

BOOK REVIEW

**Tadjo, V. (2017). *En compagnie des hommes*. Paris :
Don Quichotte Éditions (169 pages).**

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Well-known for her socio-political commitment ever since her first work, *Latérite* (1984), a collection of earth-bound orality-inspired poems, the Ivorian writer, Véronique Tadjo, has just come out with a novel, *En compagnie des hommes* (“In the company of humans”), on the Ebola pandemic that ravaged Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone from 2014 to 2016. The narrative tracks the quinary evolution of the epidemic from incubation to temporary resolution through the prodromal stage, acute stage, and intervention. The title can be understood in at least five ways. First, the invitation of the virus by humans into their fold, through the hunting and consumption of bats. Two, the humanization of the virus. Three, the anthropomorphization of Nature, the Baobab, and the Bat. Four, the mobilization of teams of actors, both local and international, to confront the pandemic. Five, the union of humans and non-humans for the protection of nature.

Much in the vein of Camus’ *The plague* (1948), Tadjo’s epic on Ebola foregrounds the siege on life by inimical forces, the incurability of the virus, and the need for permanent vigilance to confront the threat of extinction. When widespread celebrations (deafening music, Azonto dance, fireworks, binge drinking, etc.) erupt after politicians and policy makers officially declare the eradication of the Ebola epidemic, a worried old woman, acutely aware of the fragility of earthly life and the transience of human victory, cautions merrymakers against undue complacency, stressing the importance of respecting life. Appropriately dedicated first, to the victims of Ebola in the three countries, and second, to all humans involved in its management, the novel is divided into 16 chapters (each with a heading) and a terse epilogue. The 16 chapters are recounted by a motley of narrators : a third-person omniscient storyteller (three chapters), the sacred Baobab (two chapters), a doctor, a nurse, a gravedigger, a survivor who doubles as a counselor, a district administrator, an international volunteer, a grandmother, a poet, a Congolese researcher, the Ebola virus, and the Bat. The personal and professional accounts that healthcare providers give of

the epidemic are corroborated by the other human narrators who have survived the tragedy, trauma, and stigmatization. In the storytelling role of the Baobab can be discerned the multifaceted figure of a chorus : witness and commentator, critic and authorial voice, conscience of the public and representative of nature. While empathizing with humans, the Baobab situates the outbreak of Ebola and the threat to life within the larger context of the wanton degradation of the environment by humans. For its part, the Ebola virus, exonerates itself of all blame, exculpation which is staunchly contested not only by the Bat, the arboreal vector of the virus, but also by the pristine Baobab, planted in ancient times to serve as the link between nature and humans (p. 28).

If the variegation of voices and the absence of a structuring transversal character mar diegetic cohesion, the disarticulation resonates with the postmodern project of inscribing a multiplicity of angles into the storyline and delegitimizing hegemonic master narratives and centripetal perspectives. Equally striking is the use of generic names at the expense of specific anthroponyms. The anonymity of characters, the non-specification of the locale and demonyms, the recourse to non-human narrators, all combine to free the story from the narrow confines of solipsism and national borders, the better to ease it into the fluid contours of a transgeneric narrative, interpretable as, but transcending, a fable, an allegory, a tragedy, a satire, a faction, *a roman à thèse*, a testimony, a modern-day apocalyptic art, a messianic creation... Without a doubt, Tadjó takes the collective heroism in *The plague*, built around Caucasian actors, to a higher level by extending it not only to the coalition of cosmopolitan actors but to other faunesque players (other than humans) and floral stakeholders, as she imbues the Bat and the Baobab with a high sense of social responsibility, collective consciousness, and axiological wisdom. The emphasis then in this narrative of pathology is not on individual destinies but on the communitarian, the heterogeneous, the dialogic, and the interstitial. If the Ebola epidemic emerges from this diversity as the cohering thematic and actantial force, it also unwittingly imposes on animals, trees, and humans a call to arms, i. e. the duty of ceaselessly and vigilantly combatting Ebola and other epidemics.

The novel's pretension to the status of a postmodern pastiche is further boosted by its plethoric intertextual/intermedial references : epigraphs from works by Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Jean-Pierre Siméon, quotations from the Bible, allusions to the concept of a non-epiphanic hidden God, historical accounts on civil wars and the Ebola disease, Kenneth Toa Nsah's Juvenalian poetry, and Gabriel Okoundji's dirge. Steeped in orality and ancient lore, Tadjó's novel is a response to the warning of the Malian sage, Amadou Hampaté Bâ that the death of the last tree will coincide with the death of the last human on earth.

On many occasions, the mythical Baobab, in its conative and incitative address to the general public, describes itself as a primeval tree, the eternal tree and the tree-symbol (pp. 23, 25, 163). Combining the functions of a diviner,

an ancestral spirit, and a chorus, it laments the pathological self-destructive streak in humans through the desecration of life-giving nature. The jubilatory celebration of the past pantheistic union between humans and nature gives way to the threnodial indictment of prevalent degeneracy, characteristic of civil wars, political machiavelism, and the unbridled destruction of creation. While the healing and Phoenix-like tree evokes memories of the mythical and mysterious baobab in Bugul's haunting autofiction, *The abandoned baobab tree* (1991), it, at the same time, marks its distance from the alienation-prone bewildered alter ego of the protagonist in the hypotext, by reason of its palpable agency and vocality. In Tadjó's narrative, the iconic Baobab has the last word : even if the wheels of misfortune and joy never cease to revolve, from the Ebola disaster can sprout the tenacity of renewal that would make it possible to envision a collective future merging the destiny of humans with that of nature.

In our contemporary era of anarchic extraction of mineral resources, depletion of forest cover, and climatic catastrophes, Tadjó's novel on the fatal disconnect between the various inhabitants of the universe serves to reiterate the imperative of environmental protection and ecological equilibrium, while reminding humans that they are not the only inhabitants of the planet.

References

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