

## EXILE IN THE FOREST: RITE OF PASSAGE IN SONY LABOU TANSI'S *LA VIE ET DEMIE*

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It has been pointed out, as I have noted elsewhere (Mullen-Hohl 1985), that we are all the other of another (Perrone-Moisés 139). The Congolese writer, Sony Labou Tansi provides a compelling demonstration of this aspect of the human condition in his work, *La Vie et demie*, which Maryse Condé has called the first truly African Francophone novel, in that it marks the point of departure from the Manichaean representation of the colonizer and the colonized, which dominated the African Francophone novel prior to 1979. In his groundbreaking work Labou Tansi abandons the customary didactic realism of the African novel and lays claim to the realm of the imaginary.

My paper focusses on the journey of Chaldana's children, Chaldana and Martial Layisho, as they escape the neocolonial forces that pursue them, at the suggestion of their grandfather Martial's ghost, the former leader of the *opposition*. While Roger Chemain in *L'Imaginaire dans le roman africain* classifies *La Vie et demie* as a novel of repudiation rather than initiation, he does however identify the forest as a locus of initiation where the Pygmy initiates Chaldana into "tous les secrets de la forêt" (142). Moreover, Arlette Chemain explicitly refers to Chaldana's "voyage initiatique" which confers on her the status of one of the elect (Chemain 133), as does Gilbert Lombale-Bare (Lombale-Bare 22). In a masterful stroke Labou Tansi transforms the traditional rites of initiation found in African novels such as Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir*, in which initiation rites mark the passage from childhood to the status of adult. According to custom, members of the same sex are supervised by their elders, also of the same sex, as they undergo the ritual initiation in the forest groves. By contrast, Chaldana and Martial Layisho are brother and sister, the remaining two triplets, whose brother Amediando died a few months after birth, thus conferring on them the special status of twins, a name by which they are referred to in the text. Arlette Chemain finds a corresponding twin narrative in the texture of the novel after their birth (Chemain 133). When Chaldana is the only one to survive the initial trial of the Pygmy group by creeper poison, it is a young male hunter, Kapahacheu who has tried to mediate the exiled twins' acceptance by the Pygmy group, who cares for her, cures her and eventually teaches her all the lore of the forest. Thus he effectively assumes the role of the traditional female instructor in the ritual

initiation of young women. Chaldana who is twenty-one years old at this stage, is also much older than the average initiate.

If, as Pius Ngandu Nkashama implies in *Littératures africaines*, the forest serves as a narrative paradigm (448) for *La Vie et demie* it is because it functions as the principle area of growth and transformation in the novel (Nkashama 448). What is particularly interesting to explore is the explicit confrontation of two cultures, the Katamalanasian and the Pygmy. But there is a third culture present since the language in which the text is written is for the most part French, this third, Western culture is also implicated as we are constantly reminded of the foreign power behind the neocolonial dictator.

We must bear in mind Labou Tansi's epigraph to *Les Sept Solitudes de Lorsa Lopez*: "On a toujours pensé que l'Afrique était la civilisation de la parole. Je constate tout le contraire: nous sommes vraiment la civilisation du silence. Un silence métissé" ( ). Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that one of the most effective narrative devices in the initial clash and subsequent acceptance of differing cultures in *La Vie et demie* is precisely the use of what one might call "la parole métissée". By this I mean the constant interweaving of words and sentences from another language and their translation into the body of the text. It matters little whether the language of the other is an exact or invented translation of the given French version, what is at issue is the sense of an invasive force or interference and subsequent incorporation of the language of the other into the French language, as I have shown elsewhere (Mullen-Hohl 1995, 7). Françoise Lionnet points out in relation to the use of Jamaican Creole in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*, the insertion of Creole functions as a form of resistance to the dominant language in which the text is written, in that case English (Lionnet 333).

So when Chaldana and Martial arrive in a clearing in the forest after two years of wandering and struggling to survive in an environment to which they are unaccustomed, their sense of alienation and deprivation of an element that had been central to their existence, is expressed by their act of empowerment by naming the place in their own language: "N'ayant pas vu le soleil pendant deux ans, ils donnèrent à la clairière le nom de Boulang-outana ce qui signifie 'le soleil n'est pas mort'" (89). Moreover, their act of naming generates a proleptic reference to two actions of resistance performed by Jean Calcium, one of Chaldana's future revolutionary grandsons. Thus the grove is represented as a site of resistance to the dictatorial regime, since it is here that he builds:

"...[S]a cinquième fabrique de mouches, qui lui permit de gagner la douzième guerre contre la Katamalanasia et la puissance étrangère qui fournissait les guides" (90). If behind the dictators, otherwise known as "les guides", we find the Foreign Power who supports the puppet regime, behind the reference to the "puissance étrangère" lurks its language in which, for the most part, the text is written. What is more the appropriation of the grove by renaming it, in the manner of an invading force, also forges a link with the Pygmy culture, since we are told: "C'est à cette place que longtemps plus tard, Jean Calcium découvrit la pierre qui gardait les voix et les sons des milliards d'années et put, grâce à une machine par lui inventée, extraire de la pierre qui gardait les sons, l'histoire de trente-neuf civilisations pygmées" (89). Appropriately thus the grove is marked as the crossroads or point of intersection of the voice of history, myth, cultures and science which together with the closing lines of the chapter, frame the episode.

The stage has now been set for the encounter of the twins and the group of Pygmies who arrive in the grove four years later, when Chaldana and Martial are 25 years old. The difference between the two groups is represented initially by descriptions of the sounds of their language: "Ils parlaient une langue qui coulait comme un ruisseau de sons fous dans les oreilles de Chaldana et de Martial Layisho" (91). Anyone who has ever taught a language (as Labou Tansi had) will appreciate the humour inherent in the elaboration of the twins' perception of these "sons fous" which they are unable to grasp. Despite the Pygmy group's outright rejection of them, the twins persist in trying to become part of the group of the others. They are befriended by a young Pygmy hunter, whose name remains unfathomable; their efforts comprise every possible variation on the grouping of sounds as they perceive them, which are accordingly transcribed for the reader, who is none the wiser! The approximate nature of all translations seems to underlie the transcription:

...[Q]uelque chose comme Kabayhasho, ou Tabaaasheu, ou Pabahayasha. Ils décidèrent de l'appeler Kabahashou, sur une simple addition de sons habituels dans cette espèce de semis à la volée de syllabes que leur ami s'évertuait à pratiquer.

'Kapayahasheu! Kapayahaasheo! (91)

While the appreciation of the language's melodious nature is ever

present, the inability of the twins to pronounce the name is represented both by the approximations indicated by "quelque chose comme" and "cette espèce de" and the variations in the transcriptions. It is worth noting that the shape of their choice differs from the transcribed set of syllables their friend purportedly articulated, just as it differs from the actual name of the hunter, which in a gesture of verisimilitude, the reader will only learn when Chaldana has acquired the necessary verbal skills in the "Batsoua" or Pygmy language.

After their years of solitude the twins seek desperately to be accepted by the Pygmies who view them with suspicion. Despite the best efforts of their Pygmy friend to have them welcomed into the group, the exiles continue to be regarded as intruders. What appears to be the logical outcome of this rejection, in fact functions as a requisite rite of passage.

While their friend is away hunting, Chaldana and Martial are given a meal that simulates a ritual banquet. We know that in French—and in English for that matter—the word "singe", meaning monkey or ape, is associated with imitation. The meat the twins are given is monkey meat, and their portion is prepared with an additive: "*chamane kang*", authenticated by a footnote as "poison de liane" or creeper poison. Later, the reader's acquired linguistic competency will enable him to make the connection between "*chamane kang*" and a new but unexplained word, "gbombloyano" (98) used to describe Chaldana's successful rite of passage, which will empower her within the Pygmy group. "Tu seras Mère de clan" (99), she is told. Moreover, this achievement establishes an equivalency between her and "Khalahu" founder of the Pygmy line, who is said to have lived for two hundred seasons of rain (98). A similar longevity is predicted for Chaldana since she has passed this trial, and will be immune therefore to all the poisons of the forest.

Further confirmation of my interpretation of the ritual banquet is found in the description of the legendary discovery by Kapahacheu's ancestors of the forest sap called "*banghamhamana*" (95), central to the consecration of hunters, which permits the simulation of death for fifteen days and nights. The ceremony is represented in terms of a journey, as are so many rites of initiation. The initiates have a banquet during which they eat sufficient for the duration of their artificial death. Then they take a dose of "*banghamhamana*", offered to them in a container by the most famous of their hunter uncles, while pronouncing the incantation for the journey: "*Onglouenimana chahtana yonka*" ("J'apporte tous les vœux du clan au pays des tempêtes") (95). They

are then anointed and left in the forest surrounded by traps to attract prey, in accordance with Pygmy rites for the dead.

Now if we examine the experience of the twins, it becomes evident that between them they have undergone a combination of the Pygmy rituals. While at first glance it may seem that Martial, who fails to survive the ritual initiation is, in Freudian terms, excluded from the group and bears the burden of its violence. However, in death he is accorded the rites of a good Pygmy hunter, since in keeping with Pygmy custom it is only the wicked that are buried. It is this rite of passage that affords the reader a description of one of the essential characteristic rituals of another society, ideally suited to the ways of a hunting clan.

Kabahashou alla attacher le cadavre de Martial Layisho à un arbre qu'il entourra de pièges. Pendant les dix-neuf mois et vingt-deux jours que le corps mit à pourrir, Kabahashou prit à ses pièges sept cent quarante-deux sangliers, deux cent vingt-huit civettes, huit cent trois chacals, quatre-vingt-treize chats, quatre crocodiles, deux léopards, d'innombrables rats de toutes tailles, ainsi que quatre boas et treize vipères (93).

Here, the fantastic length of time necessary for the onset of putrefaction enters the mythical realm of the other's culture, while at the same time resonating with an echo of the traditional beliefs of the French culture, since to survive putrefaction was traditionally considered a sign of being blessed. The marvelous account of the multiplicity of animals snared in the traps confers on Martial, in hunter code, the status of one of the elect in death. His twin's simulated death which results from the creeper poison, only lasts twelve days and twelve nights, but curing her paralysis will take another five months and the return of her verbal powers even longer.

It is remarkable that during the period immediately following their ingestion of the poison, no verbal activity is attributed to Chafdana marking the first degree of separation of the twins. However, the cultural differences are manifested linguistically, both in Pygmy and French. For example as the group patiently waits for the twins to die, two apparently contradictory statements are made by the group in the Pygmy language: "*Mocheno akanata buentani*" (92). At this point we are given an approximate translation that corresponds to the approximation of the Pygmy sound system and its transcription noted

above. "Cela voulait peut-être dire: "Ils ont le sang dur" (92). Without transition of any kind we read, "*Ocheminka Okanani*" (92) followed by an immediate translation without commentary, "S'ils ne meurent pas c'est que ce sont des démons" (92). Thereupon the Pygmy group departs. From studying the effects of the survival of "*gbombloyano*" we know that "démons" must be taken in the African sense of spirits rather than the modern French sense of demons, especially since we have seen how Chaldana gains extraordinary powers, similar to those of the Pygmy ancestral uncle who survived "*gbombloyano*".

Ironically Martial Laysho, who had adopted the identity of Paraiso Agreganti, or the one who is magnetically attracted to heaven, in his death agony cries out for fifteen days and fifteen nights "L'enfer! l'enfer! l'enfer!" (92)—that is the ritual number of hours allotted to the hunter's induced sleep during his consecration. As a metaphor of all that is negative/unbearable on earth, "l'enfer" has become a synonym for the neocolonial regime of the Providential Guides in Katamalanasie. Kapahacheu, of course has no way of knowing the word "enfer" or its connotations. Just as the twins pronounce his name by analogy with their perception of the sounds of the Pygmy language, he interprets the word "enfer" contextually, giving it all the possible meanings relevant to Martial's feverish state, many of which ironically resonate with the Western notion of hell. First he gives Martial enormous quantities of water, then he interprets the word successively as food, air, cold, heat and fear. Eventually he alternately calls Martial "l'Enfer" and "Mahashia". Moreover, in answer to Chaldana's inquiry about the whereabouts of Martial, Kapahacheu will later tell her that he has gone to see an uncle called "l'Enfer", thus giving the word the attribute of a proper name.

Having survived the creeper poison, Chaldana must pass through many other stages of apprenticeship before being integrated as a member of Pygmy society. Symbolically her passage through mythical death to be reborn into another culture, is represented by the same sign as her mother's giving birth. Both Chaldanas are paralyzed. Thanks to the Pygmy remedy of viper venom administered by Kapahacheu, the daughter is cured of her paralysis, though she remains voiceless. When she regains her voice, her first question concerning the whereabouts of Martial is in her own language, which of course Kapahacheu does not understand. So effectively her re-birth to language as an instrument of communication takes the form of the acquisition of about sixty Pygmy

words, a linguistic threshold marked by the correct pronunciation of her Pygmy friend's name thereafter transcribed as "Kaphacheu" (93).

If on the one hand Chaldana is being initiated into the culture of the other, the hunter, there is also a thread of cultural exchange that centers on the word "enfer". Her access to another stage of linguistic development is exemplified by her ability to use metaphors in Pygmy to enquire where Martial is buried: "...[remis]... à la terre,' dit Chaldana en utilisant une très belle métaphore pygmée" (94). We have seen above that in Pygmy culture the good are not buried, and it is here that we learn, with Chaldana that the wicked are, however, buried. Kaphacheu's pursuit of the meaning of "enfer", which as a hunter he interprets as an animal of prey, hazarding a guess from Chaldana's explanation, that it is a leopard, a lion, a crocodile, or a tiger obviously lead to no clear idea of the concept. This is especially true because Chaldana tells him he needs to go to the land of Katamalanasia in order to understand its meaning. Ironically the more he hears about that country the more it seems to him that her stories or narrative must come "du dehors du monde": "Le dehors du monde était l'expression que les Bastoua de la tribu de Kaphacheu utilisaient pour désigner le maudit pays des morts qu'on enterre" (97). So finally, the reader understands that in fact the Pygmy concept "du dehors du monde" corresponds to the notion "de l'enfer".

On the other hand Chaldana's need for information about her brother's fate generates a detailed description of what might be truly called Martial's last rites in Pygmy culture. We have seen how Martial in fact was treated after death according to the manner of the ritual accorded to Pygmies who had a good life, thus symbolically incorporating him into their culture. Now in a very real way, thanks to Kaphacheu's skills he will remain with the clan after death, accompanying the nomad clan as they travel in search of game:

Il [Kaphacheu] lui montra la petite collection d'outils et de pièces artistiques qu'il avait sorties des os de Martial. Les objets d'art étaient d'une saisissante beauté et se résumaient à quatre statuettes, douze colliers, deux instruments de musique, et une pipe et une gibecière.

Les dents de l'Enfer, dit Kaphacheu qui appelait Martial tantôt l'Enfer, tantôt Mahashia.

Il désignait un beau collier qu'il portait autour des reins;

Chaldana le regarda longuement, elle n'eut aucune réaction (94).

Here we have a representation of the African world view of death as a part of life, rather than a rupture, and the carvings from Martial's bones satisfy the artistic and practical needs of Pygmy society. So while Chaldana wishes to remain where Martial died and wait their turn to die, the reader understands now how the customs of the Pygmies are adapted to their nomadic life in keeping with the ways of the forest.

As is common with exiles after a prolonged stay in another country, Chaldana's nostalgic need to talk about her country of origin, begins to make itself felt. The ensuing monologue which takes hold of her whole being, spreading like a brush fire has the effect of distancing her from Kapahacheu—more precisely her desire for the life and status enjoyed in Katamalanasic by beautiful women, who are ironically depicted as having "une ration spéciale d'oxygène" (97).

Nonetheless, we are told: "Kapahacheu versait la forêt dans la cervelle creuse de Chaldana" (98). Here the use of "cervelle" already identifies Chaldana with the beasts of the forest, while she is indoctrinated by a dense repetitive discourse on the forest's lore, its poisons, its cures, its magic words. Little by little the reader sees the forest taking hold of Chaldana's mind, first in the form of the motto: "'Le temps, c'est la forêt.' Chaldana se répétait souvent cette phrase. Elle avait fini par l'incrasser, par lui donner sa propre intensité, son odeur" (99). But it becomes evident that what the war for dominance between the two cultures is producing is another interwoven identity. It is as though Chaldana's indoctrination by the forest culture produces a resistance bringing out her latent identification with her mother, as her declaration of war implies: "Si le temps veut, je repartirai, et je prendrai la ville avec mon sexe, comme maman. C'est écrit dans mon sang!" (99). Traditionally the forest is associated with political resistance. Chaldana's last effort to resist the forest culture is demonstrated in a fiery speech of independence: "Je suis en saison de parole. Si je ne parle pas je meurs lentement du dedans. Je mourrais jusqu'à la surface, ne resterait de moi que l'épluchure, l'enveloppe. Quand je parle, je me contiens, je me cerne" (100). The ambiguity inherent in Chaldana's desires is manifested by her description of her eventual demise or loss of identity in terms of vegetation "l'épluchure." Just as she is represented in terms of the denizens of the forest when she repeats her motto, "Le



temps, c'est la forêt," both codes mark her as belonging to the forest, even as she declares her blood alliance with another group. The slippage implicit in the language, proleptically signals her crossing over to adopt a culture that recognizes no man-made boundaries, only the limits of the forest. This is why when Kapahacheu threatens to leave her if she keeps on talking, she immediately acquiesces and promises to be silent. Thus her warlike discourse is finally displaced by the discourse of the forest, as though the latter has become the drug it describes. It cannot be merely coincidence that the first sap or substance that Kapahacheu mentions at this point is the one that takes away speech, followed by substances that render one deaf and forgetful: "Cette sève enlève la parole. Cette sève rend sourd. Cette sève efface la mémoire" (100). The inherent irony is not lost on the reader, but any reaction is forestalled by the textual comment: "Kapahacheu parlait comme un torrent, lui qui ne voulait pas que Chaïdana parle" (101).

[A] la longue, dans le cerveau de Chaïdana, la forêt et ses enchevêtrements farouches, la forêt et ses odeurs, ses musiques, ses cris, ses magies, ses brutalités, ses formes, ses ombres et ses lumières, ses tourturantes ardeurs. A part ses dix-neuf ans de là-bas, Chaïdana finit par perdre de vue son âge. Il y avait les jours, les nuits: c'était la forêt du temps, la forêt de la vie, dans la forêt de son beau corps (100-101).

It is as though the power of the discourse of the forest vanquishes the discourse of the neocolonial Katamalanasia and the discourse of the foreign power who supports the puppet dictatorship and in whose travestied language the text is written. What is more the power of the word of the forest finally transforms Chaïdana who not only embraces the other's culture totally but in a sense she becomes emblematic of the forest as the wonderfully lyrical, densely poetic passage above shows, bearing witness to the notion that the forest is indeed the narrative model for the text.

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