

**MYTH, IDENTITY AND COLLABORATION
IN MICHEL TOURNIER'S *LE ROI DES AULNES*
AND AHMADOU KOUROUMA'S
*MONNÈ, OUTRAGES ET DÉFIS***

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Myths --that is the stories a people tells about itself-- act as a continually renewed if unconscious means of maintaining cultural identity. Roland Barthes posited in *Mythologies* that myths preserve identity by affirming the cultural codes that establish difference, maintain class structures, and elucidate the moral obligations of the individual to his or her ethnic group, class, religion, region or nation. Yet one wonders what kinds of stories various peoples tell about themselves to explain the periods of crisis and institutional collapse that erode such identity. How does one arrive at what appears to be a negation of ones own culture; how does one become a collaborator? Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des Aulnes* and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages et défis* explore crisis, the erosion of culture and the role myth plays in collaboration with an occupying force.

In *The Scapegoat* René Girard posits that during times of natural or political crisis, collective persecution and mob violence have historically followed a similar pattern. Institutional collapse tends to obliterate all the hierarchical differences within a society that result from diversity and the system of exchange maintaining those differences (13). The selection and persecution of scapegoats result from attempts by a mob to reestablish social hierarchy where culture --that which differentiates-- has been eclipsed. Such attempts tend to be perverse, for scapegoats are inevitably those least able to protect themselves from the majority: minorities such as Jews, Gypsies and Arabs in medieval and modern Europe; children, the handicapped, and kings in ancient and traditional societies. Scapegoatism often becomes institutionalized, and as such is a fundamental element of collaboration. Girard has analyzed the conditions for what he calls "collective resonances of persecutions", i.e. those acts akin to mob violence, such as witch hunts, that are legal in form but are the result of the extremes of public opinion (12). Such acts, Girard posits, can only be stimulated by crises that weaken normal institutions. Girard has determined four stereotypes common to myth and oral and written accounts of persecution to show that our perceptions of crisis are mythic in structure. These stereotypes are: 1) the generalized loss of difference created by a crisis, 2) the supposed crimes that eliminated difference, 3) whether the identified authors of such crimes possess the marks that

suggest a victim, i.e. physical marks of difference from the majority, and 4) the violence itself. Viewed in this light, the German occupation of France produced a psychological state no different than that engendered by the plague of Thebes in *Oedipus the King*. Similarly, just as in the popular mind the plague resulted from Oedipus's crimes, responsibility for French defeat fell on Jews in government and the press'; like the pierced feet of Oedipus, racist stereotypes marked Jews as physically distinguishable from the majority; like Oedipus, French Jews were banished from citizenship. Analogous situations illustrate that myths function during any crisis to convince the populace that the perceived causes of any crisis are real and that the persecution of a victim is necessary. Official attempts to hold an Asiatic transient accountable for the damaging wildfire in Southern California in 1993 is but one recent example. What I am suggesting here is that we unconsciously act out the structures of the myths that make us. Certainly, this is the case of the protagonists of Tournier's and Kourouma's novels.

Abel Tiffauges, antihero of *Le Roi des Aulnes*, links two opposing myths to his roles of collaborator and scapegoat: he represents the Erlking who carries off children to their deaths and Saint Christopher who, by transporting Christ across a river offers salvation to children. Although Tiffauges is not anti-semitic --his former mistress is a Jew--, his mythomaniac view of himself and his increasing marginalization from the norms of French society begin with his break from his mistress. On a symbolic level, Tiffauges, garage owner and member of the *petite bourgeoisie*, represents a French everyman whose disassociation with Jews was a step leading to collaboration with Nazi Germans. However, as Tiffauges makes explicit, myths paved the way for such collaboration: "Tu es un ogre, me disait Rachel. Un Ogre? C'est-à-dire un monstre féérique émergeant de la nuit des temps? Je crois, oui, à ma nature féérique..." (13). The change in Tiffauges's mind from the lower case "ogre" Rachel used to describe his sexual appetites to an upper case, mythical "Ogre" reveals his belief in his own marginalization and in mythical structures underlying all action. Tiffauges describes himself as a monster, and points to its etymological origin in the verb "montrer" or to show, as one might point out a circus freak. Tiffauges's neighbors confirm his monstrous view of himself by emphasizing his physical resemblance to Eugène Weidman, a German accused of mass murder in France and publically guillotined June 17, 1939. This is but a first sign not only of institutional collapse, but of Tiffauges's affinity with the future victors. There is no difference between Tiffauges and a criminal, nor is there any difference between

Tiffauges and a German. Tiffauges also carries the signs of a victim; he is big, clumsy, myopic and, as Rachel was quick to point out, has the penis of a preadolescent. Later, Tiffauges's role as scapegoat becomes clear: falsely accused of raping a pubescent girl, Tiffauges escapes trial because of the outbreak of war and his mobilization into the army of the Rhine. Moreover, Tiffauges believes that he has magically ordered world events to save his own skin, and thus claims responsibility for the declaration of war. Once captured, Tiffauges undergoes an initiatic education in Prussia that prepares him for the Ogrish vocation of providing young boys for the *Napolitas* of a waning Nazi empire. Tiffauges unwittingly aids the Nazi cause, not because he is stupid or brutish, but because he is completely removed from social responsibilities. Ironically, Tiffauges views his capture and deportation to Germany as liberating, but the irony here is double: Tiffauges's role as scapegoat is to export the evil he carries within him to foreign soil: the steppes of northern Prussia provide a landscape for Tiffauges' perversions. Unaware of what was happening at Auschwitz, Tiffauges repeats many of the horrors of the camps: he makes a mattress of the hair left by the boys on the barber's floor; he helps measure the captives to determine Aryan physical traits; he chases down child recruits with a pack of black dogs.

Tiffauges' mythical role changes from Ogre to Saint when he discovers a dying Jewish child liberated from Auschwitz whom he secretly nurses back to health and from whom he learns of the horrors of the death camps. Only by giving up the ideal of masculine conquest illustrated by his capture of youth for a feminine role of a nurse does Tiffauges become aware of the meaning of his own collaboration. Tiffauges then redeems himself by fleeing the advance of Russian troops with the boy on his shoulders. Despite the reversal of mythical roles here from Erlking to Saint Christopher, one role remains constant. Scapegoats, having exported evil, never return. Tiffauges dies in a bog.

Tiffauges has created his identity as ogre from a pair of myths, childhood memories, etymology, and the reinterpretation of signs. Although the persistent need to recreate new identities may well be the dilemma posed by modernity that links us all, myth and thus identity remains grounded in language and is culture specific. Barthes stated that above all myth is a speech act, that is a system of communication as well as a message (193). Myths are therefore communal in nature, a form of social collaboration, whether we understand their function and nature or not. If Tiffauges appears to be equally capable of evil as the Nazis for whom he worked, it is precisely because of a shared

past of Christian and European myths that tie the French and German nations.

Djigui Keita, the hero king of Ahmadou Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages et défis* understands quite well the power of language and myth in the creation of social identity. Unlike Tiffauges, Djigui lives in a traditional world in West Africa where everyone's identity, predetermined for all time, is continually reinforced by the proverbs, legends and myths known to everyone. Indeed, that the world can be mastered because all things have been named exacerbates cultural conflict based on linguistic differences. Whereas the occupation of France by Germans certainly disrupted the lives of the majority of the French, it did not alter their essentially Christian and European views of themselves. Victims of the occupation tended to be those groups such as Gypsies, Jews and Communists who did not share those views. Had France been invaded by Islamic Turks instead of Germans, the resistance movement surely would have had strong popular support before 1942.

The French conquest of West Africa at the end of the nineteenth century is similar in concept to Turks crossing the Rhine. Moreover, the French invasion created for many black Africans a complete rupture with previous beliefs; in remote areas, experience with a dominating foreign culture had never been named. Indeed the French remained an enigma because their culture was to a certain extent untranslatable. In a myth serving as an epigram to his novel, Kourouma reinforces the notion that power stems from language:

Un jour le Centenaire demanda au Blanc comment s'entendait en français le mot *monnè*.

«Outrages, défis, mépris, injures, humiliations, colère rageuse, tous ces mots à la fois sans qu'aucun le traduise véritablement», répondit le Toubab qui ajouta: «En vérité, il n'y a pas chez nous, Européens, une parole rendant totalement le *monnè* Malinké.» Parce que leur langue ne possédait pas le mot, le Centenaire en conclut que les Français ne connaissaient pas les *monnèw*. Et l'existence d'un peuple, nazaréen de surcroît, qui n'avait pas vécu et ne connaissait pas tous les outrages, défis et mépris dont lui et son peuple pâtissaient tant, resta pour lui, toute la vie, un émerveillement, les sources et les motifs de graves méditations.

On the one hand, Kourouma is stating that Europeans have been able to dominate Black Africa so successfully because they have no sense of

shame. On the other hand he describes how great, that is incomprehensible, a rupture with the known world colonization created for traditional Africans.

As king and direct descendant of Sounjata, the thirteenth century Malinké founder of the Malian Empire, Djigui Keita has a mythically determined responsibility for the suffering of his people (his name, Djigui, which translates as "rogue" in the sense of a solitary male driven from the herd by one of his sons, indicates his role as scapegoat). Above all he must incarnate the various kinds of shame (*monweu*) that submission to a foreign power implies. James George Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, has shown that in traditional societies attempts to rid a society of evil by selecting a scapegoat may or may not require a scapegoat's expulsion from society, but does require the scapegoat's death. A king is often an ideal choice because his exalted position already places him at the margins of everyday activity.

Like Tiffauges, Djigui is guilty of breaking social taboos that prove him an ideal scapegoat: the first is a human sacrifice that he ordered as a young king to assure the continuance of his line. Second, as a vassal of Samory², Djigui had pledged to commit suicide rather than submit to French rule. Instead Djigui capitulated without a fight, and in a traditional ceremony accepted his role of vassal to the new conqueror as if the Malinké and the French shared the same cultural values. Because of his ties to tradition, Djigui then becomes the figurehead of enforcement of colonial abuse: his guards round up, as they once rounded up slaves, "recruits" for the forced labor to build roads and the railroad; they use the same methods to collect taxes for the colonial administration as they once did for the king. Moreover, at each administrative level, collaborators exploit the peasantry to their own profit in what Kourouma calls *le travail avant le travail* or *le travail noir nègre* in which those rounded up for forced labor for the colonial government often spend as much as six months working under the worst of conditions for black collaborators before being delivered to the colonial administration (84). Although Djigui does not participate directly in such abuse, he nevertheless is responsible for his people's suffering because he has been seduced into collaboration by the promise, never kept, of a train in exchange for the unpaid labor necessary to lay its tracks from the coast (77). Although responsible for the abuses to his people, Djigui is powerless to help them. Interpreters and other officials upon whom the colonial administration relies more closely wield all the real power over the peasantry. The colonizers maintain their hold on the colonies by encouraging the exploitation of blacks by blacks³.

The continued success of the French throughout Djigui's long life results from his having collaborated with them. During World War II, when the abuses of the Vichy government in the African colonies far surpassed those of any government that preceded or followed it, Djigui becomes a member of resistance to colonial rule and helps bring about the fall of Vichy power in the region. However, he remains a failed scapegoat because French rule continues under DeGaulle. Djigui has lived too long (over 125 years) and finally dies in a fit of frustration over a minor humiliation, thus vanquished by *monnew*. Djigui's death marks the end of an era with ties to a traditional past:

La Négritité et la vie continuèrent après ce monde, ces hommes. Nous attendaient le long de notre dur chemin: les indépendances politiques, le parti unique, l'homme charismatique, le père de la nation, les *pronunciamientos* dérisoires, la révolution; puis les autres mythes: la lutte pour l'unité nationale, pour le développement, le socialisme, la paix, l'autosuffisance alimentaire et les indépendances économiques; et aussi le combat contre la sécheresse et la famine, la guerre à la corruption, au tribalisme, au népotisme, à la délinquance, à l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme, salmigondis de slogans qui à force d'être galvaudés nous ont rendus sceptiques, pelés, demi-sourds, demi-aveugles, aphones, bref plus nègres que nous ne l'étions avant et avec eux. (286)

All the *monnew* embodied in the king remain after his death, primarily because the old myths determining identity as a plagued people outlive him in new forms.

Although *Le Roi des Aulnes* and *Monnè, outrages et défis* spring from widely divergent cultures, they both explore similar structures within culture specific myths and legends that unconsciously prepare individuals within that culture for domination by outsiders. A reading of two novels cannot fully explain the complex relationship of collaborators to occupying forces, however, both works suggest that like scapegoatism, the possibility of collaboration already exists in the myths all societies create for themselves, and, as Kourouma suggests, by man's imperfect nature. Both Tournier and Kourouma suggest that collaboration is the result of structures that have established hierarchical differences within a given society and that the disruption of those structures leads to an attempt to reestablish difference, though not necessarily the same difference as that which preceded disruption. But such analyses are not limited to fiction. Maître Vergès, the leftist

Indochinese who defended Klaus Barbie in 1987, pointed to similarity of such structures and the inherent hypocrisy of the French government's attempt to use Barbie (no matter the extent of his crimes) as a scapegoat, because his crimes were exactly those that were part and parcel of colonial policy in Africa and Indochina.

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NOTES

¹ As early as the summer of 1940 the French judiciary affirmed Vichy legislation denying Jews access to work in public office and state service including education, the publishing industry, theater and the press (*Le Monde*, January 31, 1993). This legislation preceded the installation of the German *Propaganda Abteilung* headed by Goebbels (Defrasne 41) that controlled censorship of the press, radio and cinema. Official rationale for such legislation was to purge the French economy of Jewish influence, but the categories of work initially denied to Jews reveal a more troubling rationale: the legislation did less to deny Jews work (industrialists and workers were excluded) than it denied them the right to be visible members of society and thus participants in any national identity. The rapidity with which such legislation followed French defeat can be attributed to a large extent to national hysteria and a perceived need to reestablish the social differences eliminated by the German occupation.

² Samory was a major historical figure in resistance to French conquest in West Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. Kourouma here blends fact and fiction.

³ In *La Conquête de l'Amérique*, Tsvetan Todorov posits that Cortez's ability to recognize his adversary's belief systems from a rational viewpoint was paramount in his domination of Aztec society with a contingent of less than a hundred Spaniards. Similarly, French administrators maintained control of the colonies by recognizing traditional beliefs and exploiting them to their own advantage.

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