Tierno Monénembo's "Fula"

Between Distance and Empathy

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Introduction

Tierno Monénembo is a Guinean writer who left his country in 1969 in order to escape Sekou Touré's regime¹. He is the author of nine novels and a stage play; he won the Renaudot prize for the *The King of Khael* published in 2008. Some of his stories and his novel *Fulani* (published in 2004) are inspired by the history of his own ethnic group, the Fulani people. The novel contains numerous historical, anthropological and cultural elements on Fulani society: it is based on a series of authentic documents that informed the fiction. The Fulani are widespread in fifteen countries throughout Africa. Their nomadic lifestyle promotes intercultural connections although their identity was forged through the preservation of the Fulani language and Muslim traditions. Transhumance punctuates the course of the history of this ethnic group the origins of which are still ambiguous.

In *Fulani*, the author reconstructs the history of the Fulani people from the perspective of a Serer, member of a neighbouring tribe, establishing thus a "joking kinship"² between the story-teller and the listener, the Serer and the Fulani, linked by the same questions about characters and events populating the novel. They are considered to be relatives and by choosing the dialogue mode, the author suggests that the reader is listening to a family story. The Serer is placed in the position of an observer, but also in that of a "griot"³ whose presence provides a space for the development of a legend. The narrative is written as the transcription of an oral story told in a language that which is informal. It presents Fulani history as a series of multifaceted, shifting moments in time and space.

This dynamics could be read as part of the globalization that Nayan Chanda⁴ identifies with a process initiated by the first population movements around

1 Sekou Touré, first President of the Republic of Guinea (1958–1984); his regime was considered to be a dictatorship.

2 Denis Galvan, *Syncretism and Culturally Sustainable Development in Africa and Beyond*, Paper for APSA Short Course 20: Culture Industries, Technologies, and Policies: <<http://www1.georgetown.edu/grad/cct/culturallysustainabledevelopment.pdf>>, visited on 20 August 2013.

3 A "griot" is a story teller in African cultures.

4 Nayan Chanda, *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers, and Warriors Shaped Globalization*, (Yale, Yale University Press, 2007).

the year 100 000 BC. When read within this specific context, the story becomes what James Clifford calls a series of “historical processes of displacement,”⁵ justifying what Ulf Hannerz wrote in 1996: “That image of cultural mosaic, where each culture would have been a territorial entity with clear, sharp, enduring edges, never really corresponded with realities. There were always interactions and a diffusion of ideas, habits, and things.”⁶ The term “dynamics” could provide clues for mapping the spiritual territory of this tribe, marked by a diversity of cultural influences which could have led to many radical discontinuities over time. This brings us to our main question concerning the unity of the Fulani ethnic group: who and what made it possible? We will explore this question considering, like Frederik Barth,⁷ that maintaining a border is a condition of survival for each ethnic group. Monénembo’s novel highlights both the concept of ethnic dynamics with its specific progress and heterogeneities in the case of the Fulani, but also depicts Fulani culture and history as repositories of constant and specific coordinates or norms.

A Progressive Dimension

Throughout his novel *Fulani*, Monénembo underlines a strong progressive dimension in the history of the Fulani people, materialized in their nomadic lifestyle and the diversity of their ethnic connections. The idea of crossed, mixed, multiple identity is preserved in the titles of the three parts of the story, each corresponding to the Fulani chronology and naming a succession of processes of integration and assimilation.

The first part, entitled “For Milk and Glory,” corresponds to the great migration of the Fulani. The story begins in 1400, a time when the tribe was wandering around to meet the needs of transhumance as they lived on “wild grasses and sips of sour milk,”⁸ but also to pillage. It continues with the creation of the Kingdom of Fouta Toro. Led by Koli (Great Bull), the Fulani managed to impose their dominance on other people who lived in the Senegal River Valley and set

5 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late Twentieth Century*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1997), 7.

6 Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 18.

7 Frederik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969).

8 Tierno Monénembo, *Peuls*, (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 19: “Vers l’an 1400 des Nazaréens, errait donc une horde de Peul-rouge, vivant de rapines, de graminées sauvages et de gorgées de lait aigre.”

up a powerful dynasty that ruled for over three centuries and was replaced in 1776 by the theocratic regime established by Souleymane Bâ. The second part of the novel, "Lords of the Spear and Inkwell," insists on the creation of the Kingdom of Bundu, the first Muslim state to be founded by the Fulani. This period is followed by the establishment of theocratic regimes in Futa Toro, Sokoto, Adamawa and Macina⁹, and it is marked by a bloody *jihad* meant to impose the religion of Allah. In fact, the change was sudden and deep. From simple shepherds, they became propagators of the new religion in a very short time. Finally, the last part of the novel, "The Fury of the Ocean," is marked by the story of colonial conquest. Europeans began to manifest imperialistic desires and sought to eliminate traditional kingdoms. This led to the collapse of the political institutions in place, one after the other. It is a diffuse period about which, far from any tragic illustration, the narrator, who also plays the role of a trickster, exults:

You did not doubt, did you?, that God, in His infinite mysteries, foresaw a creature even crazier, a more pathological liar, more cruel, more adventurous, more arrogant and more boastful than you...From the coast, where he pretended to doze, the white man was watching carefully your stupid messianic targets and your feverish agitation [...]. Well done, swashbuckling! Alleged son of Abraham!¹⁰

This fragment is representative of the tone of the novel and creates a space of playful and dangerous dialogue between the narrator and the listener. Its effect is that of an on-going performance transmitting real facts and data. Monénembo maintains a certain tension in the exchanges between the two, which stresses the idea that the Fulani people assimilate and are assimilated through a constant process of negotiation. The diversity of The Fulani people's geographical, ideological and historical movements, such as described in the novel, corresponds to a large mobility which constitutes a privileged network of dissemination of values and beliefs. What could be called the progressive dimension of Fulani history is part of the globalization process which is perceived as a

9 Ancient Fula cities in Western Africa.

10 Terno Monénembo, 287: "Tu ne te doutais pas, n'est-ce pas, que Dieu, en ses infinis mystères, avait prévu encore plus fou, plus mythomane, plus cruel, plus aventurier, plus hautain et plus hâbleur que toi...Depuis les côtes où il faisait semblant de somnoler, l'homme blanc surveillait attentivement tes stupides visées messianiques et tes fébriles agitations [...]. Bien fait, fanfaron! hypothétique fils d'Abraham!"

space of exchange and progress; the continuous movement of the Fulani, through time, from one territory to another seems to generate a perpetual revival of values and traditions in spite of a certain stress and strain. Thus, the ethnic identity is not only based on immobile pillars, but on specific features of a group at a specific historical moment. Those features represent a social force that keeps the individuals of a community together as members of a totality. The way the Serer presents them reflects his readiness to take part in their joy or sorrow, placing the Fulani history into a global one. The emotional reaction paradoxically translated through an imprecation, which is, in fact, part of the ritual of joking kinship, creates a symbolic link between the two ethnic groups throughout the novel. From this perspective, *Fulani* could be read as a novel of otherness, a story of self seen through the other's eyes, deeply connected to the Serer, to the Fulani, to the reader as well and thus integrated into a global history of humanity.

A Heterogeneous Space

The movement of the Fulani people on the African territory appears to be chaotic. Nevertheless, it is governed by natural disasters affecting the quality of the pastures for this tribe of cattle herders or by wars of conquest or territorial defence. This wandering is part of the nomadic lifestyle and it constitutes a significant path for exchange leading to ethnic mixing. This last element turns out to be both a source of conflict and of material and spiritual wealth. Both *nomadism* and ethnic mixing could be considered two mobile pathways towards an early globalization. This is described in the following fragment taken from the very beginning of the novel in which the Serer reminds the Fulani: "Your identity is confusing; your countries are too many. Your path is full of white and shady areas, of intricate crossing and surprising diversions, inveterate nomad!"¹¹ This state of deep confusion, these ambiguous roots and this lifestyle, always on the move, could have been factors of destruction. They have become instead elements of cohesion and progress.

First, *nomadism* is based on a mystery shrouding the origins of the ethnic group and the Serer explains this fact by using rhetorical questions and exclamations: "Who are you? Where are you from? When did your tribe of cow

11 Tierno Monénembo, 18: "Ton identité déroute, tes pays sont trop nombreux. Ton chemin déborde de blancs et de zones d'ombre, de croisements alambiqués et de surprenantes dérivations, nomade invétéré!"

herders spring from nothing on the shores of Senegal? In the sixth, the seventh, the eighth century? The one who could tell would be clever indeed!"¹² This distant approach contrasts sharply with the Serer's deep knowledge of Fulani history. The irony of the text establishes, as Linda Hutcheon says, "a dynamic relationship, a communicative process"¹³ between the Serer, the Fulani and the reader. This could be a sign of objectiveness from the Serer's part as well as an attempt to preserve the oral tradition in this narrative which is so rich in events, facts and data. The story also aims to depict the attacks and conflicts that Fulani people have encountered during their uncountable wanderings: "(they) reproached to your ugly race the fact of steeling the kola and the palm wine that bringing the merchants from Gabou, the fact of letting animals ransack their fields and desecrate their sacred groves and ponds."¹⁴ These outbursts of violence ignited the imagination of people who came into contact with the ethnic group. A paradoxical attitude oscillating between insult and sympathy places the image of the Fulani in a sort of liberating in-between. The eye of the other, sometimes ironic and sometimes appreciative, will follow the *fergo* or the numerous and tortuous exodus that gradually becomes a mission of conquest. On one hand, this ethnic mixing is described as a source of conflict, but also of wealth throughout history. On the other hand, it is conceived as a rift, but also as a guarantee of the survival of the people: "Thou hast no more left. You have never stopped defiling our rivers, devastating our fields, haunting our villages and nights. Without asking, you planted your hut and destroyed the landscape. It was too late when we opened our eyes."¹⁵

The fragment is significant and sets the tone of the whole text which is thus built as a story shared not only with the Fulani, but especially with the reader. The narrator becomes a vital mediator between us and an ethnic group anxious to preserve its specificities. Several elements presented in the text such as *nomadism*, ethnic mixing, the wars of conquest or the religious issues provide

12 Tierno Monénembo, 19: "Qui es-tu? D'où viens-tu? Quand ta peuplade de vachers a-t-elle jailli du néant pour s'échouer sur les berges du Sénégal? Au VIe, au VIIe, au VIIIe siècle? Bien malin celui qui pourrait le dire!"

13 Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 220.

14 Tierno Monénembo, 26: "(on) reprochait à ta vile race de dépouiller les marchands de la kola et du vin de palme qu'ils ramenaient du Gabou; de laisser ses bêtes saccager leurs champs et de profaner leurs mares et leurs bois sacrés."

15 Tierno Monénembo, 14: "Tu ne nous as plus quittés. Tu n'as plus arrêté de souiller nos rivières, de dévaster nos champs, de hanter nos villages et nos nuits. Sans rien demander, tu as planté ta hutte, et démolì le paysage. Il était déjà trop tard quand on a ouvert les yeux."

a fertile field for investigating a spiritual territory which is often ignored or poorly understood by the Western reader. Their proliferation in the novel enhances the diversity of angles for understanding the Fulani phenomenon. Nevertheless, their constant repetition illustrates a spiral movement integrated in a history in which the human dimension is never neglected.

A Normative Frame

“Norms are the general expectations of a demand character for all role incumbents of a system or subsystem.”¹⁶ Norms function as reminders, pillars and boundaries for the whole society. To the Fulani, these pillars are the legends, religious traditions and cattle breeding. The legends revolve around political power and the fights for it. If one could synthesize Fulani history, this synthesis could be illustrated by a long list to which new names are constantly added and from which others are dropped out. Nevertheless, the same names come together with the legend of the hexagram of coralline¹⁷ which is passed on from one generation to another. Within the novel, history could be defined as the space in which people perform memorable actions but also as a recollection of less structured memories. Are those elements the strongest factors of cohesion of this widespread ethnic group? A founding legend and the nomadic lifestyle deeply connected with cattle breeding and territorial conquest are added to a long tradition of “joking kinship” as a way towards conflict resolution, as a means of dealing with political authority:

Joking kinship as practiced in Senegal (and many other parts of Africa) generally consists of widely held notions of perceived relatedness that may link large extended families (patrilineal and sometimes matrilineal clans), or ethnic groups. As observed in the founding colonial anthropological works on the subject, and in more recent scholarship, in this region joking kinship typically centers on regularized patterns of mutual ribbing, insulting and teasing, with primary themes of historic subordination/slavery and food insecurity.¹⁸

16 Katz D & Kahn R L., *The social psychology of organizations*, (New York: Wiley, 1966), 43.

17 The “hexagram of coralline” is considered to be the sacred stone of the Fula ethnic group.

18 Denis Galvan, *Syncretism and Culturally Sustainable Development in Africa and Beyond*, Paper for APSA Short Course 20: Culture Industries, Technologies, and Policies: <<http://www.georgetown.edu/grad/cct/culturallysustainabledevelopment.pdf>>, visited on 22 August 2013.

By making this practice his own way of writing, the author of the novel underlines its importance. Joking kinship is a social and political strategy allowing its actors to remove pressure or resentments, but also to reduce distance between people. On a symbolic level, the word becomes a scapegoat. Persecution occurs against the word itself which is the one banished from the community. From the author's perspective, the whole Fulani history could be seen as deeply linked to the use of the word—a use that carries dual characteristics. If used outside the joking kinship, however, the word can easily become a persecutor itself, if we were to employ René Girard's terminology.¹⁹ Such is the case in the Fulani's founding legend which explains the origins of the Fulani division. It is the story of a succession: a Fulani father has to choose between his two twin sons, Biron and Birane.²⁰ They are both equal in strength and intelligence; who will be his inheritor? The final test consists in an intellectual game, a riddle, allowing the Father to find the easy way out in order to make this difficult choice:

I'm a funny little boy. If you send me buy things, I do not come back.
Who am I?

- The trickster, answers Biron. You give him cowries to buy groceries, but he disappears with the goods.
- The arrow, answers Birane. When you pull it, it does not return, it is housed in the prey.
- Birane, you are the most imaginative, Birane, you're my elder son! decided Doya Malal. When I am no longer of this world isyou will inherit the hexagram of coralline, the sigil of our clan.²¹

Words can destroy, banish and punish. Doya Malal's decision will affect the destiny of the future generations in a radical manner. From a symbolic point of

19 René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 34.

20 Oral legend belonging to the Fula ethnic group.

21 Tierno Monénembo, 213: "Je suis un drôle de petit garçon. Si l'on m'envoie faire les commissions, je ne reviens pas. Qui suis-je?"

- Le filou, répond Biron. On lui donne des cauris pour acheter des provisions, il disparaît avec la marchandise.
- La flèche, répond Birane. Quand vous la tirez, elle ne revient pas, elle reste logée dans la proie.
- Birane, tu es le plus imaginatif, Birane, tu seras mon fils aîné! trancha Dôya Malal. Quand je ne serai plus de ce monde, c'est à toi que reviendra l'hexagramme de coralline, l'insigne de notre clan."

view, Doya Malal chooses the arrow instead of the trickster, war instead of wit, conflict instead of peace.

When employed within the framework of “joking kinship,” the word endorses a cathartic value; it heals, expiates individual or common faults and connects the members of the community. Moreover, there is no need for victims embodied by “a well-known stranger (...) invited in a feast which ends with his lynching.”²² The word is the only victim embodying evil and that evil is thrown away, far from the community, at the very moment the word is pronounced. Following the same pattern, the act of writing itself becomes a cathartic project. Every time the Serer addresses the Fulani, their communication is based on teasing and insulting, like in the fragment below: “You have the right to rave; no one is bound to believe you, infamous vagabond, thief of kingdoms and hens! Forget it! Legends say that we are cousins. The same blood, but we are not cut from the same cloth! You, despicable shepherd, I, noble Serer.”²³ Words avoid war, segregation and other kinds of conflicts. “Joking kinship” becomes the elusive yet the persistent ethnic tie. In his study *The Gift*, Mauss²⁴ analyses joking as a form of social control that corresponds to mutual rights. Turned into a ritual, it becomes a regulator of the social system and, in this particular case, a warranty of peace and stability between different ethnic groups. The “norm” represented by joking kinship is, paradoxically, a way of going beyond limits, standards or prejudice, a means of unifying.

Conclusion

The novel “Fulani” can be read as the description of a long journey through space and time oscillating between disasters and resilience. Tierno Monénembo attempts to reconstitute the spiritual map of this nomadic people whose identity was forged almost exclusively through exchanges. This article has focused on the factors involved in the survival of the Fulani ethnic group as they were depicted in literature. The Fulani history, resembling more a series of incursions in the territories of the Senegal Valley in search of water and good land, of bloody wars of conquest and ethnic mixing processes, could have been a

22 René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 33.

23 Tierno Monénembo, 287: “Tu as le droit de délirer, personne n’est tenu de te croire, infâme vagabond, voleur de royaumes et de poules! Soit! nous sommes cousins puisque les légendes le disent. Du même sang peut-être, de la même étoffe, non! Toi, l’ignoble berger, moi le noble Sérère.”

24 Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le Don*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950).

synonym of alienation and loss of cultural memory. Instead, while reading Tierno Monénembo's novel, the impression is that of witnessing perpetual cultural reconstruction in a world that went global from its very beginning. For this ethnic group, progress is associated with the scattered roads taken along their nomadic wanderings. Space has been split according to their movements while their way of life has followed the same secular norms and habits. Thus, one can talk about a Fulani *continuum* based on a set of socio-cultural and economic transfers that could be defined as characteristic features of what we call globalization today. From this very perspective, the book becomes a fable on the everlasting search for a resolution of the conflict between identity and hybridization.

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