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 regime. 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” 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” 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 Chanda identifies with a process initiated by the first population movements around

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1 Sekou Touré, first President of the Republic of Guinea (1958–1984); his regime was considered to be a dictatorship.
3 A “griot” is a story teller in African cultures.
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,” 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.” 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, 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,” 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

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