both source document and the target language – therein lies the betrayal. But translate we must, and therein lies the suffering (“Traduction ethnocentrique” 119).

The Importance of the Word

The scrupulous respect for the author’s words and literal translation is justified by a feature of Tchicaya U Tam’Si’s traditional culture – the primordial importance of “words” in the culture of the Kikongo, the broad ethnic group of which the Vili, U Tam’Si’s ethnic group, were a part. The rhetorical arts, knowledge of proverbs, riddles, and legends served multiple purposes in Kikongo culture: to educate, to amuse, to communicate with the dead, and to glorify the king. In his introduction to *Légendes*, U Tam’Si describes the multiple pedagogical purposes of his rich oral culture:

Les légendes enseignaient à être brave, les contes à mieux se conduire, les devinettes et les proverbes à savoir tenir une conversation – dans une certaine mesure d’ailleurs. En effet, c’est sous l’abre à ‘palabres’ – fromager ou manguier – que s’apprenait le reste: ‘le grand savoir’ – jurisprudence et rhétorique, politique aussi. (13)

At every stage of life, all important events – birth, initiation, marriage, death, dealing with the ancestors – the word was paramount not just as a means of earthly communication, but as a means of creating a spiritual bond with the ancestors. Moreover, these poetic forms of speech were also incorporated into daily discourse, they were “associated with a literature which did not exist on the margins of life, as a mere diversion or a luxury of a few, but was part of the rhythm of daily existence” (Ballandier 229).

When Ndundu goes back to his “country” from the town of Grand-Bassam, the 10

years he has spent in France and his immersion in French society have rendered him incapable of understanding the traditional speech. He has forgotten the art of verbal exchange that is an integral part of the traditional upbringing of the Kikongo. Now he is constantly confounded by the statements of his brother Tchiluembh and his sister Liambu, traditional discourse that is unmediated by Western experience and education. Consider the following passage describing an inscrutable comment by Tchiluembh, Ndundu's brother, and Ndundu's reaction:

"There's the solitude of the tam-tam under the awning."

Ndundu leaped up. He was not hidden under the awning. He'd been here for two days. He hadn't shown his face in Mabindou, nor in town. He knew that...it was not the awning he should be talking about, but...He had been there for two days, waiting for people to come and dance with joy around him and his children. That saying was very complicated to understand in the context in which Tchiluembh had said it. To confuse him? Ndundu repeated to himself that he was alone: tam-tam under the awning! (CR 67)

This passage shows Ndundu's confusion: he is ontologically removed from the day to day verbal exchange, abstruse as it was. He is unable to negotiate the intricate maze of words that have no "precise meaning," unable to interpret the ambiguity of this ritualized speech. And when his brother tells him in so many words that he should not be "hiding his light under a bushel," Ndundu, like the reader, understands the literal meaning of the saying, he knows that the saying is not really about the awning but rather about the fact that he had isolated himself, while the community expectation was that he should celebrate his return with a feast perhaps.

Georges Ballandier, a French anthropologist, described the thrall under which words kept the Mukongo. He stressed the importance of naming, saying that people often had three or more names, given to them at different times in their lives, all of them having either ritual or personal significance. Thus names were not a fixed element of

one's identity as they are in Western culture; throughout their lives the Mukongo acquired new names "to express changes in the personality," on occasions like puberty, initiation, or membership in a cult (227).

And communication was not restricted to the medium of the spoken word. Included in the category of communication were the arts: music, singing, and dancing. "From words to the rhythms of music and the dance there was no discontinuity in the traditional society of the Kongo; they were all language, whether sound or gesture. The drums had a voice, they transmitted messages that were governed by a code" (Ballandier 232). Dancing was not just for pleasure but "for ritual drama, initiation, homages to the ancestors, cults" because certain ceremonial dances had to be performed to invoke their power (Ballandier 233). Thus if we look at the maxim about the tam-tam under the awning, we might say that the tam-tam's purpose is to be played, and it is therefore useless languishing under the awning. Looking beyond the literal meaning, the tam-tam's purpose is to communicate, Tchiluembh is saying that Ndundu should not hide himself in his house, but celebrate with his community.

Throughout the novel Tchicaya reveals the symbolic importance of names through his characters. Thom' Ndundu N'noliji whose name means "albino," because his eyes and his lashes were a reddish colour, "un rien albinos," which was considered a deformity (*LC* 36). This is an important symbol in the context of this character, who is a cultural hybrid, and the first part of the novel deals with his inability to adjust to being back in his "native land." Prosper, Ndundu's son, is given the name because everything was prospering around him when he was born. Lohya, his mother, dies a few years later, so the name was perhaps inauspicious.

There seems to be almost a perverse pattern where the name's meaning heralds the opposite occurrence: the name of Malila, the woman Prosper eventually marries, means "J'étais la pleureuse." But notwithstanding the name's tense, she does not cease to be the opposite of "la pleureuse." Later in the novel, Prosper is arrested for stealing and taken in a truck whose driver is ultimately Prosper's saviour. The driver's name is Lufua-Lumbu, a name he gave himself, to which Tchicaya adds the footnote "Word for word: "la mort-le chant." But his father had originally called him "Ngoma," which means "tam-tam" and his mother had called him "Tchitithi," which means "grass," but "before calling me Ngoma my father tried several names on my 'person. None were right for me" (*LC* 129). His self-appointed name, Death-Song, is ironic because he saves Prosper's life. But the story of his names inspires a dream which is described in detail and is significant to the novel.

This esoteric, ritualized aspect of the language is exemplified by the marriage ceremony of Prosper and Malila (not part of this thesis), an elaborate pantomime in which the whole community participated, a charade of posture and masquerade where the merits and beauty, or lack thereof, of the bride and the groom are alternatively vaunted and taunted, in a playful, sensual drama that builds to a crescendo when the bride is unveiled:

They set about taking off, one by one, the twenty blue, white, red, green, yellow pagnes that veiled her underneath her parasol. As the last one is taken off, the fiancé intervenes, saying: 'Beautiful or not, I have decided, it is she that I will marry.' He performs the abduction in front of everybody and in the midst of the wailing that followed. Then there was jubilation. (*LC* 194)

Like the Kikongo traditional discourse, this unveiling in which meaning is withheld and only gradually revealed is a discourse in which communication is

dramatized, unlike the typical Western approach to discourse as rational, perfunctory, strictly to communicate utilitarian meaning.

Tchicaya as a Literal Translator of his Culture

Despite his claim later in his life to be in rupture with ethnicity and the tribe, U Tam'Si's oeuvre was intensely rooted in Africa and its oral traditions. He edited a collection of African legends (*Légendes*). He had very strong opinions as to the form such an anthology should take (*Légendes* 16). Thus, rather than just selecting the stories and writing a preface, some of them were his own transcriptions, he selected them all according to a very personal concept of how they should be compiled, and he wrote introductions to each, commenting on them and giving them a continuity of sorts. In other words, he was very involved in the process and this personal imprint is evident throughout the book. His poetry and fiction largely unfolds in the context of the Congo and features Congolese images and symbols, traditional mores, riddles, proverbs, and legends. One of his plays is about the Southern African mythical personage Shaka Zulu (U Tam'Si 1978).

To look at Tchicaya as a translator of his culture flows out of the idea that Europhone African literature is inherently translation, discussed earlier. This translation is a linguistic process, as the writers translate from their vernacular language into the European language and not a cultural translative process. But if we look at oral narratives as texts, then we can examine how the African authors translate these texts and their culture into their novels, in what manner, and what the implications of this might be.

How U Tam'Si perceived the translation of traditional African narratives can be seen in his preface to *Légendes*:

De la 'chose orale' à la 'chose écrite,' il y a un monde sur lequel il faut savoir jeter un pont, afin que le transfert de richesses de l'une à l'autre rive soit possible. Il ne s'agit pas encore des pertes fatale que subit un texte que l'on traduit d'une langue dans une autre. Il y a déjà de cela. Mais il y a l'exubérance et les trop riches inventions verbales de la langue parlée qui s'accommodent mal des canons de la langue écrite. L'expérience peut être répétée: enregistrez lors d'une veillée une légende! Essayez ensuite, avec la plus stricte fidélité, de transcrire ce texte. On constatera que si, à l'audition de la bande magnétique, le récit demeure intelligible, à la lecture, les points de repère, accents, tons, respirations (ponctuations) devenant imperceptibles, le même récit paraît lourd, par moments illisible, sinon fade et flasque. (20)

This passage clearly indicates his acute feeling for the verbal texture of the legends, whose essence he felt was lost in the translation from an oral to a written form. And, he says, this loss was double when the work was transcribed into the culture of another language. In the case of the legends he was compiling, one can only imagine that, considering that at least 7 of the 14 tales in the collection were translations from the German into French, this loss was further compounded in their translation from another European language, four times removed from the oral narrative.

Ultimately, he believed, only the vernacular languages could truly express the spirit of the oral tradition. In the translation from vernacular to European languages "La perte de la richesse de ces langues pour la culture africaine serait dramatique. Dans la mesure où ces langues sont un facteur d'équilibre intellectuel et culturel, en retrouvant leur fonction littéraire, elles décriraient mieux que toute autre langue les lignes de forces du génie original des cultures africaines" (*Légendes* 21).

However, in the translation of this orature, to minimize the inevitable loss in translation, he believed that strict adherence to the form of the original was the best method of bringing out the true spirit of the text. He expressed it thus: "Peu importe la lettre, pourvu qu'on ait l'esprit, pourrait-on dire! Certes, mais si la lettre témoigne d'une

démarche propre à tel génie culturel, d'une manière d'exprimer les idées, elle ne peut que constituer un élément appréciable d'investigation intellectuelle" (*Légendes* 21). Clearly he believed that in the case of traditional African narratives their form was an integral part of their cultural essence. And, by extension, in transcribing these texts, literal translation was the best way to capture this essence.

Thus when he translated the "texts" of his traditional culture into his novels he practised what we might describe as a foreignizing method. There are at least three manifestations of this foreignizing discourse in *Les cancrelats*. First, out of respect for his belief that ultimately only in the vernacular language could the narratives' true meaning be transmitted, he frequently quotes traditional songs, sayings, poems and evocations in the vernacular. He then either provides translations, or more frequently explains them contextually, very skilfully incorporating this explanation into the narrative. For example, when Ndundu meets his sister Liambu for the first time on his return, she calls on the ancestors to witness their reunion: "Mais je m'oublie...Attends que j'appelle les mânes. Vous les morts, n'entendez-vous pas? je vous appelle. Je vous prends à témoin. Liambu mpé Liambu s'oublie" (LC 31). Here "Liambu mpé" is a traditional way of addressing the ancestors, and Tchicaya translates it as "Liambu s'oublie."

Second, he does not routinely use the French translations of the African characters' names but used their Vili names, some of which sound very foreign to a Western ear. For example, Ndundu's employer in Grand-Bassam is Boulh'Yeng Mkossu Hmoyho, Ndundu's brother's name is Tchiluembh, and their father's name is Mué Mbumbh Buangh. Sometimes he provided explanations of the names' meanings in the text. For instance, later in the novel a minor character is introduced whose names are

Mpussa, which means *bagatelle*, Mbissi, which means *poisson*, and Tchifoli, which means *la punaise*. Third, he retains the vocative form of address characteristic of Vili traditional discourse, for example, *Ya Tchiluembh*. This grammatical voice is a vehicle of extensive information about traditional kinship, rules of precedence and attitudes (see my discussion of the vocative later).

Finally, in Vili culture as in many other African cultures, proverbs are an integral part of the orature and the group's accumulated knowledge. We might see Tchicaya's extensive incorporation of traditional proverbs and sayings as another foreignizing aspect of his translation of Vili oral culture.

Nostalgia for his native land also inspired U Tam'Si's translation. A similar nostalgia was expressed by the Cuban writer, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, when he said about Havana: "everywhere I go I have Havana on my mind. All my writings are visions of Havana. My contention is that by remembering I can rebuild Havana, brick by word, word by word, all guided by my memory. But my memory belongs to Havana...I use nostalgia to form and inform what I write" (Levine). This process of rebuilding his home city with his words of nostalgia seems to echo in these words of Tchicaya's: "Mon apostolat, c'est magnifier le Congo, privilégier le Congo. Ce n'est pas une vue étriquée d'un nationalisme borné; loin de là. Mais c'est la possibilité de se donner. Car dans la poésie, le fleuve, qui est le symbole, la matérialité fluide du Congo, se jette à la mer. C'est une vision qui prépare au don total de soi" (qtd. in Mba-Zue 5).

However, even though nostalgia might be an inspiration, it also frequently engenders disillusion. The vision U Tam'Si presents in *Les Cancrelats* is not at all an idealized one, and Ndundu's return to his native land is not what he had hoped for. This

disillusionment is manifested in Ndundu's inability to negotiate the traditional discourse, but it is also symbolized by "the country air" ("l'aire du pays") which represents everything good he anticipates, and after he arrives, all his disillusionment. As he writes to his former employer, Boulh'Yeng, "On a beau se promener le nez en l'air à l'affût...Par moments c'est étouffant. Rien n'y fait, c'est étouffant. Il arrive qu'on se bouche le nez...L'air a mauvaise haleine" (LC 44).

One could also see Tchicaya's translation in the light of Makouta-Mboukou's description of *négritude* as the locus of the desire by African authors to reclaim their ecological sources in their writing. Frequently the metaphors Tchicaya chooses with which to translate his culture are bound up with the landscape, the land, the flora and the fauna. However, his vision is far from idealized, rather, it is full of some of the most intensely realistic, anti-exotic passages. Death, drought, and poverty are the constant features of this cultural translation. When the flatness, matter-of-factness of his description is compared with the exaggerated ecstatic exoticism of African landscape that was typical of colonial observers, it is difficult not to see this as a deliberate attempt to de-exoticize the Congolese countryside on Tchicaya's part. In the following passage Ndundu has newly arrived in "his country" and we see the land through his eyes:

Ndundu admira son frère aîné. Tchiluembh se leva, fit craquer toutes ses articulations, une à une, se dilua dans la pénombre de la véranda. Il n'y avait plus qu'un pas entre l'ombre du toit et celle de l'avocatier. Un pas de luminosité aveuglante. Il y a la sèche odeur de sous-bois. Il y a le strident chorus des cigales. Il y a la terre qui pue la teigne. "Quand tu retourneras au soleil, tu verras que la glace est une bonne chose." Il y a cette phrase de De l'Escaut, son patron. Et maintenant? Il y a la terre qui ne regarde peut-être même pas...Ce goût de rance dans la bouche. La lourdeur dans les jambes. Les bras qui n'en finissent pas de joindre les épaules. La rogne de son frère aîné comme une hostilité, alors que...L'ombre du toit et celle de l'avocatier se rejoignent. (LC 29)

This inventory of the land is recited in a flat, monotonous tone like a chant, which

depends on short sentences and the repetition of “Il y a.” Even though the passage is very evocative, what it evokes is a kind of stillness and heat and hopelessness:

Tchiluembh got up, cracked all his joints, one by one, and then dissolved into the shadow of the veranda. It was no more than a step between the shade of the roof and that of the avocado tree. A step of blinding luminosity. There is the dry odour of the undergrowth. There is the cicadas’ strident chorus. There is the earth reeking like hell. “When you return to the sun, you will discover that ice is good.” There is this saying of de l’Éscout, his boss. And now? There is the earth that is perhaps not even looking at him. This rancid taste in his mouth . . . Heaviness in his legs. Arms that don’t seem to join his shoulders. His older brother’s anger, a kind of hostility, while...The shadows of the roof and the avocado tree merged (CR 67).

One can see this tellurism in *Les cancrelats* as a literary act of reclaiming the landscape, people, culture, flora and fauna of the Congo. This idea of writing as an act of reclaiming, appropriating one’s land has been mentioned in the context of Aimé Césaire’s work by Indira Karamcheti. According to this author, Césaire’s poetic practice was “a struggle to name and inhabit the local place” (182), and by writing the kind of poetry he wrote he was “asserting his right to represent that land, to name and occupy it” (183). In this ultimate anthropomorphizing gesture he was appropriating a colonial discourse, writing over it, writing himself into it and writing it into himself to make it his own. So when Césaire says: “Je dirais orage. Je dirais fleuve. Je dirais tornade. Je dirais feuille. Je dirais arbre. Je serais mouillé de toutes les pluies, humecté de toutes les rosées” (Césaire 8), by naming these phenomena, he claims them, he becomes them in order to render them ordinary, unexotic.

As Tchicaya translates, not signs but symbols, he is reclaiming the ecological source of his past from colonialism: this textualization of his past, a response to his intellectual (and physical) exile. In this metaphorical translative figure the land, the people, and the culture of the Congo are the missing “ecological source” of his

translation.

My Foreignizing Translation of *Les cancrelats*

Even if one thinks one is translating in a foreignizing manner, fluency has a way of insidiously creeping back in. Resisting fluency means unlearning years of inculcation at school, at university, about the importance of fluency at all costs. Writing comes before translating, and one imagines that a large part of what makes a good translator is to be a “good” writer. But most often in learning to write and translate, “good” means “fluent.”

As I revisited the source text and the translation it became clear that I could often leave Tchicaya’s syntax intact without betraying my language. Sometimes during the initial revision stage I changed my first literal translation into something that was more “current.” Take the first sentence of the second paragraph. The original sentence reads: “Cette question précipita le rythme des battements du coeur de Ndundu” (*LC* 9). Before my final revision, the sentence read “At that question, Ndundu’s heart rate quickened.” This translation involved major changes to the original, including making the first part of the sentence a prepositional clause, introducing a comma, and turning it into the passive voice. The more literal, revised sentence reads: “That question precipitated the tempo of Ndundu’s heartbeat” (*CR* 43). In this sentence there is no grammatical reason why the vocabulary and the syntax in the English can’t be almost the same as the French. I also discovered the importance of punctuation: it sets the rhythm for the flow, and changing the punctuation changes the pace of the prose. Thus every phrase has to be questioned: does this have to be this way, or can the authors way be transported into English and still “sound” pleasing? Am I exceeding the texture of this text? Searching for this balance by reading against the source text and then distancing from it is the “manipulation” involved

in literal translation.

When choosing vocabulary, the fluent strategy would be to choose words that are as different as possible from the French words, and always choose the more colloquial, less foreign-sounding, “easier” words. In my foreignizing translation, the strategy was to choose the word that was closest in *sound* to the French word, if possible, and only choose another word if necessary to preserve the meaning. Since French and English are so closely related, many words sound the same because they have the same roots, and many English words have French or Latin roots.

For example, when Ndundu talks about “sa défunte femme” (LC 13), my first instinct was to translate it as “my dead wife.” To my fluent ear “defunct” sounds somehow like a euphemism for “dead.” But “défunte” is a literary word in French, as it is in English. So if Tchicaya said “défunte,” and Shakespeare said “defunct,” I can say “defunct,” as in the following passage about the dead and the defunct: “Le hasard seul poussera quelqu’un au wharf...A défaut des vivants, il y a les morts qui seront là...Sa défunte femme aussi sera là, sur le quai du wharf” (LC 12). I translated it thus: “Only chance will bring someone to the wharf...And failing the living, the dead will be there...His defunct wife will also be there, on the quai of the wharf” (CR 47).

I retained the French words if they have been absorbed into the English language, even if they are not common usage and are more archaic and more “difficult.” For example, there is this poignant description of Tchiluembh, Ndundu’s brother: “Tchiluembh était une sorte de géant manqué, long et flexible, le haut du corps légèrement penché en avant” (LC 38). The word “manqué” appears in the English dictionary, defined as “failed, frustrated in the fulfilment of one’s aspirations.” So I could

have said “Tchiluembh was a sort of failed giant, long and flexible, his upper body slightly stooped.” In a foreignized translation, I chose to say “Tchiluembh was a kind of giant manqué, long and flexible, his upper body slightly stooped” (CR 77).

I did not italicize the foreign words that I have retained as foreign words.

Italicizing foreign words has the effect of drawing the reader’s attention to the fact of foreignness, provides a warning, perhaps gives them a convenient label for what they are reading, permitting them to ignore the foreignness. Not italicizing draws attention to the translation. By not marking the foreignness, I force the reader to pay attention to it cognitively, not just visually.

Surplus translation and Insufficient Translation in “The Cockroach and the Rooster”

In examining the “potential of translation into English, another dominant language, to subvert Césaire’s subversion,” Karamcheti proposes a poetics of translation that will “respect Césaire’s subversive intentions” (182). She proposes translating insufficiently, not-naming, refusing to translate, silence in translation as strategies to accomplish this. She also proposes excessive translation, or overly naming, which allows the translator to remark on the impossibility of translation, “the inadequacy of translation itself...translation...is marked as an unnatural act; it is revealed as unable to transform one text or word into another smoothly, invisibly, unremarkedly” (190).

She also proposes the use of glossaries, appendices, endnotes, footnotes, and translator remarks as excessive translation, saying that

The presence of footnotes...has an interesting effect. Not only do they work against invisibility and fluency, they set up, as Shari Benstock explains, a place to question ‘authority in fiction’ and actively engage the reader in the text. This kind of surplus translation can serve Césaire’s subversive purposes by preventing fluency, by not allowing the reader to accept the exotic easily. (192)

Tchicaya's intentions are not parallel to Césaire's, especially not in the early years of his writing career. He categorically stated that his goal in writing was not political or revolutionary on at least two occasions, including the following:

Je me souviens qu'en 57 [after the first black writers conference in Paris]...Glissant a fait une conférence. Dans cette conférence, il disait que l'écrivain doit être ce que l'on dit à peu près ici, celui qui a le fusil, celui qui fait la révolution. J'ai dit 'non'...La révolution ne se fait pas sur la place publique, pour l'écrivain. S'il doit y participer, je pense qu'il doit faire comme Tolstoi et Dostoievsky qui ont fait la révolution peut-être, qui ont préparé la révolution d'octobre en instruisant les gens. (qtd. in Killam)

Tchicaya saw his role as a teacher, he was engaged in a pedagogical and not a subversive poetics, but as I showed in the section on Tchicaya's hermeticism, de-exoticization does seem to have been one of his aims. This de-exoticization is one of the underpinnings of my application of Karamcheti's translative practices of insufficient translation and surplus translation in "The Cockroach and the Rooster." According to Rabassa, there is a risk that what is ordinary in the source text culture can become extraordinary in the target text culture (cited in Karamcheti 182). My foreignizing strategies aim to prevent re-exoticization of the de-exoticized cultural text in the target language. The greater the distance between the cultures, the greater risk of exoticization, so in an African text, especially a culturally bound one like *Les Cancrelats*, the risk of producing a re-exoticizing translation is great.

Surplus Translation

There are many inconsistencies of fact in *Les Cancrelats*, such as inconsistent spelling of proper names, which appear to be publisher's errors. To cite some instances, people's names are not spelled consistently (de l'Éscout calls Ndundu "Ndounedou" [LC 14] and "Ndundu" [LC 15]). At the end of the passage describing Ndundu's return by boat to in

his birthplace with his children, there is the postscript “Loango, 1910,” to indicate their location (*LC* 14). Later we read that Ndundu was born in Laongo (*LC* 15). There are two different spellings of Ndundu’s home village, “Mabindu” and “Mabindou” (*LC* 26).

Tchicaya deliberately introduced these misspellings to disrupt, confuse and disorient the reader, in the same way as Ndundu is disoriented. It seems that he used this strategy in *Les méduses ou les orties de la mer*. In his preface to *The Madman and the Medusa*, Eric Sellin says:

there are a number of passages in which Tchicaya presents contradictory information...there are contradictory versions of dress...Such variations abound in the novel and may be a device by which Tchicaya defines hearsay, distraction, hallucination, and dream. Another explanation, however, is that Tchicaya is consciously seeking to establish an opaque rather than a transparent style of writing, which is not amazing for a writer who lived in Paris during the most fashionable years of the New Novel...There come to mind...the deliberately varied facts and spelling of names...which render the style opaque and bring the viewer-reader’s attention back to the surface of the screen...or back to the surface of the book page (xl-xli).

In my surplus translation I not only reproduce the discrepancies of the original, but I also draw attention to them by inserting [*sic.*] after them. The goal is to make the reader of the translation as disoriented as Ndundu is and as the reader of the source text would be: which is the true spelling? In doing this, rather than silently correcting the errors as I might have done in a fluent translation, I also draw the reader’s attention to them, thus bringing the translation to the surface of the page and making it “opaque” as opposed to “transparent.” Finally, these textual bumps are like speed bumps that slow the reader down, in order not to lull the reader into a false sense that they are in familiar territory because of pre-existing impressions, an attempt to ensure that readers truly get a detailed sense of the texture of the narrative. Thus I am attempting in this way to “stage an alien reading experience...by using a marginal discourse to translate it” (Venuti 20).

Paratext

In my translative practice, surplus translation, specifically footnotes, serve several purposes. First, they are a way to draw attention to the fact of the translation and away from the narrative. But they also provide information, and as such, exegetic footnotes as surplus translation work in tandem with insufficient translation, in that they compensate paratextually for semantic loss in the text. Hence, in my translation footnotes serve to bring the translation to the surface, remark on it, foreground it, thus rendering the translation and the translator visible. But they also serve the purpose that Kwame Anthony Appiah describes in “Thick Translation”: to explain the African cultural context (817).

Just as translation is not innocent, neither are paratexts. In African fiction where traditional culture is prominent and the author uses exegetic paratexts, it seems obvious that some process of selection is at work. In *Les cancrelats*, almost all Tchicaya’s footnotes are either translations of passages in the Vili language (LC 39), or explanations of features of Vili culture, as in the reference to “poulet à la *muambe*” (LC 62). But as a result of his extensive immersion in French culture Tchicaya was a cultural hybrid. This was manifested in the range of non-African cultural references he drew on in his writing and did not explain. Consider the following passage: “Sur la pelouse du ‘Nid au Fauvettes,’ Ndundu mima la reddition de Vercingétorix. Et l’on rit très fort, même Edmond de Saint-Villars, qui dit que le soleil y est pour quelque chose dans la folie de Charles” (LC 17). Later in the text we are introduced to the *commandant*’s African interpreter and the public scribe for Mabindu, the Triton, a potentially treacherous figure and an unpleasant character: “L’interprète entra peu après. Un jeune homme, à la bouche

épaisse et fendu – un triton, des pieds à la tête” (LC 48). Tchicaya does not explain Vercingétorix or “the Triton.” The latter is a minor but somewhat important character in the novel since he symbolizes the colonial subject/collaborator par excellence. Whether these decisions as to what to explain and what not to explain were the result of an assumption that it was not necessary to explain non-African cultural references, or because Tchicaya was so immersed in French culture that he was not mindful at all of his audience,⁶ or finally because of an editorial decision beyond his control, is unknown. In publishing “The Cockroach and the Rooster,” I hope that it will be read and understood by as wide an audience as possible, so my exegetic footnotes, while still subjective, are somewhat more eclectic than are U Tam’Si’s.

Insufficient Translation

When one is resisting fluency, literal translation is insufficient translation. To extrapolate from Berman’s claim that ethnocentric translation requires massive intervention in the text, or “surlittérisation,” (1984, 114) one might think that insufficient translation, or literal translation, would involve less intervention in the text. When one is aiming to produce a foreignized text, the end result may appear to be closer to the source text and therefore less “manipulated.” But insufficient translation does not involve less manipulation, it just appears to do so. Under the rubric of insufficient translation I include the nontranslation of proper names and the literal translation of proverbs. These might be considered a less radical form of insufficient translation.

Proverbs and their Translation

In general proverbs can be characterized as pithy turns of speech that express wisdom and universal truths. The challenges in translating them are not linguistic but semantic. As

⁶ Thanks to Professor Paul Bandia for this idea (personal communication, March 6th, 2002).

Appiah points out, with proverbs “getting the meaning...right is hardly even a first step towards understanding” (809). They frequently draw on various poetic figures of speech for their effectiveness. McKelvey lists some of these as “metaphor, antithesis, play on words, rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, allusion [and] personification” (2). For example, they might draw on the use of a symbol that has a specific significance in that particular culture and might not resonate as such in another culture. In addition, they frequently have multiple possible meanings.

The literal approach to translating such context-specific figures has been advocated as the one that is preferred by African writers and is thus preferable for a foreignizing translation (Sumner-Paulin). This is the approach I adopted in “The Cockroach and the Rooster.” And in cases where the meaning of the proverb is not clear, literal translation is still preferable to the communicative approach, supplemented by a paratextual explanation if necessary. In a foreignizing translation the object is not to lull the reader into a false sense of belonging to the culture being described, but rather to sometimes allow uncertainty of meaning to be part of the reading experience. If necessary, semantic loss can be compensated for in translator’s notes.

U Tam’Si sometimes explained the meaning of the proverbs he used in *Les Cancrelats* contextually, and sometimes he did not. Consider, for example, the following passage that occurs not far into the novel:

“Tu vois la mer, crois-tu que le sable soit proche?” se dit Ndundu pour parodier un dicton qui l’avait guidé, malgré son pas très large et sa vue si basse, tout au long du voyage, très long au bout de la terre, soit dit sans exagération. On savait donc la terre proche. “Tu vois le sable, crois-tu que la mer soit proche?” dit en réalité le dicton, pour enseigner modération, épargne et patience. (LC 11)

The saying “when you see the sea, do you think that sand is nearby?” draws on a

metaphor of travelling and the ocean. Tchicaya tells us that it teaches “moderation, thrift and patience.” Perhaps a communicative translation would be “Do not judge a book by its cover.” However, in a culture where there are no books, this would be ludicrous. In this and most other cases Tchicaya provides sufficient contextual explanation to get a sense of the meaning. Given the importance of words in Kikongo culture, proverbs, with all their metaphors and symbols, are manifestations of the unique style of the Kikongo people. To replace these proverbs with ones that are meaningful in another cultural context would indeed be betrayal.

The Translation of Names

In “The Cockroach and the Rooster” I left all the names as they are in the original. But as an indication of how far the instinct to translate fluently has penetrated my consciousness, I debated whether even “de l’Escaut” would be too foreign for American readers and considered “De l’Escaut.” Ultimately I retained the name Charles de l’Escaut. The African names are even more strange for a non-African audience, since they use the vocative form, which is defined as “a grammatical case marking the one addressed, or just a word marking the one addressed.” Thus in *Les Cancrelats* Tchiluembh addresses Ndundu as “A’Ndundu,” Ndundu addresses Tchiluembh as “A’Ya Tchiluembh,” and Liambu addresses Ndundu as “A’Ndundu.”

The function of these forms was explained to me by a Congolese writer who is specialist on Tchicaya’s work. For example, when the Triton addresses Ndundu as “A’ta Thom Ndundu” (LC 41) “A” is a general vocative element, “ta” is the short form of “tata” (father, daddy, dad), since for the Kongo “ta” means all adult men, as a sign of respect. Ndundu calls Liambu “Ya Liambu” (ya = yaya, elder brother or sister) and the

children Prosper and Sophie, call her *Ta Liambu*. In this case, *ta* is the short form of *tata-nkento* (female father, i.e., aunt) (Mabana 2002).

Because of the importance of names and naming in Kikongo culture, I retained the traditional Vili names with their vocative form, retaining the spelling and usage. This is in contrast with the translators of Tchicaya's second novel, *Les méduses ou les orties de la mer*, who omitted this "tricky material" (Sellin xliii). This was in part to respect U Tam'Si's cultural "translation." But there are other justifications. According to Bandia, one of the pragmatic functions of code-switching and code-mixing in African novels is a "focusing" function, which he describes as "to isolate the addressee as the sole intended listener to the utterance in question," for example, direct address that explain kinship (1996, 145). In this instance, retaining the vocative seems to have a "focusing" function, which is important in this novel all about family and family relationships.

Finally, respect for the rules of personal precedence that are manifested in this vocative form and that are dictated by tradition is a major theme in *Les Cancrelats*.⁷ To illustrate this traditional observance of precedence, Tchiluembh, Ndundu's brother, blames himself for his father's death in the bush, which he says occurred because he did not observe the traditional forms of precedence: "Et si notre père n'était tombé que de fatigue, n'aurais-je pas eu assez de coeur pour lui tendre mon bras? Mais voilà, j'étais devant! Mon père était derrière!" (LC 35). In his cultural translation Tchicaya is also marking the strangeness of the traditional discourse through Ndundu's eyes by insisting on reproducing these traditional terms of respect.

Since Tchicaya chose not to translate the traditional names of the African

⁷ "All relationships are defined first by bloodline and then by the distinction between senior and junior status" (Bockie 19).

characters into French – most of which are sobriquets whose significance U Tam'Si often explains either in notes or in the text – but retained them in Vili, I did the same. There are, however, a few sobriquets that the author cites in French, mostly of European characters. For example, later in the novel there is a Portuguese commerçant who betrays Prosper by accusing him of theft (not in the portion translated for this thesis). His nickname is “l'Encorné.” The humour of the name would be lost if it were left untranslated, so the translator has to find a communicative equivalent. The obvious choice would be “Horny,” but in English this has sexual connotations which are not present in the French. “Corniferous,” which also means “horny,” might be a possible translation.

Because I am resisting translating this French colonial African novel into the British colonial context (more natural given my background!) I retained the colonial context of the source document as much as possible. This meant that the *Commandant* remained the *Commandant*, or more completely the *Commandant du cercle*. The British equivalent would be the Provincial Commissioner. The head of the French Equatorial Federation (all the colonies in French Equatorial Africa) was the *Gouverneur-Générale*. The equivalent in British colonies was the Governor (Crowder 133.) I also retained the French usage for all the place names (Grand-Bassam). The intention of this strategy is to foreignize the novel, it is a particularly effective because there is little or no loss of information to the reader but a considerable gain in foreignness.

Is it Translation?

Karamcheti proposes what could be characterized as a more radical insufficient translation, “not naming,” or “the refusal to translate” (190). In the case of Martinique

and Aimé Césaire's poetry, the flora and fauna were a pivotal object of textual reappropriation because they were so subject to exoticization in colonialist discourse. She says that the nontranslation of the names of flora and fauna "show[s] their utter linguistic ordinariness; there are no others (translation always implies the idea of linguistic alias)" (189).

I would like to conclude this commentaire with an experiment. The following passage appears later in the book (not part of this thesis) and describes the death of Ndehlou, the husband of Cécile (Sophie and Prosper's cousin) at the hands of the *Commandant's* wife:

Et pendant qu'elle chante, là-bas un tam-tam éructant se pâme. Parmi les fougères, l'eau clapote. Cécile traverse les marécages qu'il y a là, pendant la saison des pluies entre Mabindu et la Mission et où il est dangereux de se hasarder à cette heure de la nuit. C'est alors le rendez-vous des pires reptiles et des pires démons ! L'eau clapote, les grenouilles se taisent. Les crapauds se taisent. Les membres raides du cadavre s'incrument dans le corps de la veuve. Une étoile filante précède un long hululement d'oiseau nocturne. Cécile chante. Brumes, roseaux, fougères ! Une fugue de chouettes, puis une immense langue de feu éblouit la nuit. De chaque buisson sort un ricanement. Cécile tombe sur le dos les jambes en l'air. Comme un sanglot, comme une éclaboussure (LC 145).

With its supernatural, almost gothic quality, the passage could easily become exotic in a fluent translation. Can Karamcheti's strategy of insufficient translation be employed to translate it so that it is not exoticized in the target text? Here is the passage with the names of the flora and fauna translated normally:

And as she sings, an eructating tam-tam convulses in the distance. The water laps among the ferns. Cécile crosses the marshes that appear during the rainy season between Mabindu and the Mission, and where it is dangerous to venture at this hour of the night. That is the time when the worst reptiles and the worst demons gather there! The water laps. The frogs are silent. The toads are silent. The cadaver's rigid limbs intertwine with the widow's body. A shooting star, and then the long "whoo-who" of a nocturnal bird. Cécile sings! Fog, ferns, reeds! ...There is a fugue of owls, then an enormous tongue of fire dazzles the night. From every bush a sniggering can be heard. Cecile staggers. Cécile falls on her

back with her legs straight up in the air. Like a sob, like a splatter.

Refusing to translate the names of the plants and creatures into their known English equivalents and using their Latin names instead would produce the following text:

And as she sings, an eructating tam-tam convulses in the distance. The water laps among the felicineae. Cécile crosses the marshes that appear during the rainy season between Mabindu and the Mission, and where it is dangerous to venture at this hour of the night. That is the time when the worst reptiles and the worst demons gather there! The water laps. The ranidae are silent. The bufonidae are silent. The cadaver's rigid limbs intertwine with the widow's corpse. A shooting star, and then the long hulument of a nocturnal bird. Cécile sings! Dun, phragmites, felicineae...! There is a fugue of strigiforms, then an enormous tongue of fire dazzles the night. From every bush a sniggering can be heard. Cecile staggers. Cécile falls on her back with her legs straight up in the air. Like a sob, like a splatter.

The refusal to translate into English (I used the Latin names) does seem to make the text uglier. Such a text would also force the conscientious reader to stop and search for the common names of the flora and fauna. In these respects, it would achieve the goal of de-exoticizing the text, according to Karamcheti's concept. Whether this can be considered translation, I am not sure. That it goes beyond the *texture* of the original, there can be no doubt. Probably Antoine Berman would not approve.

Conclusion

This translation is a work in progress. Just as a work and its translations are in constant evolution, my translative position has evolved with the writing of this preface. As a student of translation studies, but also as an aspiring literary translator, having to defend my approach is necessarily an extremely subjective, self-conscious process, a personal quest, which this document reflects. Looking for the personal in the poetic, with Antoine Berman looking over my shoulder, this was a "recherche de la traductrice" (Berman 1995).

In translating this novel resisting fluency is resisting the exotic. It could have proven problematic for me, because I am a White translator from an “oppressor” culture, the “other” culture. But I prefer to see my experience in Africa as an advantage in that it lessens the degree of alterity with which I confront my “other.” Perhaps a more serious challenge in translating this text from Africa is confronting my own nostalgia for my childhood, for what the place Africa represents to me, my childhood and youth. Resisting fluency and resisting the exotic is not easy in combination with nostalgia. But perhaps this nostalgia of exile is a bond between U Tam’Si and myself. Undoubtedly as I translate Africa I am travelling into my past and translating it into the present. This hybrid text – this African text mediated by France, enables me to come to terms with my own cultural hybridity. I am Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and South Africa. I am Africa/l’Afrique and Canada/Québec. That is the translator I am.

THE COCKROACH AND THE ROOSTER

Luvesi u ye'nfundila

nkanu fa'ngandà susu

(The cockroaches went to plead a case in the roosters' court!)

1. Living on air

The journey had bent Ndundu's back a little. With his shoulders stooped, he turned around in front of his cabin door, glancing briefly inside where the children, his two children, were sitting tense with expectation. A girl and a boy, sitting next to a couple of round trunks and a fat gray canvas bundle.

"Is this your country, papa?" questioned Le Corbeau, who disappeared in the general commotion without waiting for the response to his question.

That question precipitated the tempo of Ndundu's heartbeat. He was returning after a long absence to "breathe the country air," but it was not the excess salt in the air that made the country air stifling, it was emotion. Granted, he was coming back "alone." With his two children, but alone, without his late wife...with his late wife; perhaps she was following from her heart from where she was, if not him, the children, because...He had left alone and a houseboy, he was not returning alone, and he was a tailor. And the children do count, oh how very much! They had their place in his heart as a father, a widowed father. All this was enough to throw a little confusion, a little emotion into a humble soul, into a sensitive soul. He was coming back to breathe the country air, with the children; would his dead wife continue to watch over them? Would that it not be only over the children. In Ndundu's heart that was so tense and so little suited to laughter, a

little thing was enough to cast doubt where there was none.

“Papa!” responded Sophie, putting her right index finger on her nose. A habit of this child who had inherited her mother’s light complexion, and whose liveliness was tempered by too much sensitivity, propriety and modesty.

“Did I call you, child?” asked Ndundu, startled to hear his daughter respond to a call that had not passed his lips. Unless...No.

“Yes papa,” responded Sophie, looking to her little brother to back her up. But Prosper, who had inherited his father’s soft, heavy eyelids, did not back her up.

Ndundu no longer knew whether he had called his daughter. Was this a good omen for a return to one’s native land?⁸

“Perhaps I did call you. Come onto the bridge. It won’t be long.”

Their cabin had surely seen worse than Ndundu’s distraction and grief. Sophie took Prosper’s hand, and Prosper took his father’s hand. On the bridge, the murmuring voices stifled the clamour of the sea and the ship. There was no chaos, in Ndundu’s soul and in his head there was only vertigo ...bric-à-brac, a bag of knots in his skull. It was enough to make everything seem distorted, to make you suspect every word; it even played havoc with his body, heart and all.

The past is always tricky, you can fool it, but you risk finding yourself back to back with it anyhow. Standing between his two children, he scratched the bottom of his chin with the extremely long nail of the little finger on his right hand. This very hard nail was a useful tool of the trade that had made him the man he had become. It gave a good fold to the hem before he ran the needle over it.

At the approach of land, the passengers got excited, and Ndundu could not follow

his thoughts where they wanted to go. Trying to unravel them in his head made him sweat more than did the heat of the bodies in the crowd of passengers, with their acrid, hostile sweatiness. The weary movement that he hid from his children, who paid scant attention to the state of his soul anyway, plunged him into a feeling of powerlessness. Powerlessness at not being able to direct his thoughts, mixed with impatience at not arriving where his thoughts wanted to go, ahead of them! “When you see the sea, do you think the sand is nearby?” Ndundu asked himself, parodying a proverb that had guided him, in spite of the very large step he had taken and his low perspective, throughout the journey, very long to the ends of the earth, which was no exaggeration. So they knew that land was close. “When you see sand, do you think the sea is nearby?” says the dictum in reality, to teach moderation, thrift and patience. Ndundu stifled a yawn. This made his face tighten, and there was a trace of irritation in his jaw. Expectation and heat formed a haze around the ship. Sophie and Prosper, statufied by their father’s silence, did not move. Ndundu was surprise by this, but he said to himself: “It is not a bad sign that the children are aware of their father’s problems.” He had taken the risk of coming out into the open with these problems.

“Yes, but what was the risk?” The risk of nostalgia? Of course, nostalgia can really cut you up. But a risk? One does not cure oneself of nostalgia like that. Alright: you answer a mother’s call, you come into the world, you are in the world, and then what? Life takes you. What it does with you is nobody’s outlook. The best road is not laid out in advance. And the good road is not easier than the bad road. All you have to do is avoid the road that leads nowhere. Sometimes a road ends up someplace other than your destination. That is what Mué Mbumbh Buangh said. He will repeat it to Prosper

⁸ Reference to Aimé Césaire’s poem “Cahier d’un retour aux pays natale.”

when it is time.

Who was that other in Ndundu, with whom he conversed like a lunatic? He was asking himself this question when the memory of another question, one of “his delights” as a child, surged in.

“Who is *your* father?”

“Mué Mbumbh Buangh,” he replied with that tic he couldn’t stand now in his daughter (fiddling with her nose every time someone asked her something); perhaps it also reminded him of his late wife?

“Your father is Mbouyou’s son, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And if he was born in Kondi, he must be the one who...?”

A loaded question. All his genealogy was there. His genealogy and his identity. His place in the line.

Rehashed, or rather reformulated like a ritual. Son of the son, of the son of...And your name is? Ndundu N’noliji! He laughed at this, it annoyed him. Oh well, the fact that he was thinking about it now proved the point. To look at the past you have to go right back into the recesses of your memory. But with this bric-à-brac in his brain, how far should he go?

The torpor of nostalgia was still there in Ndundu’s body. It was Ndundu’s decision to return. He had arrived, or almost. What was plaguing him so?

Why was he standing there, in the middle of the bridge, spoiling the excitement of the other people who seemed to be already happy to be back, among their own, or just to touch the ground, even with their feet, it was good to touch the ground. Was it the

exhaustion of waiting too long?

The ship moved slowly to the centre of a circular horizon that was blurred with the haze of the heat. From where would the land come? Because they had turned around on themselves, no one knew any more from where the land would appear. It is not just the disembarking that mattered, the welcome also mattered. But would they recognize him? He had left as a houseboy; he was returning comfortably off and wearing expensive clothes, made of good cloth under which he was sweating all the water in his body. So what! What mattered was the reception he was given when he was recognized. And if there was a welcome...

Only chance will bring someone to the wharf. Neither Tchiluembh, nor Liambu, if they are still alive, know that their younger brother will be, before noon, setting foot upon the ground of his ancestors, after quite a long absence that took him to the ends of the earth; shrug your shoulders if this speaks to you!⁹ And failing the living, the dead will be there...His defunct wife will also be there, on the quai of the wharf.

Before leaving Grand-Bassam, Ndundu had been to his wife's tomb, his eyes fervently closed, to pick one, two, three blades of grass. For each blade of grass he had said: "I am going. I am taking Sophie, I am taking Prosper." And holding them to his heart, he had said while picking the third, "Come with us if you like..."¹⁰

And she had followed them. Perhaps. She definitely had followed them, because

⁹ Reference to a superstition that shrugging one's shoulders wards away bad luck. Perhaps U Tam'Si is addressing his readers, his confreres, referring to the fact that so many Africans in the Diaspora had had the same experience.

¹⁰ This is the first of several references to grass on his wife's grave. It could be a reference to a belief similar to this one described by Suzanne Césaire (wife of Aimé Césaire), in *Tropiques*: "Un des contes populaires du folklore martiniquais: l'herbe qui pousse sur la tombe est la vivante chevelure de la morte, qui proteste contre la morte. Toujours le même symbole: la plante. Sentiment vif d'une communauté vie-mort. Bref, *sentiment éthiopien de la vie*. Donc, le Martiniquais est typiquement éthiopien." (qtd. in Irele xxxiv).

there was not one night that he did not see his wife in his sleep. She was cutting the crests of the waves with her arms in an enormous scissor-like movement; she was blowing on a tuft of grass to remove the dust from the road. And the dew as well. “Dew hurts sensitive feet,” she explained. Between Douala and Port-Gentil, the defunct had told one of her friends whom Ndundu did not know, about the reason for this voyage.

“A long journey, yes, but it is still only a stroll...For a long journey, you leave with empty hands, but, you know, my husband and the children are going for a stroll, getting a bit of air, they really must have enough.”

What had his defunct wife’s friend replied? Ndundu did not remember any more. He only remembered that it had reduced his children to tears precisely because of what Lohya their mother was supposed to have replied. His own thoughts had haunted his nights, had made his sleep insalubrious.

A birdcage disgorged passengers into rowing boats. There was jostling, shouting while they waited their turn. It was really her: in the crowd, his mother had her back to him on the wharf, next to a bald man, was that his mother’s first husband, Liambu’s father whom he no longer recognized?¹¹ A bit more and Ndundu would dislocate his neck craning it like that above the crowd. Someone shoved him and he lost “his mother” from view. He must not let his emotions get the better of him. On the quai of the wharf, Ndundu did not find a minute to himself. He watched himself from the outside. He was wearing a suit of the best cloth, a gold fob chain on his waistcoat and a cane in his hand, which he promenaded in front of him before setting down his shod foot, like a blind man. Ndundu saw himself with his children, unbearable in themselves amongst the rags and the tatters. They were being looked at.

“Quickly! Quickly!” he said to his children.

It was midday. Their energy drained, with the sun beating down on their heads and the stridulations of the cicada’s song.

Loango, 1910

Paris, 26 May 1900

Ndundu knocked on the door of Monsieur de l’Escaut’s office in his hesitant manner that Monsieur recognized.

“Come in,” said Monsieur, who was writing at his desk. “Come in,” he repeated without raising his voice.

Ndundu went in and stammered the very sensible supposed reasons for his resignation.

“Explain yourself, ‘Ndounedou,’” said de l’Escaut, condescendingly.

“Monsieur, I am leaving for the country,” said Ndundu, with a tilt of his head that signified “It is with regret.”

Ndundu looked up at the naked women in the large painting on the wall behind his boss. His mouth tightened with disgust at such immodesty: those naked women! He always crossed himself – not in front of Monsieur – when he went into the office for service.

De l’Escaut had a pinched smile and twirled his moustache. He put on his monocle.

“When are you leaving?” he asked, while crossing out a phrase on the sheet of pale green paper in front of him.

¹¹ Liambu and Ndundu have different fathers and the same mother.

Ndundu responded to the irony with a seriousness that pained de l'Escaut.

"When Monsieur wishes. I am leaving in a month."

"Ah! In a month? So don't say 'when Monsieur wishes.'"

De l'Escaut was not angry. Ndundu trembled. His feet and hands were damp. De l'Escaut did not seem to be taking Ndundu seriously.

"Right, so you are leaving? You will get a good recommendation. Too bad! You are leaving a friend. I see that this is as difficult for you as it is for me."

"I am sorry, Monsieur!"

"Come on, 'Ndoundedou!' Are we friends or not?"

And de l'Escaut got up and went to pat Ndundu's shoulder.

"Look here! You'll write to me when you want to come back..."

"Yes, Monsieur," said Ndundu very quickly.

"That's settled, Ndundu. Don't say anything about this to Madame yet."

Charles de l'Escaut, whose respectability had made him popular in Laongo [*sic.*], took his houseboy and launderer, Thom' Ndundu, to France, through Europe, and then to America. This was a good decade before the beginning of the century.

Laongo, where Ndundu was born, is a few days walk from the estuary of the Congo River. De l'Escaut had been here and there in Africa. From the Congo, he wrote to his beautiful cousin Alberte de Saint-Villars about things that meant absolutely nothing to her. For example, "The savanna on the Batéké plateau is not the same as the Atlantic coast." Even the Atlantic evoked nothing for Alberte. And yet it was their entire

youth...The Atlantic, Île d'Oléron,¹² the rocks on the lighthouse shore, how could one forget all that? Had he, de l'Escaut, forgotten the "Warbler's Nest." In these letters from de l'Escaut, Alberte always found a distant reminder, not so much because of the distance, but because Alberte had too many memories, a distant reminder of a detail about life in the "Nest."

In the letter in which Charles de l'Escaut announced his return, he said to her: "You cannot imagine the surprise that is waiting for you!" Alberte did not imagine anything. She was not in the least concerned about her cousin's arrival. "He is mad about me" was all she said to her friends.

Madame de l'Escaut was too capricious. Her approach to life was too on-edge. So incompatible with Charles. "His Tartar," as she said. All in all, Laure and Alberte were far from being two sides of the same coin. Alberte had a noble detachment and Laure was consumed by a vapid frenzy. Be that as it may, Saint-Villars had done nothing to deserve Alberte! The happy Épinal image: the beautiful, sad couple, Charles and Alberte.

"It is unhealthy, this obsession of your cousin Charles!"

"But it amuses him. Are you jealous?"

"Me? No!"

De l'Escaut knew that the arrival of every one of his letters brought out the bile in his cousin-in-law. But since Alberte did not forbid him to write..."Her detachment makes her even more superb," he said to himself, and wrote even more beautiful things.

And when de l'Escaut arrived from the Congo, he was outdone in the "Nest" by

¹² An island off the Atlantic coast in South-West France which has been a favourite resort since the end of the 19th century due to its warm climate.

Ndundu, loaded with spears, arrows, quivers and shields, like a warrior going to battle. With trophies in hand – leopard, panther and lion skins – Ndundu rode the stretch from Passy to Saint-Cloud in a carriage driven by Monsieur's chauffeur, wearing a coachman's livery. The people strolling on the Bois de Boulogne were the first to see the spectacle. Alberte and her guests were expecting her cousin's visit. They were surprised by the din on the street and when the coach door opened and the strange cortège entered, they were speechless.

“Charles's negro! An Alexander on his chariot! He has sent me a negro Alexander! He is crazy about me! Oh! Laure must be mad!” Alberte had never enjoyed herself so much.

On the doorstep of the “Warbler's Nest,” Ndundu mimed the surrender of Vercingétorix.¹³ And everyone laughed very hard, even Edmond de Saint-Villars, who said that even the sun was a part of the scenery in Charles's lunacy.

“Pranks, dear friend,” corrected Alberte.

When it came to pranks, they did not get much better than this! For Ndundu, it was the least of evils. He gave a show that did not humiliate him. It should be understood that humiliation for him was people's contempt and not their laughter. And even if he did notice that they were laughing at the ludicrousness of his situation, was he the most ludicrous? He was being obliging, he had not initiated anything.

Charles remembered his return from the Congo and smiled bitterly. He watched sadly as Ndundu went back to work. Ndundu, who laughed at anything unusual: without him life would be impossible in the huge Passy apartment.

¹³ A Gallic leader who led a rebellion against Julius Caesar in 54 BC. He held out against him and defeated him several times, until he was surrounded on a hilltop in Alesia, Gaul, and starved out. He surrendered

How could he explain this perpetual desire to vomit at the sight of everything? His wife's imbecilic frenzy, the little bit of pure pleasure he derived from her fortune; so distressing, so distressing! And he had not been born to be wealthy, any more than to be poor. He coughed, he smoked, he did not curse life, but he fled Laure's receptions! His son Jean's future did not worry him. As had been true for himself, anything was possible for Jean. So much the better if he dreamed about the colonial empire. He will escape this monotonous turpitude that was so lacking in chivalry. It was a good thing that Jean did not owe his confidence in life to his father. After all, Laure only lived for herself. When she went out with Jean, he was her younger brother or a cousin her age! Everything was unnatural around Charles. He no longer knew whether *L'Oeuf et le Masque* was a literary or a political newspaper, nor why he had founded it. And then again, why had his mother taken it upon herself to dust off a particule¹⁴ that an ancestor had abandoned in a republican fury? And then, Alberte died romantically of tuberculosis, leaving him with one more terror, him, the chevalier of the new French empire!

The ridiculousness of all these things was suddenly awoken in him, disagreeably, because Ndundu wanted to leave. In Marienburg, he had passed Ndundu off as the emperor of Ethiopia! In New York, when he was not allowed to share his apartment in the hotel with his negro king, he told Ndundu: "Never mind, they are savages!" Why was he coughing? Because he had to finish it all, and the reprieve he believed he had been granted was enduring. He was forty years old. Ndundu had made him laugh like a drain for ten years. And now Ndundu was leaving him.

"It is settled, Ndundu!"

after over a year. He is seen as a symbol of national freedom by the French.

¹⁴ Refers to the preposition "de" used as a prefix of nobility in personal names.

Ndundu had again said, "I am sorry, Monsieur!"

Alright, come on now! Ndundu said to himself emphatically. What is this? A rich man who inspires pity, that made one feel disgusted to be poor. Ndundu's heart was hard, because he needed to make this voyage irresistibly, like the desire to make love. It came down to him. The salinity of the air was nothing compared with the disgust that the dampness of Charles de l'Escaut's handshake left imprinted on his hand. Poor Monsieur! This was the kind of thought that was dictated by reason and not the heart, when the heart was elsewhere.

Ndundu was going back to his native land, he rejoiced within himself. And the warm images of the country that were conjured up choked him. He holed himself up in his cabin until he got as far as Bassam, and there he made the mistake of going ashore. He walked for a long time on streets he did not know, searched for someone from his "country" to whom he could give a wave in passing, from whom he could ask about the rumours in the country, and mistook the stop-over time. The boat left with the modest fortune in four trunks that de l'Escaut had plied him with, but without Ndundu.

A mistake? No. What a relief, in fact, to lose something he thought he had taken from a dying man! That was not a salary. A dying man does not know what he is giving, it was up to him, Ndundu, to know to refuse, without being disagreeable. One has to know to refuse...Especially since there were some who would quickly suspect as theft what should only be seen as an act of charity from one man to another. But fate was having its sport, or else it was taking a good stab at it.

Ndundu wandered around in Grand-Bassam, found a roof with someone from his "country" that some suggested he pay a visit after his misfortune.

The warehouse, Boulh'Yeng's workshop, looked out over a large square on the edge of the native quarter, almost in the European quarter. And there was a military camp next door, which gave Boulh'Yeng's workshop a lot of work.

While he was waiting for the next boat Ndundu wanted to find work as a houseboy. Boulh'Yeng' advised against it, saying that Ndundu would not be able to stand working as a houseboy, here or in the country, after having done that work over there where he had been treated with such respect.

"So you didn't you learn in the books that over there they say 'There are no stupid jobs'? Isn't that true? Well, over here, we say 'There are stupid jobs, and to do them, in addition to the price, one gets kicked in the ass for a pittance.'"

"It is true," said Ndundu, recognizing that the "old" man was right.

"You are adroit, aren't you? And patient?"

"You think that I can learn...?"

Ndundu was a bit simple. This fact did not escape the roguish Boulh'Yeng, half of whose apprentices consisted of "those down-and-outs" spat out by the boats as they passed through Grand Bassam. They were, for the most part, people from the coast who had been stowaways. On landing in Grand-Bassam or elsewhere, they would wander through the town looking for compatriots to "visit." Boulh'Yeng had a knack for finding among these visitors a relative to whom he would recommend learning the trade. A relative to whom one teaches a trade, that must make him seem generous!

With Boulh'Yeng, Ndundu learnt the tailor's trade. He pulled the needle and raised mournful eyes to look at the coloured thread. Nevertheless he learned very fast. In Grand-Bassam people were poor, it was also like that at home. And he had left de

l'Escaut for that. But does one hate one's mother, even if she is ugly or bad? No, of course not, the proverb says quite the opposite. So, along with his piety, there was bitterness mixed with gall at his misfortune. But Ndundu had managed to save himself, because he had a secret desire to reinvent himself. He did not regret the negro paradise of Harlem, or the blazing lights of Marienbourg. Now, this little place where he found himself, even crushed by the sun and labour, was exactly right for him. "One foot on firm ground is worth more than a big mouth open on the world," said another proverb. The tenets of his moral code were all expressed in this latter saying, in other words, "When you see the sand, do you think that the sea is nearby?"

Without this restraint, this sage and naïve detachment in the face of all the opportunities throughout the time he had followed de l'Escaut, how could he not find this place hell? Nothing else could explain this decision he had taken to leave de l'Escaut.

Ndundu pulled the needle through, paying excessive attention to every little move, as if he were studying the sensation each one of them aroused within him.

Without complaining to him for having lost everything en route, even without blaming him for it, Charles de l'Escaut responded as follows to Ndundu's letter:

My dear Ndoundedu,

I am not dead yet, but I am going to die. The health is not exactly brilliant. I have seen someone about your baggage. When the boat goes through Grand-Bassam again, you will go and see the Captain. Take the same boat if you want to come back. I will still be alive, etc.

This letter from de l'Escaut filled Ndundu with confusion. So he had asked for compensation for the loss suffered, at least, he had lodged a complaint about it! He was

sad about it. He had wanted to make the best of his bad fortune, and now that good fortune was hounding him, he felt remorse. Wicked heart, wicked heart. And what had made him write?

“What is upsetting about that letter?” asked the old man Boulh’Yeng. Ndundu handed him the letter. Having read the letter, Boulh’Yeng thought of his niece, Lohya. Ndundu had also thought about Lohya on writing to de l’Escaut, but did not dare admit it to himself.

“There is nothing bad in this letter. You never told me...”

“Oh!”

“Don’t say ‘oh!’ When someone is your age, being quiet is a waste of your mouth. When you are quiet, it means that you are thinking about something or someone.” Boulh’Yeng emphasized “someone,” but about who, about what?

Ndundu’s said as little as possible to Boulh’Yeng:

“My head is not clear enough to think.”

He had this habit of sighing while taking his chin in his hand to open digressions and close them.

“Quite ‘drole’ for a White man. You had left before he became the commandant in Loango.”

“And why did you leave him? He is quite a goldmine, isn’t he?”

“The country air, it’s lot more than that, isn’t it?” replied Ndundu, without even taking the trouble to think.

Boulh’Yeng thought: he is mad. Ndundu looked at his hands. They were long. They appeared longer than ever to him. Too long to be taken as witnesses. Too much to

be valuable witnesses. Because a testimony has to be brief to deal with the spirits. His interminable hands prattled and prattled and prattled... They talked for too long, about what, exactly? A sigh never said anything precise, but nevertheless, it was with a sigh that Ndundu responded to many troubling questions that he asked himself, when it was not to mark a digression!

Boulh'Yeng swore because one of the apprentices had just broken a sewing machine needle. He calmed down when Lohya came into the workshop. Boulh'Yeng had brought this niece in from the country. He had given her the name Lohya, because the young girl had a habit, not to put too fine a point on it! She always arrived in time so that you did not get beside yourself with anger. And she always had a stopper¹⁵ on hand, spoke in stoppers, she had all kinds of them. And "heartstopper" was another word for "Lohya." Her kindness, that was the worst of her heartstoppers. She knew how to stop the hearts that were the most prompt to spread their bitterness. Too gay, too generous.

"She never has anything for herself, and she would like me to be like her. But, if we did allow ourselves, where would she lead us?" Everyone in the shop caught their breath when she appeared. For Ndundu, she was like the country. Lohya, she was the country that had come ahead of him, to meet him. Chance had dictated that there always be a place for custom, the custom that said that you go ahead of the one who was coming, of the one who was returning. Ndundu breathed even harder than the others in the

¹⁵ This is one of the more arcane references in the novel. Apart from being a cork, a stopper, or a float for fishing, a *bouchon* can also be a bottleneck, or a wisp of straw. There is also a reference to a "stopper" in *The Madman and the Medusa* (*Les méduses* 54): "He hears the voice of his father. They had realized that one 'stopper' wasn't enough for the big bottle that his family represented. Count: More than one mouth, more than one body. Of course, we have always been prolific. So one 'stopper' for so many mouths, so many bodies, wouldn't do" (*The Madman* 37). The word "stopper" in this context seems to have to do with the living person being the repository for perpetuation of the race, symbolized by the bottle or receptacle, and the passage of the seed from one generation to the next. The reference could be to an traditional Vili concept, or it could be one of Tchicaya's "privately encoded references" (Sellin xi). In the context of *Les*

workshop. His body detached itself from him, split away. Then air engulfed it, causing havoc, deafening him, enlivening his senses. He experienced a compulsive desire to touch, to feel, to taste, to listen, to devour Lohya's eyes, senses, hands.

In her voice that was cool as a drink of water, Lohya asked:

"What is that letter, uncle?"

Mischievously, Boulh'Yeng said:

"Look, I am returning it to its owner. Take it, A'Ndundu. Please excuse my indiscretion."

"Excuse me," said Lohya mischievously, playing the same game as her uncle to confuse Ndundu.

Her uncle had asked Ndundu to excuse him for his indiscretion, and she had also excused herself for it, spitefully.

Lohya was already a mature woman, in spite of that smile that was always on her lips. A man could take her already. With her whole body, she said "Who wants to take me?"

"Don't tease him, you can see that he is embarrassed to have received that letter," said old Boulh'Yeng, who deep down was happy.

"I will go to get my things from the boat, but I will not leave," said Ndundu, stubbornly. He raised his eyes to Lohya who had her back to him, very décolletée with a curve the length of her spine, making his hands seize up suddenly in a delirious spasm.

Old Boulh'Yeng cleared his throat noisily to create a diversion. He looked affectionately at his niece and gave Ndundu a satisfied smile. The business seemed to be wrapped up.

“But what are you waiting for to go and buy another needle!” he shouted at the blundering apprentice.

Old Boulh’Yeng demonstrated a venal obsequiousness in response to some sudden insight. He turned and turned, rubbing his pudgy hands, while running his tongue over the thick edge of his upper lip.

He had, until then, obstinately refused to think about the fate of his niece, of whose pubescence he had been aware for a long time. This letter revealed that an opportunity had presented itself. It is incredible how blind one can be sometimes!

“A’Ndundu!”

“I am listening to you as much as I respect you!”

“I do not ask that much of you...Yes, well. So listen to me. I don’t want to meddle in anything, of course, but...after all...you are a man, right? You understand me, don’t you?”

Boulh’Yeng had thought that the letter might be...Shit, how could he shake him up! Ndundu answered:

“You find me puzzled.”

“Puzzled, puzzled! One eventually sees who one is looking at. Well?”

Old Boulh’Yeng was getting annoyed.

Evening fell. Either he is simple, or there is still something that I do not know that would help me understand him. The anger that was threatening to swell in his throat had to pass. He took it out on the apprentice.

“The imbecile hasn’t come back with the needle?”

“He did not find one.”

Ndundu was silent for as long as he had to be to gather his strength. Then he plunged back into the fray, his head down.

“If I were your son, you would be more direct. Pretend that I am already your son.”

Not so simple after all!

“You were saying?” asked Boulh’Yeng, who was playing the absent-minded old man. One can’t think of everything, but one has to.

Ndundu looked him in the eyes, without insolence.

“Show me your letter again,” demanded Boulh’Yeng. Ndundu handed it to him again, eagerly. It was already getting dog-eared. Ndundu was afraid. What if this made it lose its attraction?

The old man did not unfold it. He examined the grain of the paper with his index finger and thumb for a long time. This game titillated his soul. Ndundu sighed.

“Why do you sigh?” asked the old man. “You have found a dowry. A good dowry.”

Lohya, standing in the doorway, listened, her eyes on Ndundu. Ndundu met Lohya’s eyes and refrained from answering old Boulh’Yeng.

“But look, it is dated a month ago, your letter!” Lohya intervened. “As you see, my uncle still has good eyes.”

“And you, are you are so badly brought up that you listen at doors?” joked her uncle.

“We have to go and eat, night is here.”

“Which of you two is more in a hurry...?”

Ndundu started to protest, the old man did not give him the time, he finished the sentence he had intentionally left up in the air:

“...the night or you?” Lohya did not answer.

Ndundu noisily swallowed his saliva..

“Don’t swallow your saliva: come and eat, night is here,” finished Boulh’Yeng.

So Boulh’Yeng, Ndundu and Lohya left the shop to go and eat in the kitchen where old Matchi, more considerate toward Ndundu this evening, was bustling about. And as transitions had always appeared normal to Ndundu, he didn’t notice the abrupt change in the old woman’s attitude.

No, Ndundu had refused to be married off. He espoused, with the help of his fortune, the niece of the old and rich tailor, Emile Boulh’Yeng M’Kossu Hmoyho! Ndundu retrieved his four trunks and all his belongings. He did not take the boat. Not knowing how to write to de l’Escaut, he did not write for a good two years. In 1902, Sophie was born. Ndundu had the excuse he wanted. He wrote; there was no response. At least, not immediately. In 1904, by God’s grace, a second child was born to him, a boy, whom he baptized Prosper. In fact, everything was prospering around Ndundu; the name he had given his child was more than justified. And then Lohya was expecting again, but it was too soon. She had a phantom pregnancy, which did not do her health any good. Ndundu lived through countless nightmares. Finally, a letter arrived, which he neither opened nor read, tormented as he was by his wife’s incurable illness.

In 1905, one week after Epiphany, Lohya died. On Ash Wednesday of that year, he opened and read Charles de l’Escaut’s letter as he was coming back from the cemetery. While written in de l’Escaut’s own hand, the letter, with a few words added by

Madame, announced Monsieur's death. Ndundu did not have tears in his eyes when he said to himself: "One death summons another." Many things that might explain his wife's death remained mysterious, unfathomable to him. Who knows whether this letter, which he had not been in a rush to read, might have put him on his guard! If only he had read it earlier! Destiny amuses itself. Our tears do not protect us from the worst of it, but perhaps if we refused to play, it would not be able to do as it pleases!

Was it really on that Ash Wednesday that the wind lifted his hat off his head? For more than twenty meters Ndundu chased after his hat, a black melon that the wind set down right there, in a ditch full of water, like a little ship. The people watching got a free show. If it really was that Ash Wednesday, what a humiliating memory to mourn her death!

With all the earth has seen
The earth maintains silence
With all the stone has felt
Of which its smoothness is evidence
Night always makes us bear
The burden of our grief
I embraced life with open arms
But my heart I gave to death

There was no mistaking it. It was that Ash Wednesday. What a humiliating memory to mourn her death!

Mabindu, 1910

The strongly resinous odor of the undergrowth did not reach as far as the shade of the large avocado tree in the rear courtyard on Tchiluembh island. The "island" was in fact the invention of the wicked tongues of Mabindou.[*sic.*] In fact, when you got to Mabindu, you had to wade or swim through a mass of floating dead grass to get to the island. A reef, a seamark, if not an ill-famed island. Beside the sea, which was not even three steps

away, but where one could occasionally breathe, mangos and palms made up a bush dotted with clearings, where until not long ago people bent over their hoes, still cultivating peanuts and potatoes, mostly peanuts. Tchiluembh, so they said, had his own path to the sea, the short cut, while the whole of Mabindu now took the Mission route – with its detour – to the sea. That was Mabindou's affair.

The odor of the undergrowth was only breathable when it was cool, and especially when it was saturated with sap. What illusion was the earth still hiding that Ndundu endlessly, obsessively scrutinized it? The earth stank like hell, that much he had decided. "With all the earth has seen." He wondered what kind of eyes one had to have to see...His thought got lost, or burst like a bubble as soon as it reached the surface of his lips. The earth stank like hell, that was no illusion. His gaze turned to the pointed, shaven nape of his older brother's neck. Tchiluembh, comfortably coiled up in a chaise longue,¹⁶ turned the nape of his neck toward his younger brother. The sun's rays beat down.

"At midday, everything sleeps, at midnight, everything sleeps," said Ndundu in an even tone, without bitterness.

"Everything is silent at midday. One sleeps at midnight," Tchiluembh corrected him.

"Huh?"

"One is silent at midday, one sleeps at midnight," repeated Tchiluembh, peremptorily.

"It's true," Ndundu agreed somnolently.

¹⁶ It is not clear what piece of furniture U Tam'Si had in mind. The furniture one associates with the term *chaise longue* seems incongruous in this context. However, that is the term U Tam'Si used (when he could have used *banc* (as he does later, twice). Perhaps this is U Tam'Si's way of reminding the reader how immersed in metropolitan French culture Ndundu still is.

There was a silence, which Ndundu broke.

“But still, one is silent but one lacks will, which is as much as to say at midday one sleeps!”

Tchiluembh did not acknowledge this difference. Ndundu was talking to himself.

“Why do I keep asking myself: how long have I been here?”

“The boats just come and go,” said Tchiluembh.

“Was it you who spoke, brother?” asked Ndundu emotionally.

“It is very hot, don’t you think?” asked Tchiluembh, to create a diversion.

Ndundu sighed; the avocado tree let the wind rustle its leaves. It was not bad, this wind. Ndundu leaned his head against the trunk of the tree; to do this, he tipped up the bench on which he was sitting by moving his body. He swung his legs, made a face, brought the legs of the bench and his own body back to a vertical position, bent over and scratched a diagram of a louse, a flea or a cockroach in the dirt with the end of his cane.

“Everyone has their own gait, does that ever surprise you?”

Tchiluembh cleared his throat and spat, saying ironically:

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“You never stop to think, so nothing bothers you?” asked Ndundu in a neutral tone, with a slight hint of provocation.

“Alright then, tell me, which of the two of us is the elder?” asked Tchiluembh, piqued.

“Did I lack respect, brother?”

Tchiluembh did not reply, but set about clearing the depths of his throat and spat everything he found there in a thick hawk behind him, on the diagonal, next to his

brother.

“With all *the earth has seen*, says the song; alright, and then what? You could get fucked up inside waiting for the earth to reveal to you what it is so silent about!”

Ndundu marvelled at his older brother. Tchiluembh got up, cracked all his joints, one by one, and dissolved into the shadow of the veranda. It was no more than a step between the shade of the roof and that of the avocado tree. A step of blinding luminosity. There’s the dry odor of the undergrowth. There’s the cicada’s strident chorus. There’s the earth that reeks like hell. “When you return to the sun, you’ll see that ice is a good thing.” There’s that saying of de l’Escaut, his boss. And now? There’s the earth that perhaps is not even looking at him...This rancid taste in his mouth...Heaviness in his legs. Arms that do not end up joining his shoulders. His older brother’s anger like a hostility, while...The shade of the roof and that of the avocado tree merged. Ndundu sighed. From inside the house, Tchiluembh said:

“There’s the solitude of the tam-tam under the awning.”

Ndundu leaped up. He was not hidden under the awning. He’d been here for two days. He hadn’t shown his face in Mabindou, nor in town. He knew that...it was not the awning he should be talking about, but...He had been there for two days, waiting for people to come and dance with joy around him and his children. That saying was very complicated to understand in the context in which Tchiluembh had said it. To confuse him? Ndundu repeated to himself that he was alone: tam-tam under the awning!

Taty, Tchiluembh’s older child, crossed the courtyard. He walked like a dog that was being made to walk on his hind paws. Or rather a beetle standing up! Poor child. So was Tchiluembh talking about himself with that saying? The heart rips itself apart just to

invent troubles for itself. Completely false though they might be, they did a lot more damage than real troubles!

When was it the sentry had chanted?

A man, a man!

A man, two children!

A man, two children, no woman!

A man, a man!

That time is past. And you came. You returned on the sly. I was too absorbed to see the growing, to see the dying, to bend over my hoe, to complain about my back. Sleep refused to inhabit my body. I was too absorbed for all of that. Where is that time when the sentry chanted “A man, a man!”? So that the one who came was expected! So that the one who came did not return on the sly. Oh hell!

I, who was so vigilant: the dream had nevertheless said it all. Dreams do not speak as we do. All my seeds on the road. And here I am, astonished at not cursing my own clumsiness! Here is the road. Here is the field. I am sowing not in the field but on the road. When I wake up, I ask myself: what’s this? Grains, seeds on the road, and not in the field. Someone is going to come. Seed of race. No doubt, it is himself. Only doubt oneself; hell!

Ndundu looks. Ndundu listens. He swallows some sand in his dry throat. Afterwards it stings his nostrils. He listens, he looks. His eyes can barely take it in.

That dried up woman with the dried up skin, and behind her a tall kid with long, very thin legs, that was Liambu and her daughter Shishile, or Cécile. That dried up woman with the dry skin, the dead cheeks? That woman, still erect, with the sunken, wrinkled eyes that were once large and open, her eyes, of course! That woman introduced herself.

“It is I, Liambu. I was born out of the same belly as you were. They put the end of my umbilical cord back into my mother’s belly so that it would be the seed for the one that would have to connect you with my mother. And yet, I am here for nothing if you and I are of the same mother.” Liambu fell silent. Then she said: “Would you be my brother?” And Ndundu stepped back, opened his arms and ran to her, still holding out his cane. He embraced Liambu.

The avocado tree saw all this emotion singing between the brother and sister. The tree shuddered. That woman in rags, it’s Liambu! The rags are not important, because Liambu is there!

“I couldn’t wait any longer for you in case you went somewhere else. Perhaps you don’t want to go anywhere else. But I couldn’t wait! She is my witness! (Shishile lowered her head!) I have no time...Raise your head: he might dress like a White man, but he is still your uncle. He is all you have. A’Ndundu, I have no time. I am not comfortable talking. You see how haggard I am. One becomes haggard when one can’t say what is in one’s heart. Over there, where you were, did you learn that it is hard to bear others’ bad feelings? But I am forgetting myself; wait while I invoke the ancestors... You, the dead, can’t you hear? I am calling you. I call you to witness. Liambu mpé Liambu is forgetting herself!

“Where are the children, if only I could see them...No, not now. Give me your arms, leave that stick for a minute! Give me your arms. Here, take this blessing. Take this surplus of air: I am only the intermediary for it. Give me your arms again, here are mine. Good bye!”

And Liambu went off, followed by her kid. Before Ndundu had time to react,

overwhelmed by the flood of words. And what words! All of them having no precise meaning. They made the avocado tree shiver again. It was still morning. The odor of the undergrowth coming out of the bush of mango trees and palm trees to the north of the little yard; the odor of the undergrowth was still cool, breathable. Taty, with a demijohn on his head, was coming back from the well. Mwisu, Sophie and Prosper came behind him, carrying bottles in their outstretched arms. Taty looked like a beetle, and whose fault was that? If he ate a little more, he would have the limbs of a kid his age. Ndundu put back the bench, took a Panama hat and clapped it on his head.

“Is there still a lot of dew?” asked Ndundu.

“Yes, papa,” answered the children in chorus.¹⁷ He heard whispering: “Papa is leaving.” Ndundu came out, wearing his boots.

“Taty, do you know where Ya Tchiluembh is?”

“Down by the sea, papa,” replied Taty.

“By the sea...Listen, take care of your brothers,¹⁸ OK? Be good, understand, Sophie. Prosper, where is Mwisu?”

“I am here, papa!” Mwisu’s voice came from the large yard, muffled by the thick screen of the big house, between the large and the small yards.

“Don’t be disturbed, child, look after the little ones.”

“The head of a family is the head of a family! It means what it means!”

“For whom are you speaking?”

“Just reflecting on what is upsetting us! A dog is still a dog, a man is still a man.

¹⁷ They all call him Papa, because in most African cultures, your uncle is like your own father.

¹⁸ According to the rules of kinship, Mwisu and Taty are Prosper’s “brothers.”

When do you see a man following his dog?"

"Follow those who go hunting! You'll see! And if you don't want to see, or if you can't see, be blind and you will soon be following a dog! And you will see everything, totally blind as you are, you will see! Because some things just jump out at you."

"Don't ask me to give in. I am speaking from my heart."

"Through your mouth? Would it be so bad..."

Tchiluembh got up from the table, hesitated, and then sat down again, still facing his brother. The lamp fluttered. Their shadows on the wall imitated a cock fight, animated by the oil lamp's flickering flame.

"You have seen what is upsetting us, and you want me to speak? Have you really seen? Have you really listened? A'Ndundu! Shall we recapitulate, huh? What do you think? Shall we go back over it all, from as far back as we can, huh? It's something...It's a children's game...I am calm, but, when you get right down to it, you can go as you came, as you left the first time, when you get right down to it!"

With his arms crossed on his chest, Ndundu listened. When you get right down to it, he would know where he stood...Tchiluembh was dancing to the beat of his own drummer.

"You really do have to have be spoon fed! Answer me...Do you have only gums...? What does it matter! I am yours, but...you are mine, but...one day you left...Alright, you here again...Alright! ¹⁹ But I didn't throw stones at you! Take it easy! Take it easy! The head of the family is the head of the family. It means what it means.

¹⁹ According to an old proverb "the Mukongo who has left his clan is like a 'locust who has lost his wings'; he has crossed the boundaries beyond which security, solidarity, and affection are no longer guaranteed him

Alright! And what does it mean? You tell me!”

“Ya Liambu...”

“Silence!” (Tchiluembh leapt up.) “Silence! You are forgetting that you were still drooling when I already knew how wipe my own ass! Silence! I am calm. I am calm. Good. Right, what now?”

Ndundu thought to himself: Lia'mbu, Lia'khli, Lia'mbu mpé!

Here I am: such a little thing. But all the same! What is this forgetting game that Tchiluembh is talking about now. Listen to that! That is what killed Mué Bumbh Buangh! And that is not the worst that he was made to hear! Go on! Go on! Play word games! Surprises. We turn our backs on everything, this way we are innocent, without even thinking twice. It's so convenient, so easy!

“Brother!” Ndundu protested plaintively.

“I have gone too far. You let me do it.”

“I was silent: it was a good thing! You stepped on my tongue...!”

“But this forgetting game, how does it explain Mué Bumbh Buangh's death?”

“My God, he really has to be spoon fed!”

Tchiluembh raised his arms to the sky, which he did not call to witness.

The essential thing remained to be said. Tchiluembh avoided it, went around it with hackneyed parables that had no relation to the essential issue, a string of innuendoes. For Ndundu, there was in fact only one question. Why did Liambu arrive and leave again on the sly...? And Tchiluembh started up again: “If we go back as far as possible. Look! This, this is you, the index finger; this, this is *your* sister...”

“Liambu!”

“Let me speak! This one, this is *your* sister, the third finger; this one, this is me, the middle finger, in the middle of the hand. Good! I am not asking you to dream. I am asking you to listen to me with all ears! Down there...starting with you, your sister and I...”

“Liambu is also your sister, what is the problem?”

“If I say she is your sister and if we know that you are my brother, it is as if I were saying she is our sister!”

Ndundu had won.

“But that is what you did not say, two or three times: A’Ya Tchiluembh, what is there between us?”

“The essential thing is to know what there is between...between her and me...and not why...!”

“Finish what you were saying...”

Tchiluembh did not finish his business; he sent Ndundu off to bed like a kid!

Ndundu got a whiff of a nasty smell around him! The country air! “The country air: it means endless palavers, family here, family there.” Boulh’Yeng was right. It was not because he was confronting the truth that Ndundu felt little shivers down the skin of his neck, but because he had this terrible thought: that his wife, who had followed him, might take umbrage at Tchiluembh’s words! His older brother had sent him to bed as if he were not old enough to understand.

“No! Go to sleep without having been told everything!... I am here, I am all ears to listen to you because you are my brother, I haven’t forgotten it.”

“Ndundu, I am...I haven’t forgotten, I am yours, but! You are mine and I say

again: but! Understand whatever you want, look at yourself, look at me. I look at myself, I look at you. The sky does not see us differently from how you see yourself, differently from how I see myself. That is the truth. To shrug your shoulders is to turn your back and say you are innocent! Where is my innocence? I blame myself, yes I do! I blame myself! I forgot to turn around to see my father fall! There: you are mine, but...I am yours and I say again: but...It's all there, what is upsetting us...It all fits. This forgetting, my forgetting, your forgetting, our forgetting. And if our father had only fallen out of exhaustion, would I not have had enough heart to give him my hand? But that is the thing, I was in front! My father was behind me! It's all there. Because that was what was allowed from then on: a son could walk in front of his father and not follow his father. I was the dog, my father followed...But he was not going hunting. You question me and you want me to be quiet now! But those others...their insolence is their insolence. They can have their insolence. But those who say...who are indignant that a son...that they should be indignant, after all that! But neither Bumbh Buangh nor I decided that. That a son could precede his father on a perilous route! He himself, from having failed to protest against such a procedure, Bumbh Buangh is dead as a result! But there I also blame you, for walking ahead, in front of me, your older brother. I didn't complain. I didn't blame anyone. I was quiet. Tam-tam under the awning. Do you think there was a lack of good tam-tam players... Players who wanted me to invite them to dance? And you, you come, you want to take me by the arms.... You feel you have skilled hands? At needlework or holding a leash ... Alright, that's enough."

The sly one is also God's creature! It is not a sin to say that! Mué Bumbh Buangh

died on the Mayombe²⁰ road with some others in his caravan. It was what God wanted. The best way to show filial piety was to wait....Don't shrug your shoulders! I waited, when will you understand? That's good, don't try to understand any more. But Liambu did not hesitate to accuse Tchiluembh of having helped carry out God's work. God is great...But let's not bring God into all this despair...

"Liambu, as you said yourself...that, that's you, the middle finger; the first man born from our mother's womb; that, Liambu, the third finger...the one that wears the wedding ring, is Liambu."

A pigeon's dropping landed on Ndundu's shoulder. Tchiluembh saw his brother's energy drain out.

Ndundu received that name because of his eyes, above all because of the lashes around his eyes, which were a bit reddish. Just a touch of albino. To hide this slight deformity, he always opened his eyes very wide.

"It is quite unbearable, this little pigeon dropping. But I have seen worse..."

The pigeon shrieked spitefully and launched itself in pursuit of a cricket through the air that was vibrant with heat.. Tchiluembh ground his teeth, they croaked like toads at the full moon. From a cocoon of mist emerged a reeking memory of shit. That smell and the stink of the taunts had not been very well buried. The cause of his isolation ultimately did not, it is true, explain his disagreement with Liambu, nor did it have anything to do with his father's wretched death in Mayombe. And yet, it was all there, somewhere...

Mabindu had split away from Tchiluembh, had taken the mission route. He too would have taken it, if, by some chance the incident, which set the whole of Mabindu

²⁰ The Mayombe is a mountain range between Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire.

prattling and which people sang so cruelly about, had not happened. Ndundu had just gone to sea. Then there was only one fisherman worthy of the name: Tchiluembh. His nets always brought in more fish. The whole of Loango ate what he often too generously gave. The whole of Loango, including the Commandant. And the Whites. But despite his generosity, they “dumped a whole barrel of shit into his arms.” Here is how it happened. He was fishing one day in the Bay. It was early in the morning. And he himself suddenly cried out “A barrel in the sea!” He brought it ashore, overjoyed, not knowing that this barrel that the sea had rolled to him, was full of shit. He was overjoyed, and pushed the barrel into some hidden bushes and then invited some friends to a libation (this was when Tchiluembh had friends in Mabindu). There were perhaps ten people in the bushes. With their empty tumblers standing around the barrel. Each with their clean tumbler. Just then Tchiluembh went berserk, which is quite understandable. The news spread with its smell of rotting shit. The jeers, the taunts flowed back to Tchiluembh’s ears – only two or three years earlier he had mourned his father, wasn’t that cruel? Needless to say the fish abandoned the fisherman. The irony of fate? Thom’ Ndundu had just set sail with a White man, Commandant de l’Escaut.

While Ndundu had this fate on his soul and conscience: everything comforting that life could offer, for example, a good salary earned working for a White man – everything comforting that life could offer – Tchiluembh was disillusioned and bitter, living on his nerves, but also on a quest, oh a desperate quest, for a new sun in the Mabindu sky, a new sun that would wash him clean of guilt. But every time he opened his eyes to the world, was it really an illusion, this poverty that he saw everywhere? The poverty and the whole of Mabindu beleaguered him. There was a whole army of *whoever*

they were: houseboys, cooks, laundrymen, tailors, dupes, drunks, twerps, twits... Tchiluembh raged and choked as he listed them all. Oh no! They did not frighten him! They besieged him: didn't they see they were wasting time? And since all of this was ridiculous, the task of making him capitulate fell upon his own brother: on Ndundu's example, all of Mabindu took to attacking the Ta Tchiluembh citadel. How could Tchiluembh forgive that of his brother? Ndundu had to either put up with his brother's sarcasm and bad temper or raise the siege. Ta Tchiluembh examined his brother from head to toe. Scandalized, he said: "They must hurt you, your feet, in those corsets." The "corsets" were patent-leather shoes with pointed toes that Thom Ndundu [*sic.*] the tailor sported elegantly. Who do you think you are ridiculing? Oh no, that's not jealousy I am feeling deep down in my heart!

Tchiluembh had been a fisherman and in his youth, as you may or may not know, he was a caravaneer.²¹ No, to be precise, he had followed his father on the caravan routes that went to all four corners of the land. Tchiluembh was a kind of giant manqué, long and flexible, his upper body slightly stooped. His head, which was of quite minor proportions, cohabited with two night-owl eyes. His disproportionately long arms seemed to encumber his whole body. Thom' Ndundu looked like his brother. But life's ordeals had made Tchiluembh lose sight of the functions of his disproportionately long arms. And when one no longer knows what function a limb has to perform, one cannot know what fate has in store for one. Those who his father had followed, those who his brother had followed, those who had forced the people of Mabindu to prostitute their souls had

²¹ The caravan routes were well worn trade routes which proliferated after contact with the Europeans, some local, within the kingdom, and others more long-range, which crossed the continent from West to East. Exports included slaves, ivory, medicines, stimulants, and imports were mostly luxury items intended for the kings and the aristocratic houses, such as household goods, carpets, crockery, glassware, etc.

perverted destiny.²² It took the wound to Tchiluembh's whole being to open his eyes. The humiliation took root and made itself at home, in spite of his rejection. What fantasies he had! And more than anyone else, Tchiluembh had reason to be upset by the incredible and cruel fantasies that made life sordid for anyone who wished to live. Of course, for many people, in Mabindu, in Diosso, those fantasies were just fantasies and nothing more. Getting upset by them was to be pointlessly covered by ridicule. Those who got upset about being poor, and who stole, were jeered. Those who got killed for a principle were jeered. That's how it was. Because Tchiluembh had hardened himself – humiliated as he had been by this fantasy – his powerlessness before it was a scandal, and was jeered.

What was also a scandal was how people abandoned themselves, through complacency, to this forgetting game. Tchiluembh was scandalized that his brother wore shoes, not because he considered wearing shoes to be scandalous in itself, but because around him nobody who wore them had the gait of a healthy person, like the White man who sold them and who was born with shoes on, right?

You could see Thom' Ndundu measure his steps; it was alarming. People walked that way when they had jiggers in their feet.²³ They walked like ducks: kébé-é kébé! kébh ntötu nghan kumandhé kébh!²⁴ Thus, the Commandant found the perfect allies, even in the jiggers; thanks to the jiggers his "land" was respected: you had to look out for them when you walked. But only Tchiluembh could read all that into his brother's elegance.

(see Ballandier 135ff).

²² Participation in this trade with the Europeans would be considered treachery, collaboration, especially since the principal commodity being exchanged was human beings.

²³ A type of flea, the female of which burrows beneath the skin of the human feet (and sometimes of the hands) and becomes greatly distended with eggs, which are sometimes hatched there, causing itching, and painful sores. In many parts of Africa, if you walk barefoot, you will get jiggers.

²⁴ U Tam'Si's footnote: "Attention! Attention! This is the Commandant's land!"

This land was no longer theirs. There you go.

Tchiluembh certainly had a belligerent old age. But all the same...But there again, which old age? Is one old at his age? So far from being a grandfather!

Liambu ended all her sentences with the question “isn’t that true?” For the most part Ndundu agreed, or only disagreed for the sake of form. To admit that he did not know seemed to him to be a lie... He remembered so little about their mother, but he said:

“You are the reincarnation of maman. Look at Cécile and Sophie, they have so little of maman in them!

“Oh, not very much, but that high forehead...”

Liambu wiped her daughter’s forehead with her dry hand. On the child’s upper body there were two portentous bumps. Cécile looked more like her grandmother than Sophie did, at any rate, she had her high forehead. Ndundu agreed thoughtfully, resting his chin on his hands which were folded on the knob of his cane. Liambu continued...I waited a second time... I came quickly to tell you that I was living over on this side. She drew a dividing line in the soil with her index finger... on this side here, which she crosshatched... where night always makes us bear the burden of our grief of mourning death that is waiting for us ²⁵... I am not in a rush, today, I can stretch out my poor legs... And also, you are no longer there where I could never be at ease! An aunt is as good as a grandmother! Here I am, my children!...

²⁵ “Où la nuit nous remet toujours sur le dos le deuil de la mort que nous guette (LC40):” this echoes the poem that appears earlier: “Mais la terre a tout vu/Mais la terre se tait/Mais la pierre a tout senti/Elle en a perdu le nez/La nuit remet toujours/Le deuil au dos de l’homme/J’allai la vie au bras/Donnant mon coeur à la mort!” (LC 26). See my translation (RC 64).

Prosper had a little of his father's eyes: tired eyes, albino eyes. He was a slow-moving boy who was short on speech... "What have you done with your incisors, my little husband? Eh? Have you swallowed them, tell me? He is not quite awake," said Liambu to her brother.

Prosper (because everything was going well when the child was born), Mpobhà (because you could put him anywhere and he did not move, did not speak and lowered his eyes). It was his way, the child's way, of mourning his mother's death! Separated so young because Lohya suddenly found herself expecting again. No, Sophie had nothing of her mother about her, the texture of her skin perhaps...Porous, not very tight, with light hues.

"I am astonished but nevertheless I came. The road, it is nothing, even if one does have to climb up to your place. Go and play children." She watched them go... "Prosper Mpobhà...what I have to say is not for you."

The children went to play behind the house. One should say, the palace. The palace that Ndundu had bought in Mabindu, a palace on stone stilts more than a meter above the humid Mabindu soil. Enough corrugated iron sheets on the roof for twenty modest roofs! At least twenty, if not more! Ndundu raised his eyes to Liambu. Liambu looked at the veranda that ran along both lengths and widths of the house. From this high you could see the mission road coming as soon as it branched off when it got to the "Sisters' place." Then, you lost sight of it in the swamps that separated Mabindu from the "Sisters' place" before it reappeared at Ribeiro's warehouse.

"Do they produce, these palms?"

"They will, if they are cared for."

“Are you going to work?”

“Yes, I am going to send for the machine.”

“Has he come to see your *spread*? Sticking all this property under his very nose, it’s...Put yourself in his place...”

“Liambu! I have spoken with Ya Tchiluembh, I will speak with him again ...but it would be simpler if you just explained things to me.”

“Gather your strength first, you will understand afterwards. You talk...and if he does not want to hear you, you will have wasted your time. I have asked someone to follow me, to come here and see you. You will get strength from the one who is coming. Fortify yourself. I would have prevented you from leaving with a hollow belly when you left, and I would have prevented you from buying this house on your return. You are not insolent; now nothing will prevent you from appearing to be so. As quickly as possible, you must fortify yourself. Someone will come.”

Ndundu did not ask who. Liambu did not say.

“Even if he does not want to hear me, I will still talk.”

Liambu did not lose patience. She cried, she sobbed with all kinds of epileptic spasms, danced on her sobs a pagan and ancient exorcism ritual!

Come evening, Ndundu, forgetting everything Liambu had said to put him on his guard, went along a dark path in the grass. He crossed the large yard. His sisters-in-law and their children were eating under the communal roof. It smelt more of peppers than of palm nut sauce. A little of boiled citronella. Tchiluembh was in the house. Sitting at the table with the remains of the meal in front of him. Alone. A bit of cloth was soaking in palm oil. It was too acrid and there were no moths around the ochre flame.

“Are you well?” asked Tchiluembh.

“As you see,” replied Ndundu.

“Nevertheless, you look well to me,” insisted Tchiluembh.

Ndundu grumbled: “You know what is bothering me, and you make comments and don’t explain yourself...”

Tchiluembh took a humorous tack, making large, knowing gestures to illustrate his words.

“I was bored and you come along and bore me; that’s not good.”

This was just too much good humour, Ndundu found it abnormal in his brother! It gave him goose bumps, and it was not because of the coolness of the dry season.

Tchiluembh continued: “You don’t bring me a bit of paraffin, you come and talk to me in *the dark*, that’s not prudent, *someone* else could get involved in our conversation.”²⁶ No, not a little bit of paraffin?” Tchiluembh persisted.

“I didn’t know...”

“That’s right, no foresight. To have foresight, you have to reflect, to reflect you have to have time, but that’s what everyone says, isn’t it? That confession: no time...! You were in hurry to come...in spite of the night and ‘the advice’... Come on, excuse my good mood! Speak, let’s be serious, don’t waste time, speak!”

“In spite of the night, in spite of the advice! What advice?”

“Night brings advice, that’s what they say, isn’t it?”

“I came to breathe the country air, to be joyful... Oh! I am nowhere near it! Too bad! It is not right to grumble to oneself. What else can I do so my grumbling does not

²⁶ U Tam’Si’s emphasis. He is referring to the spirits, which according to traditions in the Congo and many other African countries, are at large at night.

become chagrin because I am not supposed to speak. Useless mouth!”

At night, Ndundu went back home with his head down. He forgot to go to bed. He stayed awake praying. And he was thrilled by this idea: he could have a mass said for his father, his wife, his mother and all his dead and all his living! The morning came very slowly, drawing out the rooster’s song! There was whispering in the children’s room.

Dawn shrouded the houses of Mabindu in morning mist up to their roofs, which emerged streaming with dew. Ndundu came down the little broken stone staircase. He moved his arms around a few times in the air, which around the house smelled of mold. Climbing back onto the veranda, he stopped, disconcerted to find Liambu’s luggage. He thought: “A bad sign,” even though the presence of Liambu’s luggage on the veranda, near the broken floorboards, could have a simple and banal explanation. The floor creaked...Ndundu liked that better: the floor had creaked under Liambu’s step. A dragging step . Liambu spluttered while her brother was silent, but as soon as Ndundu cleared his throat and protested, Liambu seemed vehement.

“Allow me to also do as I please, will you?”

“You obey yourself, I obey myself, Liambu mpé! (where is the harm in that?)...”
Cécile stood trembling behind her mother.

“Go back to sleep, Cécile! A’ya Liambu, it is not one o’clock. The cocks have sung, but which of us really knows that in fact that the day will come...? To tell the truth, I...(Cécile, go back to sleep!...). We are barely more than shadows... You sense me and I sense you and without even seeing each other, are you alright...?”

Little lambs came out of the black mass of the sky and trotted toward the yellow inferno that lit up the day that was nascent on the horizon. It was more dazzling just

above the Mission. Ndundu twisted his fingers, which cracked like good wood burning gaily.

“A’Liambu! Liambu mpé? Where are you?”

“Call, I will answer you and you will see that I am in front of you.”

“In front of me? You, who are leaving! And would you push me aside to get past?”

“...But because I was going to do it without saying farewell, it is as if I were not leaving...”

“...Don’t leave, that would be better!”

Ndundu was silent. Liambu was silent. Liambu groaned:

“Stay standing, fatigue.” She grumbled this without conviction. Then she added vaguely:

“You haven’t slept...”

Ndundu did not respond.

“Does it worry you?” Liambu asked.

Ndundu raised timidly questioning eyes up to Liambu.

The air in the country was irritating, because it was unbreathable, going around blocking one’s nostrils – like someone who was being led by the end of the nose – is not reasonable either! One could suffocate in the time it takes to go from here to the sea...

And what about the taunts of the people who might see...Forget the taunts...But from here to the sea...If you see sand, do you think the ocean is close by? An irony of fate, that you should end up at an impasse with your eyes wide open!

After having tested the country air with his nostrils, Ndundu dared not get back on the boat. To tempt fate twice is too reckless. He would not take up the challenge. But the reason he gave to Boulh'Yeng, who was waiting for him in Grand-Bassam! In the letter that he had Mpola the interpreter write, and which he recopied himself in his spindly, crooked handwriting, he said something else altogether: "I have seen the earth where I was born, every day I see how meager it is and how it is becoming even thinner. Everyone's health is suffering from it...How can I send you some of this air here! Those who feed into it by exhaling have bad breath. Also, it is so thin...It is as if we were walking around with our noses up in the air sniffing for something...! At times it is suffocating. There is nothing you can do about it, it is suffocating. Sometimes you even block your nose...The air has bad breath. Cavities that are irritating people's mouths. Sleeping badly gives you a bitter taste. Oh, pity us if you want to. Do not envy us. Here we also hear the cocks' crow, but when it is time to get up, we spend so much time stretching our limbs. It's pitiful, oh! What can we do? On one path, the work road,²⁷ for example, you leave the shade, you take two steps... You go back into the shade, two steps behind. If this is a life, envy it if you want to. I have seen the family. Everyone has elbows on their torsos. Understand whatever you like from that. Send me the machine, no, sell it. With the money, I will buy myself one here. Send me the money."

"Sophie and Cecile, the daughter of Ya'Liambu, my sister, are at the convent. They have barely been there a month. Prosper is with the Mission Fathers and is learning what they teach him well. He will have his first communion at Easter. May God protect him. I have a large house, I will be able to sew on the veranda... etc., I did not build it, I bought it."

²⁷ A reference to colonial road-building, for which labourers were conscripted and frequently mistreated.

In a postscript, he had written: "If there is grass on my wife's tomb, could I ask you to take the trouble to pick it." He also recopied the postscript. Between the date and the greeting, "Ay Boulh'Yeng," at the beginning of his letter, his hand trembled.

Having put the letter in the envelope with much care, Ndundu went back to thinking about the unbreathable air in this country. Too bad! The nose will manage, and if the heart does not take it from higher up, it will also have to manage. He licked the envelope with his eyes closed. Good, let us hope that the heart does not take it from too high. He made a mental detour, to flee this counter-nostalgia. He had lost a precious inner peace. Hell! Where, when, had he blundered into such an unequal battle?

"Breathe well, come back: do not stay, Ndundu, come back!" Is that what Boulh'Yeng would recommend?

"...Family here, family there: that's not a life!"

It had all been true, but how could he obey? He had more than one duty here. He could fulfill at least one: dress his semblables, without any hope of making a fortune.

Ribeiro had a greasy head with jowls like a pig, A nose like a piece of sponge: if you pressed it wine would pour out. Little porcine eyes. He spoke through his nose, breathing a lot.

"Zey don't pay: Zey drink, zen zey break everyzing."

Chartriant creaked in his rattan chair and drummed on his desk with the well-sharpened tip of a large carpenter's pencil. He exhaled in the direction of his interlocutor.

"They are not wrong, my dear Ribeiro!"

Ribeiro almost choked.

“Señor Satrian! What? What?” Before replying, Chartriant creaked in his rattan chair again, drummed with his pencil, exhaled and stuck his red neck out of his jacket collar.

“Living in Mabindu...For a White...involves risks: you are experiencing them... You looked for them. Just because you are Portuguese...!”

“If it were not for a few hooligans,” Ribeiro protested.

“Perhaps your wine is...”

“Zere are honest people that my...”

Seeing Chartriant’s skepticism, Ribeiro cited an example:

“Ndundu, for example, Monsieur le Commandant.”²⁸

A rank, a symbol of honour was more important than the recollection of a name, however illustrious it was! Chartriant was almost taken in by the Portuguese man’s cunning.

“There are honest people who drink your wine, who pay you? You astonish me. Have you just discovered them?” said Chartriant, sarcastically.

“Ndundu sinks that the people of Mabindu go too far...Yhe provides a good example.”

“Pardon! I beg your pardon! What did you say?”

“Yhe is a good example to zem.”

“To whom?”

“To the hooligans!”

“Ah! And who is a good example to him?”

²⁸ In the French African colonial administration the *Commandant* was the head of a local geographical area called the *cercle*. His counterpart in the British colonial administration was the provincial commissioner,

“Ndundu, a good man! Like zat!” Ribeiro displayed a very thick, short thumb, then dabbed his face with a cotton handkerchief.

Chartriant joked, put his lorgnette to his eye, and wrote derisively: “Ndundu provides a good example, Ndundu provides a good example. Ah, that, for example!”

Chartriant took off his lorgnette, raised his eyes up to Ribeiro, creaked in his chair, exhaled, drummed with his pencil, raised his arms and let them go with a gesture of powerlessness:

“I can’t do any more for you. Stick to Ndundu. In the meanwhile...”

Ribeiro did not understand what lay underneath Commandant Chartriant’s sudden good humour. He got up cautiously, his huge hairy hand stroking his opulent obesity.

Ribeiro walked like a duck.

Chartriant kept talking to him in the same cheerful tone until he reached the office door, where he stopped.

“No! No! You will complicate everybody’s job!”

“Do you zink so, Monsieur le Commandant?”

“Yes, dear fellow. Don’t ask them to pay before consuming it. First, they are thirsty...then, the good example of...Remind me of his name...Yes, Ndundu. His good example must be used for something...And it will be used!”

Ribeiro stood there flabbergasted! Usually when he came to complain, Commandant Chartriant was neither deferential towards him, nor so benevolent toward *the baboons*.

“It’s a good example,” said Ribeiro, suspecting an ulterior motive on the part of

who was the head of a province.

the Commandant.

“That’s good, so everything will work out for you!”

Ribeiro left. Chartriant exhaled. He looked disdainfully at the door the Portuguese had just passed through. He sat down with a racket of creaking rattan! What was Chartriant thinking about? His thoughts were too vague, they didn’t make sense even to him. This surprised him. The orderliness of his desk seemed embarrassing, ready to denounce his obvious idleness to the first comer. Everything around him was marked by an absolutely military sobriety. Not a picture on the wall, nothing hanging there, nothing. There was only the magnificent view right along the right wall when all the persian blinds were open. The sea silvery in the sun on the top to the right ; bunches of russet bamboo on the lower left; and below, in the middle, the clearing, the lagoon. Tchibète²⁹: a magnificent picture, fragrant and enlivened by the cicadas’ song!

Chartriant rang. A militiaman³⁰ marched in, knocked his naked ankles together and saluted, his hand open on his temple. He stood to attention near the door.

“The interpreter!” commanded Chartriant in military fashion.

The militiaman did an about-turn and marched out. The interpreter came in soon afterwards. A young man with thick, cracked lips: a triton from head to toe.³¹ Mabindu’s public scribe. Like the militiaman, he saluted and stood to attention.

“Do you know Ndundu?”

“Yes, Monsieur le Commandant.”

²⁹ The Tchibète is a river in the Congo.

³⁰ A noncommissioned officer or private in the militia.

³¹ Triton was a minor sea god in Greek mythology, the son of Poseidon and Amphitrite. He was usually represented as a man with a fish’s tail who rode about on a sea monster carrying a trident and trumpeting on a conch shell. It is this sea god that makes the roaring of the ocean by blowing through his shell.” Thus he is a hybrid creature, neither man nor beast, just as the figure of the interpreter is, in that by his very positions as interpreter for the Commandant and Mabindu’s public scribe, he is a potential traitor.

“You were at Ribeiro’s yesterday?”

“Not for long, Monsieur le Commandant.”

“I did not ask you how long.”

“Monsieur le Commandant is telling the truth.”

“He was there?”

“I don’t understand, Monsieur le Commandant.”

“Don’t act like an idiot! Ndundu, was he there?”

“Yes, Monsieur le Commandant.”

“What kind of example did he give you?”

“Not to me, but to the others, the ones who were drinking without paying. It is good what he said, Monsieur le Commandant.”

“I did not ask you for your opinion. Where did he come from?”

“He left with Commandant de l’Escaut. He has come back, my father told me. He is very rich...”

“That’s enough, get the hell out of here!” ordered Commandant Chartriant. The interpreter had already performed his half turn when the Commandant’s voice thundered out behind him:

“Wait! Go and get him.”

“He has already come back, a month ago...Monsieur le Commandant.”

“Go and tell him to come!” yelled the Commandant.

Chartriant reread: “Ndundu provides a good example.” He drew two large dots, one above the other, at the end of the phrase, and then wrote: “Agitator.”

The days followed one another in a desolate routine. People rushed over in a crowd whenever they heard wailing voices. It was always a funeral wake. Ndundu followed the others, his cane in his hand. In the wake of the funeral a trace of the lament remained in the air. Even when it came from afar, from another village, carried by the wind, people made it their duty to take this lament into their own hearts! Life had no other meaning than this tacit solidarity through the worst of times.

Which game killed Mué Mbungh Buangh? Was it not knowing how to live? People did not know how to live any more, said Tchiluembh, they would prefer it if some mouths were never right. Everything depends on the place one creates for oneself in life. The floor in Ndundu's house was rotten in many places. But because he knew it, it was easy to avoid taking the wrong step.

Ndundu's house in Mabindu contained enough planks, enough corrugated iron sheets...to cover twenty modest homes. But on its stilts, it did not seem lofty. Ndundu was kindness itself. Even Ribeiro's drunks blessed him, among them the interpreter. One of them, when sober, recounted the naïve words Ndundu uttered in his zeal: "Go on then, be undignified, we all know who will benefit from it!"

Tchiluembh did nothing. Like the others, he carried on living in poverty. Ndundu may not have had fresh air in his lungs, but he had sufficient breath to cry out: "Enough!" Ah! If only his elder brother would suddenly understand that the moths that used to flutter around the resin lamp and that were now being attracted to the oil lamp were not the cause of his nightmares. But even if Tchiluembh did understand...would the nights be any lighter? Mue Bumbh Buangh was dead...alright, but filial piety did not require committing suicide, which is what Tchiluembh's attitude boiled down to. How to broach

it with Liambu? She's a woman, that's true. But for her, the conflict between the two brothers could be explained by her marked preference for the younger one, to whom she wanted to give the whole of Mue Bumbh Buangh's bequest. Ndundu wanted nothing to do with this inheritance, because he had chosen the path to Christ. He was baptized. He was Christian. But he had only closed his eyes. Liambu would "prepare" him. The time had to be right; someone would come and open his eyes.

"It is you who will lose, if you do not take..."

"If it is God's will..."

"It is God's will because He put the other one beside you."

What does she know about it, does one doubt the word of the one who saw the day before one?

"Liambu, I do not know who my brother blames for our father's death...but all I do know...alright. Go on, we shall see!"

It was obvious he didn't know what to think, poor thing.

The Triton came through the gate.

"Look, here's the Triton, said Ndundu. "He is coming here; to see him coming at this time, it's not good that he comes like that."

Liambu looked at her brother with pity. Wrongly.

"Good day, A'ta Thom' Ndundu.

"Good day, you're not working?" asked Ndundu.

"Good day, A'ya Liambu."

"Good day. You're not working this morning?" asked Liambu.

The Triton turned to Ndundu and answered: "It's not Sunday today."

Ndundu hung on the words coming from the Triton's cracked lips; too bad he had to hang on his words like that. Liambu did the same. The Triton, embarrassed by the interest being paid him, tried modestly to repress a smile and got agitated. Ndundu and Liambu lowered their heads. The Triton was mortified by this. He pulled himself together and talked about things and people in general, about those dead-ends where you feel condemned to death for a physical or even an intellectual handicap. "Suddenly, you don't know anything but wanting. How do you want?"

"Isn't that backwards?" Liambu pointed out.

"A'Liambu! That I, your son, have just shown you a lack of respect, do not justify it to yourself as just an error of youth...So you must blame yourself for it... you are my mother. Admit it. And don't justify it with my bad heart, because if I did have a truly bad one, it would not have been given to me by you, but...But still, blame me all the same."

"Who is blaming you? The important thing is to know where to put your feet."

"Who is blaming me? The important thing is knowing where to put my feet, as you said."

"We are talking, and it is not always easy to talk. Let alone eating, drinking, sleeping and suffering...I have to tell you...don't laugh, I consulted diviner after diviner, it was no good, one of them asked me 'But what do you want to know?' I answered 'Guess.' These things I want to do and cannot think of...I don't know what I want, and yet I want to know what I want, I want to do something...A'ta Ndundu, do we know what..."

"The Commandant sent you here to ask me..."

I am not a traitor, I am not, I am not! bemoaned the Triton to himself. He added:

“If he had wanted to hurt you, the militiamen would have come and not me.”

Ndundu looked at Liambu as if to say: “and if the soldiers had come...the children...did you think about that?”

“Must I come with you right now?”

“No, tomorrow or the day after, come by. Tell me which day...The Commandant is just sorry that you have not been to see him...You are one of them...You have returned from far.”

Ndundu turned his back to flee the Triton’s accusations.

The Triton explained to Liambu that when a Black has been to the Whites’ country...the Whites consider him to be one of them...

Ndundu, who had left the veranda, appeared with his cane in his hand and hat on his head; he adjusted his black waistcoat embroidered with yellow silk: the mauve suit he wore on the boat did not fit him any longer, it was a bit narrow on the shoulders. Sophie and Cécile were dressed to go with him, first to the Sisters’ and then to the Mission. Ndundu explained:

“It is late in the morning. I promised myself I would take care of the children this morning. I will come tomorrow to see the Commandant.”

Those words of her brother’s confirmed what the Triton had said. Putting children before the Commandant! Her brother was really something!

“Ya Liambu, we will be back in a minute...”

“Go, take all the time you need,” she said with confused gesture, proud and tender.

She thought to herself: “I have always had something, like a premonition, that

mother had brought a *White* into the world: Ndundu.” This confirmation of her suspicion emphasized the distance between the two brothers. She went to tell Ndindu, her neighbour.

“People like him will give us back what we lack,” said Ndindu.

Liambu agreed, but Ndindu’s remark worried her. She fell silent, thought it over and finally discovered that in reality people perhaps knew what they wanted.

Was he treacherous or simple-minded, the Triton? Or perhaps he was both treacherous and simple-minded? He knew everything that went on in Mabindu, every little thought. He wrote all Mabindu’s letters, not under an oath of secrecy. He also translated what the whole of Mabindu said to Commandant Chartriant, just as he translated everything that Commandant Chartriant had to say to Mabindu.

He combined morality with malice, whether it was a sermon or petition, which was impossible without betraying one group or the other.

Chartriant raised his puffy eyes to look minutely at the countryside framed by the Persian blinds. The weather was stormy, it was heavy with a false freshness that made one’s nostrils flair.

Father Equiem did not understand why what the Commandant had just told him about Ndundu worried him.

“I find that very surprising!”

Chartriant did not reply, his mind lost in the arabesques of the trembling bamboo leaves. Finally, he produced a thought, saying in a banal voice:

“We cannot trust...”

“...but Ndundu is a believer...”

Chartriant turned away from everything that was implied in Father Equiem’s protests.

“I am not saying...”

“Mr. Chartriant...if I may...this is not advice, naturally, but...receive him like a notable...”

“After three testimonies! You...”

Chartriant choked. Blood rushed to his eyes. He yelled:

“Interpreter!”

The Triton appeared, more triton-like than ever. His eyes bulged.

“Why didn’t Ndundu come with you?”

Father Equiem scrutinized the Triton icily. An evil spirit in the Triton that he could not exorcize mocked him. A veneer of violent bravado took over the Triton’s globulous eyes.

“Will you speak?” shouted Chartriant.

The Triton snapped back to attention.

“He went to the Mission, he said he would come by tomorrow.”

“Out of my sight!”

Father Equiem crossed his arms and sighed.

“Monsieur Chartriant, I came about something else altogether, but this business, if, as I believe...”

“The reason is that this...Ndundu, because he has come back from France, who thinks that he can do anything he wants, just like a White,...is a...”

“An honest man...”

“A Christian, I know...!”

“Pardon me, Monsieur Chartriant, I came about something else altogether.

“You can’t worry about anything else if the Ndundus of this world begin to play the role of agitator.”

Father Equiem got up, retreating into a sort of passive neutrality. Chartriant calmed down.

“My apologies, Father...As for our business...alright. So tell His Eminence that I will do everything...! (A categorical gesture of his hand sealed the promise.) I will come and find out for myself the success (Father Equiem smiled...) no, don’t expect, Father...”

“About Ndundu, let me sort it out,” suggested Father Equiem.

“Pardon? Oh yes!...of course!... think about it a little...order is the only guarantee of our safety here.”

Facing the sea...1916

Prosper really felt that his young strength was too much like these waves that the sea rolled in and that broke, impotently, onto the somewhat flat and sandy coast. What was it that prevented the waves from submerging this land where dark and ancient ideas clung to men and to things with such little restraint! Ta Tchiluembh’s stubbornness was among these dark and ancient ideas. A river in spate would be better than these waves, it would sweep them all away, these ideas! But still, these waves! The obstacle against which they were powerless was God’s will! Of course, it was God’s will!

Prosper distinctly heard every gull crying at sea with every wave: “Ah, You will not go far – Ha, Ha ,” and every startled wave answered every gull: “Hou-ou-ou-ou-ou!

Beeee quiiiiet!" In each movement of the waves there was an uncouthness that irritated Prosper. Each more brash than the next. He stopped contemplating it, and turned to considering his cousin who was sitting next to him burying his feet in the sand and staring at him. Prosper's face was bathed in a kind of suffering. Bewildered, he uttered with extraordinary fervour the word "Easter." Quite suddenly, he felt overcome by a feverish earnestness!

He said: "You don't understand."

Taty, whose soul was not as rich as Prosper's, did not understand anything, any more than he understood why Prosper, breaking his silence, had said to him: "You don't understand!" Taty asked: "What do I not understand?" Prosper's only response was to stretch his back out on the sand. Then, sitting up briskly he surveyed his cousin all over with his heavy-lidded, salt-encrusted eyes and concluded, shaking his head, "It's really true that you don't understand! I can't explain to you...Easter! Do understand what I am going to become...?"

Taty could not, naturally, imagine what his cousin was going to become, and, above all, the magic of the word "Easter" remained completely foreign to him. Because his cousin could not explain anything to him...Yes, his cousin could explain himself. The cousin said:

"You have jiggers because you are full of sin, because you are a pagan."

Wait. Here it seems that there should be an explanation – oh yes, it is really quite simple – it involves two words: naturally, you have to know that – for a curious individual, and Prosper was that – he had learned by himself that they were the children of a damned race, because of an ancestor. That ancestor, he told his cousin, made a fool

out of his father. He found his father naked in front of the field where his father was making wine. Like the wine that Ribeiro sells. His father had lost his clothes, so full of alcohol was his mind. Taty understood that it was bad to drink to fill one's mind with alcohol, that one should never ridicule drunks, but to go and prevent him from understanding that, it's really logical, isn't it? It's a good thing they're children, at any rate. Anyway, that's why Prosper, contrary to his father, found it disrespectful of the children to throw clods of soil at the drunks of Ribeiro the Portuguese, who were nicknamed Ngon'N'Kuang, because that is why the rest of us are black as the devil, like Lucifer, the father of the devils. This Taty had no problem understanding.

At this new revelation, Taty, who was nervous, stammered: "Wh...wh...what?" and gestured with his hand to force the sea to make less noise, as if he could. Children and their innocence, it is quite something. Would the sea never shut up? When the lie is expelled from humankind, like the demon. Prosper laughed at Taty's gesture. Then he assumed his severe tone again, his eyebrows raised so as not to blunt the interest his cousin was prepared to show at his knowledge.

"We don't even see our tails! But we do have them, like the devil. We are devils." He arched his arms in imitation. A child who has seen the devil will never know how to set about pulling the devil's tail – happy is the mother of such a child. So there you are, what proverbs say is no clearer than what nightmares say.

Poor Taty felt his behind, furtively, with dread. He, Prosper, had no more than a very small bump, but after he had taken his first communion, he would not have it any more.

"Then..."

“Then?”

“Then, when I die, I’ll go to heaven.” He got up, opened his arms and, with his eyes raised up to the sky, he felt for an instant, with a sharp sense of martyrdom, the disagreeable brightness of the burning sky. “But that’s not all,” he went on, pointing his index finger vehemently at his cousin.

“That’s not all, what else?”

“I’ll be White,” said Prosper, bringing his arms to his heart in all humility.

He stepped back to gauge the confusion, the effect this revelation had produced in his cousin.

“You...you’ll be White! When you die?”

“Yes.”

Taty made an effort to look his cousin right in the face. He raised his eyelids, which fell down again, burdened as they were.

“I saw one of our aunts die. You, you weren’t here, but she was there just as I see you and you see me.”

“Was she baptized? No! Ah, you see! It is because she was not baptized. When the devil dies, he stays black. You have to be baptized.”

“Ba...ba...what?”

“Baptized!” Prosper batted his eyelids.

The cousin’s words fell on poor pagan Taty’s head like the after-drops of water from a violent rain. As they went into the village, on the day of this cruel revelation, Taty asked:

“What do you do to be ba...ba...”

“Baptized. Ask Ta Tchiluembh to send you to catechism to first learn the word of God.”

It was Easter Sunday and there was a crowd packed in like sardines. You could not see a blade of grass in front of the mission. For their sins, the candidates of the Communion of Saints were throwing themselves into it fervently and with such zeal! They relished the thorns with a blind “passion!”

There were Ohs! and Ahs! of admiration for the Convent girls and the communicants, whom the Sisters had been in charge of dressing. Under the slightly vaulted sky, the voices made the same music as stones dropping into a well. The young girls were dressed in white; they wore scarves of knotted mosquito netting on their heads. People jostled each other to see a little better. Then a many-hued multitude swept into the church. The bishop came in last. All eyes fixed on him in the porchway – on his expressionless face, his supple hands moving as he repeated “Dominum vobiscum” – and followed him as he proceeded to the altar, never leaving him. The fanfares of the harmonium, the incense and the choirs did the rest. The administrator Chartriant was there on the invitation of the bishop, who had requested his presence at the first communion ceremony. It seemed that the Bishop, for his part, did not take his eyes off the administrator: Did Chartriant recognize that this was truly a triumph, this fervent trembling of so many souls won at the Mission? The Black priest, Father Stanislas, was officiating. The functionary wept inwardly at the scandal. He himself was a Voltairean. But even so, if these b... had to have a religion, it did not have to be the religion of the people of Voltaire! I mean, really! The administrator’s thoughts were vehement. They

besieged him; the poor man was sweating. And then it was stifling in this blasted church!

The corners of Ta Thom Ndundu's eyes were wet, with tears of course. He was a great Christian, Father Stanislas. If only his brother could have been there, by his side! Ta Tchiluembh was on his way to Mayombe. Father René placed his black fingers on the ivory of the harmonium keys, and they ran like waves rippling over sonorous sands. How refreshing it was!

All the priests in the Mission³² liked Prosper. "Of course, we can't all have Thom' Ndundu for a father!" said the other boarders. Tchizimbila, the scrapper, never passed over an opportunity to provoke Prosper. Prosper was too nervous and he did not defend himself very well. In addition, he had acquired the reputation of being an "asslicker." False, of course. But people always had to have an excuse for harassing others. In the dormitory, they wet his bed, they stained his clothes with grease, and at night the rats came and ate away at everything he had, even at the soles of his feet. One night, they woke him up, took him out of the dormitory and forced him to climb a coconut tree. "Throw us some coconuts!" Bang, bang, went the falling coconuts. Woken up by this racket, Brother Jules could only come to the obvious conclusion: it was Prosper who was stealing the coconuts. He was also blamed for the pig that was found dead the day before every feast. The real culprit, Jean Balou, stuck a pin into the foot of the fleshiest animal. That is what killed it, they said. It changed the boarders' menu a little. But poor Prosper, all the same! And then there was the diarrhoea when their stomachs could not take the pork fat. One time someone brought a sorcerer to his trough (all the boarders slept in troughs). That was right at the beginning. Prosper was almost

expelled. Thom' Ndundu gave his son a thrashing. He gave even more gifts to the Fathers. The Fathers only did it for the sake of form when they were forced to send Prosper away, because in the end, the culprit had confessed, right?

That was a long time ago, that Easter of the first communion. Forgotten... The Fathers' paternal tone of that time had slipped into another, shriller tone. Every day life had its hardships, and in a poor country like this one it makes no sense to only preach charity. "What are the people going to give you, they have nothing." Brother Jules went hunting. It was not only for the sport. Manual labour was more than just part of an experiment. They lived on it. Anyone who demonstrated even *a hint* of faith was immediately given a syllabary, an exercise book and a pen. To the others, it was said that a wood plane might be the safest rudder for such a fate... Saint Joseph, the foster father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, was cited as an example. Take this spade, dig your grave to rest your body, while you wait for the final Judgment, Amen.

Who would have said that two months ago it was Easter! Outside, the sky pressed innumerable banks of stars around the full moon. The moving air chattered here and there, exciting the clamour of the toads and the shrill hilarity of the cicadas. Above Prosper's head, the termites continued their painstaking labour.

Prosper tossed and turned in his trough. He couldn't close his eyes. In his mind he remembered Ta Liambu's ducklings, no sooner had he chased them away than they came back again. His memories fluttered around in the darkness of the dormitory. Two troughs away, almost keeping time with the rhythm of the croaking toads, Tchizimbila the scrapper, also nicknamed "the warthog" because he had a big mouth and protruding teeth, was snoring. A real pig! At the other end of the dormitory, little Pelessus-Taty was

³² The Fathers of the Holy Ghost Mission in the Lower French Congo, Loango River, was founded in 1866.

dreaming out loud as usual. “Mama, mama! There are snakes in the hole! No! No! You mustn’t! I don’t want to die...!” The warthog snored, while the toads’ song subsided.

Two months ago it was Easter, Prosper said to himself with a sigh. One thing was sure, Ta Tchiluembh was a strange one!

Ta Liambu, instead of going back to where she had come from, busied herself around her younger brother’s house. Prosper saw her spry and well once more. Only Tchiluembh had the kind of heart that he had, how was it possible? Lord! Prosper, immersed in his prayers, forgot why he was praying. Things – call them *memories* if you like – came back to him. And that meal she had regaled us with! The chicken *à la muambe*³³ had been particularly tasty. He needed more fingers on each hand to prolong the pleasure of licking them one by one. What had they eaten this evening, at the house? And to think that at home I had a decent bed!

The noise of the key in the lock made him lift up his head. Brother Jules tiptoed in to do his 10 o’clock rounds. Prosper did not close his eyes when Brother Jules shone the lantern onto his face. “Try to sleep, close your eyes, sleep will come!” Brother Jules’s whispering stayed in Prosper’s ears for a long time. Prosper pricked up his ears. Hello, it looks like they’re mourning someone down Mayombe way. Outside, it became silent, the stars more distant than the moon in the sky. The bats continued their wide swooping. One of them swooped within a hair’s breadth of Prosper’s nose. He shivered. The bells rang 10 o’clock. There was a wild hooting noise like a sinister tocsin. The darkness of its formless, unctuous mass made the walls crack. Feebly, the thunder rumbled from the sea

³³ U Tam’Si’s note: “Palm nut sauce.” According to Georges Ballandier, “The whole of African culinary art lay in the making of sauces to enhance dishes which tended to be plain...In the Kongo, it was by her preparation of *mwamba*, a sauce made from the oil of the palm, that one judged the talent of a cook” (Ballandier 158).

side: then all the corrugated iron sheets on the roof started to creak. The water rushed into the dormitory where Prosper was sleeping. It awoke a profound desire among the boarders to wreak havoc. The “troughs” were flooded. Brother Jules asked those in the other dormitory to each take a mate into his bed. Jean Balou hastened forward and offered Prosper half of his bed. Brother Jules said to himself, “he is strong headed, but has a good heart.” But as soon as he turned his back, Prosper was thrown out by his host. He curled up on the damp cement. Outside, the thunder carried on crashing like a quarry breaking up in a devastating explosion. Then, from very far, came the slow roaring of a satiated lion.

Prosper fell asleep. He dreamed. The palm tree behind his paternal home bore avocados. That’s something that goes against nature, even in a dream. And during this restless sleep, he had eaten one of these avocados, which was naturally spicy. A naturally spicy avocado, there’s something else that goes against nature, even in a dream. Prosper’s mouth was on fire and he rolled on the ground, thrusting his hand down the back of his mouth to ease the pain by scratching his irritated esophagus. Without managing to ease his pain, he choked himself .

However, when he woke up, he did not feel oppressed. The nightmare had vanished and Prosper was alive beyond his usual capacity, which never allowed him to act spontaneously. Gathering momentum, running, leapfrogging over a buddy’s back took a prowess he thought he did not possess. But today, what sudden fury was inside his being! The demon of innocence has resources that would be an angel’s downfall.

Father Stanislas watched all Prosper’s antics. “He is normally so calm!” Prosper laughed. Something inside him would not let him stop laughing. The priest crossed

himself as a thought entered his mind. “How cruel God can be!” Then the priest begged for God’s mercy on his poor soul, overburdened as it was by the wretchedness of these times. But nothing in this weakness – that “how cruel God can be” could only be weakness – betrayed his faith, which was so profound. He suffered for what had befallen Prosper and what Prosper did not know, what he should not know for the time being. The priest was also suffering because Prosper was laughing in such circumstances. “We will only tell him after the burial,” Father Echelin had said to Father Stanislas when the priest asked him “How shall we tell Prosper?”

The two Black priests of the Loango Mission des Pères du Saint-Esprit did not have beards, and this made them seem less dignified. The white fathers looked like God with their beards. But oh! Those hands of Father René’s on the keys of the harmonium! Ta Tchiluembh had said once to his brother: “To mass! To mass! But look at Him, their God, does He perhaps look like Mué Mbumbh Buangh? (“Always papa everywhere, that’s not filial piety any more, it’s a bad excuse!”) “So, you understand,” continued Tchiluembh, “I, for one, have nothing to do with their stories.” That day Prosper was gripped by panic when he heard his uncle talking like that. He wanted to explain things: “The ancestor...” “Will you shut up, little jerk! Do you understand it, their story? I, for one, know nothing, but Mué Mbumbh Buangh knew everything! Everything, do you understand me? But now, the world is backwards.” Because everybody knows everything. There is no longer anyone to just be there without knowing anything.

When he dies, Father Stanislas will look like Father Mathieu, Prosper was convinced of it. When he dies, of course.

On the veranda the priest wiped his eyes. Like a dog that had eaten young grass,

Prosper bounded, twirled around, picked his nose and splashed the water in a puddle with his feet, while bursting out laughing. Ceasing this tack suddenly, he ran to kneel at the foot of a tree, with chagrin but also laughter in his eyes.

“Prosper!” called the priest hesitantly.

“Father?” replied Prosper, enunciating each syllable.

“Come here, will you?” Prosper went to the priest, kicking his feet in front of him.

The priest noticed the pout of a spoiled child he had never seen in Prosper before.

“Remember I promised you holy pictures?” All innocence tortures the soul!

“Yes father,” replied Prosper, rolling his eyes and showing the moist brilliance of their whites.

“Why are you rolling your eyes like that?” said the priest, almost nervous.

“I am not rolling my eyes.” Prosper laughed, but not insolently, the abbot noted.

“You will have some,” the priest cut him short.

“I will have what?” asked Prosper, his voice and body suddenly going limp.

The priest crossed himself furtively. A voice, very far away in his soul which now appeared to be under the soles of his feet, repeated one word: “Innocent! Innocent! In...no...cent!” We make the sign of the cross when we no longer know what to do. The priest, who was bent over Prosper’s face, shuddered, pulled himself together sharply, crossed himself, clasped his hands high behind his back, regained his composure and looked at the child who was blinking up at him.

“The abbot said ‘you will have some.’ What will I have?”

“Come. Some holy pictures and medals.”

At these words, the priest saw Prosper become himself again. He appeared less

free, more reserved. He was now looking at everything very furtively with a guilty curiosity.

Prosper had heard people say that Father Stanislas and Father René did not have the same breviaries as the White Fathers. He told himself that if their breviaries were different, their rooms might also be. So he had examined the abbot's room minutely... Brother Jules had the same bed, iron with bars! The sheets...Ah! The cloth they were made of was not as white. Perhaps it's nothing!

"What are you looking at like that, Prosper?" asked the priest.

"I don't know exactly." Prosper really meant "in what way am I looking?"

Prosper rubbed his nose. The priest did not persist.

"Hmm," said the priest. "How old are you?"

"I am twelve years old, Father."

Prosper was twelve years old and stood tall on two very thin legs that were joined onto the rest of his body with two knock knees. He looked through the window.

The air outside smelt of orange blossoms and blew back into the room. The coconut palms, rustled by the slight morning breeze, showered rain drops from the previous night onto the corrugated iron roof. The sun refracted on the puddles of water in the yard. Prosper saw the priest looking at him surreptitiously and hesitating to give him the order that he was waiting impatiently, zealously to carry out. He wondered why the priest had called him.

"Can I go now, Father?" asked Prosper, still rubbing his nose like he did when he was embarrassed. Recess was already over. Usually, the order was given summarily. But there was the priest, saying again: "Would you be so kind as to..." Could he be sick?

This sudden lack of composure, or then again...

“No, wait. Would you be so kind as to...?” said the priest, struggling with himself. He had been Ndundu’s friend. And the Father Superior had told him to talk to Ndundu’s son, to tell him what had happened, tactfully. It would be simple. He knew how he himself had been hurt by the news. He sensed how much more pain it would be inflict on this beanpole Prosper. “Lord, why do you permit these things to happen!”

“Would you be so kind?” Prosper did not say whether he would be kind or not, because this scene was appearing increasingly strange, it was bewildering. The priest must really not be well!

Since he had been with the mission fathers, he had never been asked a question like that, especially not by the priest. As he had lowered his eyes, he did not see the priest’s glistening. Nor did he see the priest’s hand trembling. And his tone was becoming less peremptory and was beginning to quiver. Prosper felt his spine grow warm. He looked up and saw that the priest was staring at something beyond the open window, in the direction of Mabindu. At that moment the warming of Prosper’s spine had an incredible effect. The willing and disciplined child turned into a zombie. He went to the window as if the priest’s glance had commanded him to do so. A palm tree brushed the corrugated iron roof of the awning; further away, on the diagonal, the avenue of mango trees followed by the avenue of palms leading to the Sisters’ was visible. The priest narrowed his eyebrows to try and give his face a severity, which he then suddenly felt was inappropriate. Striving to remove all the severity from his voice, he said: “From now on, you will go to the Sisters’ place to get the communion wafers. You will start today, right away, little one.” His voice became constricted. He felt worn out and weak.

At the Mission, he was legendary. Like all the members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Father Stanislas had a reputation for never uttering a single superfluous word; whether he was giving an order or saying vespers. And his voice could hypnotize you for the whole length of the service...That priest had just disappeared. In spite of his disarray, Prosper felt honoured – and no doubt he was the only one – to have seen the priest in his human skin. He found him less impressive than his own, so respected father.

Father Superior had decided that his father's death would be hidden from Prosper. Yes, Thom' Ndundu was dead. The burial was today, the Office of the Dead would be recited in two hours, and Prosper had to be sent away. This the priest did not understand and was obliged to obey. Even the wind had collaborated: it had blown from Mabindu to the mission; the boarders would be asking each other who had died.

"Class has already begun, Father," said Prosper, angling for an absence note.

"I will tell Brother Jules that I sent you. Go quickly, little one. Wait. Do you know what this is?"

"That bit of cloth? No, Father."

"This bit of cloth, as you call it, is a relic. Do you know what a relic is? Here, this one comes from the cloth worn by Sister Teresa of the Child Jesus. Take it and keep it carefully."

"Oh, thank you, Father!"

"Go now, little one!"

The sky was now low and a dirty gray colour, everything was bogged down in a gloomy stillness. Father Stanislas noticed that the coconut palm was no longer brushing the corrugated iron of the awning. He went to the window, sighed, and crossed himself.

Prosper had taken his hoop (the rim of an old bicycle wheel) and dashed off toward the Convent. How wonderful! The water from the puddles sprayed out. He almost fell down when he arrived at the convent gate. Sister Sidonie opened the gate and took him to the parlour. A large, long room with sea-green walls. At one end there was a daïs, on top of which was mounted a large cross. Christ's flesh, dark brown and shiny, had a disconcerting, cadaverous look about it. The blood from His four scars, incredibly fresh, shocked one's soul into piety. Prosper knelt down on the doorstep, crossed himself and waited for Sister Sidonie's order to stand up.

Sister Superior was there, her eyed behind glasses. It was sewing day; the two best embroiderers were also there: Cécile and Sophie. "Why have you come to see us today?" Expecting a visit from their uncle and father, they felt a bit ridiculed by Prosper's arrival, and found their brother's fervour awkward and insincere.

"Come on, Prosper, what do you think you are doing walking in the puddles like that?" said Sister Superior.

Prosper was flattered that the Sister Superior was treating him so solicitously, and above all that she knew his name.

"Nothing, Sister," he replied, fiddling with his nose.

"What do you mean, nothing? That's not what Sophie or Cécile think, is it...? It is good that you came to see us..." To see us?

It was too much, this kindness toward them, they couldn't get over it! Before bringing them into the parlour, Sister Sidonie asked them to join her in morning prayers.

"I have come for the communion wafers, Sister" he said, implying that he had not come to see them.

“Yes, but don’t you want to stay a minute with your sister and your cousin?”

“Yes, Sister, thank you, Sister.”

Sister Superior whispered something in Sister Sidonie’s ear and went out. Sister Sidonie stared at “the children.” “Alright, children,” she sighed.

Sophie pinched Prosper who was examining Sister Sidonie’s face. Sister Sidonie felt him staring at her cheek, his look penetrating the flesh of her pale, fine face.

[69]Beautiful, certainly. The blood rose to her cheeks. His idiotic look confused her. And in other circumstances, she would have accused him of insolence and lack of respect.

She opened a large book on a lectern. Only Sister Sidonie’s fingers were allowed to touch these pages, so holy was the book. It was off-limits even for Abbot René’s fingers, at whose light touch the harmonium was so responsive.

“Prosper, you’re not looking?”

“I am sorry, Sister.”

“Look, Cécile, what does this picture show?”

“Blessed Mary, mother of God, Holy Saviour...(She rhymed it off.) Pray for us.”

“That’s right, my child.” It did not occur to her how utterly ridiculous Cécile’s response was, more to show off her knowledge than her piety. But was it any less innocent? Less pious? Innocence, in this case, is not being aware of what is going on. Piety, in such an instance, is to be able to reconcile oneself devotedly to one’s fate. But then to tell children...now it was Sister Sidonie who was torturing herself.

“That’s it, my child, may the Blessed Virgin pray for us,” said Sister Sidonie. She sighed as deeply as she could. Not because she had had a thought, but because of the habit the Order wore when it was 45° in the shade...God would not approve. But

innocence was never finding oneself so naked and defenseless that one was driven from this earthly paradise – still imminently possible.

“And this one, Sophie?”

“The Holy Saviour dead on the cross, who was conceived from the Holy Ghost and born from the Virgin Mary...”

Perhaps innocence is the cruellest, most offensive way of being guilty or complicit.

Sister Sidonie’s thoughts, whatever they were, were far from intriguing to Prosper. But he was spellbound and thought to himself: “She is as beautiful as the Holy Virgin.” Coming to his senses, he stammered: “Sister, Sister, give me the communion wafers, please. I ran so fast so that the storm would not catch up with me.”

Cécile and Sophie had the same gentle and amused thought: he is mad. They had seen it for themselves! Prosper had not taken his eyes off the Sister’s face. And now he wanted to beat the storm in a race! The two cousins burst out laughing. “Don’t laugh like that,” said the Sister dryly, “it is bad, children.” The children strained their ears: the Sister clenched her fists and suddenly started to tremble. Mabindu was not far, and Prosper himself must have heard it the night before. They were mourning someone. Why didn’t they give him the wafers? He had run so fast! It was Wednesday, embroidery day, and yet Cécile and Sophie were there looking at pictures that they already knew off by heart. And then, normally it was Ndehlou the sexton who came to fetch communion wafers. Why, all of a sudden, was it Prosper...? To tease Cécile, they said at the Convent that she looked at the sexton Ndehlou in a strange way. And Cécile protested, getting irritated: “Me look at him! He’s not even handsome!” (That is not what Cécile really thought

because, in fact, she did look at him and did nothing else but look at him...and had a great deal of trouble controlling her breathing.) But after all, why were they there? Cécile wanted to question Prosper with her eyes, but they were vacillating between fascination and the desire to get out of there. Sophie was ashamed of him and became visibly annoyed: her brother was behaving so rudely! Sister Sidonie did not know how to deflect Prosper's gaze, which was irritating her now. The shutters on the parlour windows clattered. Suddenly, everything started to shake, to tremble as if the sky had cracked open, now blocks of black clouds were falling to earth, making each thing furious, as if, for each thing, this was the ultimate convulsion of agony. At midday it felt like dusk, a wild, dishevelled dusk lacerated in some places by fires in the whole sky. Quickly, they closed the windows. The sky was black, the rain was black, the terror in people's hearts was black. The white flash of Prosper's eyes was black. His expressionless face was black...Prosper was black...When he died he wouldn't be black any more.

"Pray, children, may it be God's will that this storm does not do any more damage on earth..." murmured Sister Sidonie. "Pray for those who are suffering."

They prayed, distracted perhaps by the blackness around them. Without knowing to whom they were addressing this prayer, or for whom they were praying.

The thunder pummeled this prayer, which did not manage to be fervent because neither Sister Sidonie, troubled by dark thoughts, nor "the children," paralyzed by black innocence, knew why they had to pray.

"De profundis clamavi ad te domine...Ad te domine! Ad te domine!"

Sister Sidonie did not notice that she was now saying the Prayer for the Dead, and the "children" were looking at each other asking "why?" with their eyes.

Now Chartriant could not punish the agitator, the provider of a good example, as a warning to would-be agitators. There was more nothing more frustrating to a Commandant than being deprived of an agitator. No more agitator! Attention, Thom' Ndundu died in a lorry accident. Father of Sophie and Prosper, brother of Tchiluembh and Liambu, uncle of Cécile and Taty, is dead! Thom' Ndundu is dead! Both his legs crushed, his left cheek slashed open, his eyes put out of his head: I'm telling you, that's how it was! With his last gasp was he just able to ask to see his children? Yes. Abbot Stanislas, who ran to his side immediately, shook his head: "No, no, my God! Have pity on us, poor sinners!" It is quite simply stupid, a man does not deserve to die like this. May God rest his soul," he said with humility, in an ultimate farewell to the man who was the tailor Thom' Ndundu. May God rest his soul...And if this man's soul looked like his body in rags, what will he do, Lord, Lord, what will he do?

Remember that great hurricane? It had nothing to do with the one of the accident. It made everybody more alone than the withered leaves, the dead leaves of a tree struck in a storm that no one saw coming! Thom' Ndundu also did not see the storm coming, he who was so perspicacious, so prudent. Who else would have seen the storm coming, if not him? He would cry, perhaps, on cutting his first teeth as the clouds gathered overhead; and, undoubtedly, this little game of the "elements" would run its course. There was already a hurricane when he set off, in shock at leaving with de l'Escaut. He went off, beside himself with joy at leaving without any qualms. That's right, without any qualms, because, after all, wasn't it his duty as a son to collect his father's bones? And this father, had he seen him die? Alright then, what are we going to blame him for, he

who cried when he cut his first teeth! He had waited in vain for his older brother Tchiluembh to say to him: “Give me your hand, follow me.” Oh! He would not have asked him “Where do you want to take me?” And he knew that his father’s bones were there, under the open sky, somewhere in Mayombe! But Ndundu just took off, without any qualms.

Tchiluembh had hung around, there where his great aunt had buried his umbilical cord, in the area that Mabindu had abandoned to take the big road that led to the Mission and then on to the “commandant’s” villa. As for the other members of the family, life had delivered them to their fates, stuck them on a few thankless, dusty, and abandoned patches of ground that were pounded by voracious rain in the rainy season, roasted in the sun and parched in the dry season. It took Thom’ Ndundu’s return to bring them together...without it lasting – with Liambu – Oh for nothing but a moment, because they couldn’t live on top of each other any longer, because it is so hard to breathe when two people are sharing one current of air. And so life did exactly what it wanted...! Tchiluembh knew and said that it was not his fault that the weather had become impossible. Those who accused him of egotism were wrong. And everyone knew how much life had humiliated him. Isn’t humiliation the worst evil? But why blame life and not oneself?

Some time before the Easter celebration, Thom’ Ndundu had been to see his older brother and noticed that he was preparing to leave on a journey to Mayombe.

“Why are you taking this trip to Mayombe?”

If only Tchiluembh had answered that this journey was to fetch their father’s bones, if only he had said: “Give me your hand, come with me,” even more so because

over time...

“What, just like that, on the spur of the moment, when you haven’t even asked me to get ready to go on this journey with you? Which grain of dust have those bones become over time, do you know?”

Then, combining a strange thought with a quarter of a kola nut, Tchiluembh chewed the whole thing. His slow chewing was unbearable. With his two eyes expressionless, he said again:

“If you have you forgotten that it is somewhere in Mayombe that Mbumbh Buangh and I lost sight of each other...Doesn’t that explain some of our misunderstandings?”

Nor should there be any mistaking the meaning of Tchiluembh’s explanation. Then Ndundu, distracted, replied:

“Wait until after the celebrations, you know that the children are having their first communion.” Ndundu thought better of it: “I...I am not saying no, just not right away.”

“You who knows how to count the passing hours, so you also know how to make pleasantries...? What’s the rush? I am not asking you, but I for one am leaving tomorrow. I was going to come by to tell you tonight. Thank you for coming, you have saved me the...trouble.”

All this was too ambiguous, but Ndundu, too preoccupied, did not get it. Under his brother’s insinuations, Thom’ Ndundu insisted:

“Whether you leave tomorrow or in two weeks...”

“But until then I would have to count the hours, and that is something I do not know how to do. It is up to every person to do what they know best, according to their

heart.”

So Tchiluembh left for Mayombe. The night was thick, he went through a forest, he crossed another plain with night in his heart.

In all of Mabindu, Thom’ Ndundu was the only one who was naïve enough to believe his brother’s accusations. And then, after Tchiluembh left, Thom’ Ndundu did not think about it any more. He was engrossed in making new clothes for his son, was engrossed in his devotions, and was extremely moved in the church on the day of the communion. He was sorry his brother was not there that day, and he came to life at the table, where they ate poulet à la muambe. And when, one month later, he learned of his brother’s return, he was amazed that he had not noticed his absence.

Three days afterwards, Thom’ Ndundu died in a lorry accident coming back from Loango, where he had been on business. It was a Monday. On Wednesday, just before midday, he was buried, and at that same moment, Prosper was watching Sister Sidonie’s face, fascinated.

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