

Donato NDONGO-BIDYOGO, *The Dream*

Translated by Deborah Dietrick and Juan Zarandona
Universidad de Valladolid

Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo nació en la localidad de Niefang, en el territorio continental de Guinea Ecuatorial, en 1950, y ha llegado con los años a constituirse en uno de los representantes más señeros de la literatura hispánica de dicha nación africana. Aparte de escritor, Ndongo ha ejercido la profesión de periodista con gran dedicación. Fruto de este esfuerzo continuado lo son los numerosos artículos y libros de investigación sobre la historia, la economía, la política o la cultura de su nación africana, de la que lleva muchos años ausente. Sin embargo, en estas páginas nos interesa el ser humano estudioso de la literatura y creador literario. Donato Ndongo es autor de numerosos relatos, uno de estos –“El sueño”– traducido ahora al inglés, y de varios libros de ficción, siempre orientados a la difusión de las realidades africanas precoloniales, coloniales y poscoloniales. Entre los segundos cabe resaltar la trilogía, aún inacabada, Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra (1987) y Los poderes de la tempestad (1997). Por lo tanto, aún está pendiente la tercera esperada entrega de la misma. Además, es imposible obviar su Antología de la literatura guineana, de 1984, todo un hito cultural al ser la primera obra de divulgación amplia de la existencia de una literatura nacional africana que se expresa en español. Por esto, y por mucho más, merece este escritor y humanista hispano-africano la atención y el homenaje de Hermēneus en forma de esta traducción de un cuento suyo al inglés.

I am still young. Hardly twenty-five years old? since my circumscision. If I asked myself what I am doing here, up to my neck in water, I would call myself the most stupid man in the world. My grandfather, old Diallo, is always right: «too young to be so wise». Was it really twenty-five years ago when I was circumcised in a small village of no importance, on the banks of the Casamance River? In that river once blowed my blood, in that river I learned how to swim. Hot waters, other waters, waters like mirrors that faithfully reflected the young village girls' erect breasts. I do not remember exactly why, I do not even remember when; but what is certain is that I was uprooted from my little village in order to attend school at Bignona. There I spent four years, four years of “life”.

When I was able to endure mosquitoes and hunger without complaining too much, when I was regarded as a “good” black fit for hard work, I was handed over to a white farmer. We grew

rice for the white master. We grew rice that we never tasted. And again, the years went by quickly, years during which a strong wish to get away, to escape from poverty, increased deep down inside me. I wanted to marry black, black Traoré, more beautiful than the darkest of nights, but I did not own the twelve cows that I needed for her dowry. Twelve cows. Those twelve cows were my downfall.

I already had four cows. I wanted her to trust me, wanted her to see me work, to see that I was ready to do anything, to make any sacrifice for her. My cousin Tello had gone to Gambia to make his fortune, and he came back with twenty cows and two oxen. Another cousin of mine, Lamine, had gone to the country of the Mandinka, further north, crossing the Senegal River, and had returned with a *thing* he called a bicycle, which he said was more valuable than all the cows in the world. I never wanted to believe him. In this life, what can be more valuable than a cow? They emigrated and they lost faith in our people. So our people forgot about them. Grandfather Diallo, who still remembered having seen that ship –the one that ran aground in the sands of Joal Beach–, sailing in the Mandinka country, had told them that none of our women would marry them, because they had renounced their company and had dishonoured them by chasing white women with their eyes. And Grandpa Diallo’s decision won my inner approval. How can you compare a bicycle with a cow?

Cows are more difficult to obtain. It was taking me too long to get the dowry together, and black, black Traoré was threatening to stop waiting for me and go off with a more industrious suitor. I am very poor –what can I do about that?– and the very same day that I went to give my fifth cow, she gave me back the other four. And I even had to pay for the grass the four cows had eaten!

Then I emigrated. I began to see the advantages of a bicycle. At least it does not eat grass. So I bought one. I worked in some peanut plantations, in the Mandinka country. The master was black, as black as daylight. I preferred the white man’s ricefields, but the black master paid better and, in the big city, girls no longer wanted cows, but bicycles, and sometimes not even that!

When my mother died, I saw the banks of the Casamance again. And I saw that young girl, for whom I would not even have spared a single look three years before. This is the law of life. I would rather marry as my father did, without bicycles, or with *nothing*. What due respect will a wife show you if you have given *nothing* for her? And once again, it was back to cows again. And I emigrated even further away. I went as far as Dakar, the biggest city I had ever seen. Every time I wrote to Dikane, I told her that we would always live there, in one of those flats that look like hives, where men are bees, but everything is much more convenient. Of course, Dikate had many things to learn yet! She could not even ride a bicycle!

In Dakar, you could earn enough money to live well, but not as quickly as you wanted. I did not want Dikate to leave me, as dark, dark Traoré had done. I had to get those twelve cows as soon as possible. If I failed this time, everybody down there on the banks of the Casamance, would think that I was not manly enough to get married. And is life worth living if a man is not a man?

“Be careful of the company you keep.” Grandpa Diallo always warned me against falling in with the wrong kind of people. When I emigrated to Dakar, which was like going to heaven or hell, in any case, very far and forever, Grandpa told me before that those places were like a mixture of heaven and hell. How right Grandpa was! He knew human nature very well: he had witnessed the

birth of all the males in our tribe, he had seen the arrival of the white men on that ship now run aground in the sands of Joal River.

With every passing day dark, dark Dikate was putting more pressure on me. And I had to do it. A friend of the wrong kind told me about a port, called Las Palmas, where you can make an amount equivalent to seven cows in a year. I did not think twice, that is the plain truth. And, as Grandpa Diallo used to say, "If you do not think once, you do not think twice either." Consequently, I spent two years in Las Palmas, working in the biggest harbour I had ever seen. Much bigger than the one in St. Louis, much bigger than the one in Dakar. But my pockets were not any heavier. It was a fact that my wages were much higher than the ones I earned in the land of the Mandinka, but here –I still do not know how– my money rolled out of my hands. First of all, that dirty white man was to blame. I had to hand over half of the money that I earned. It is true that he had helped me cross the sea in the night, in his little boat; it is possible that, without him, I would have never reached this place. But I could see that the price I was paying for his services was excessively high. Secondly, that irresistible temptation to rub myself up against the white women at the port was also to blame. It was costing me a fortune, but I could not stop doing it. It was more than I could bear.

It was then that I met that clean, sweet-smelling Mandinka, who spoke of earning a lot of money by going to France. We were delighted with the idea. There is nothing worse than being so ignorant. Why had we not thought of this before? If Dikate knew that I was going to walk up and down the streets of Paris, that my dark eyes were going to see the Eiffel Tower, that I would visit the President of the Republic, and would talk to Napoleon ... that was more valuable than all the cows in the world! I paid the Mandinka with all my savings. I even promised him the five cows that I had on the banks of the Casamance. Fortunately, he did not eat beef.

He took us to Algeciras by ship, and then by train to Barcelona. I cannot explain to you, black Dikate, what these countries white people inhabit are like. When I am in Paris, when I see the Seine with my own eyes –it must be bigger than the Casamance– I will try to explain what it is like. Well...

You will never be able to imagine –no matter how hard you try– how big, how bright, how ... whatever Barcelona is like. Two days after our arrival, they put us to work on a big highway, a long distance from the city. In our spare time, we could not go for a walk together. They forced us to walk only in groups of two or three. The clean, sweet-smelling Mandinka would tell us that it was for our own good. With regard to wages, they were given to the Mandinka. He administered them and gave us a pittance for our expenses.

I do not wish to continue. While pondering the excellent qualities of Paris, I had almost forgotten the cows. What is our village compared to the rest of the world? What are twelve cows if nothing is worth the trouble in the end? Who are you but my nemesis? Will I ever even see you again?

We spent five months in Barcelona. Three of us slept in the same narrow, stinking hammock that pricked our naked backs. We never visited the city again. I was not able to rub up against even one woman in the port. In reality we were at liberty to do almost nothing.

They took us to the border by train. There the Mandinka told us that somebody would take charge of us and accompany us until we were treading French soil. My heart was jumping for joy. All our troubles would disappear in a few hours' time. Maybe, if I could find a job, I would be able to bring you, your parents, our brothers and sisters here ...

The man came tonight. You cannot imagine how cold we all were. I do not know if you have the slightest idea what "winter" really means. We all curled up together at the train station, our meeting point, in a vain attempt to share a nonexistent warmth. Finally, when he turned up, we were able to eat something better than broth in the bar.

Before setting out, with the excuse that we would no longer need our Spanish money, we were stripped of it. Halfway, amongst thick woods, in the dark, feeling his way around, the man took our passports. «I will give them back to you in France», he told us. We have reached the river. I know neither its name, nor where I am. I imagine it must be the French-Spanish border. Dawn was breaking. I was tired. We had to wait around two hours. At last some small lights. It is the signal. The small boat came closer.

Well aware of the fact that we were illegal aliens, our hearts were skipping beats as the oarsman rowed on. We heard the order to halt. At nearly the same time, a shot. The boat turned over. Freezing water, love. I am frozen. I know I will not be able to reach either bank. I realize that this is the end. No more cows. My last memory is of our broken dreams. I do not know if you can hear my last cry of death down there on the other river. I do not really believe in our spirits, but I will pray to Grandfather Diallo for you. I ...

Suddenly, I woke up. She was sleeping next to me. Her countenance was peaceful. Her dreams were not like mine. Dreams of white woman ... I felt a chill in my bones. I felt a lump in my throat. I felt that I was about to die. Slowly, delicately, I woke her up. I needed to make sure that I had not died, that everything was just a dream. She looked at me, in surprise.

“Now?” she asked.

It had to be then and only then.

I came back to life.

(First published in 1973)