

From Africa to Barbados via Salem

Maryse Condé's Cultural Confrontations
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- Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba sorcière... Noire de Salem*. Paris, Mercure de France, 1986.
- Maryse Condé, *Segou*. Trans. Barbara Bray, New York, Ballantine, 1987 [1st ed. 1984].
- Françoise Pfaff, *Entretiens avec Maryse Condé*. Paris, Karthala, 1993.

Maryse Condé likes large-scale cultural confrontations, the sparks generated by the collision of contending cultures. That is the essential structure of *Ségou: Les murailles de terre*, Segou being the name of a town on the Niger River in present-day Mali and center of the former Bambara civilization that was confronted, and finally vanquished, by first Islam and then the expanding «civilization» of the French colonialists in western Africa.

The seminal idea of the novel, and the commercial impetus responsible for its being written¹, was to represent the nobility of a late 18th-century African civilization and chart the ensuing conflict between it and Islam. The sequel, *Segou: La terre en miettes*, deals primarily with the French incursion from St. Louis Island down the Senegal River and depicts the fall of a powerless, decadent Segou to the superiorly-armed French colonial forces.

It is significant that in her early novels, Condé consciously avoided the colonial period and the paths of its depiction well-travelled by such prominent African writers as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Perhaps because the colonial mindset was ingrained into the population of her native Guadeloupe – still today a part of France – Condé set her first novel in postcolonialist Africa. Published in French in 1976, *Hérémakhonon*, whose ironic title means «waiting for happiness» and was taken from the name of a Guinean department store where there was nothing to buy except Chinese toys of poor quality, focuses on the illusions of the post-Independence Marxist Guinea². In the same attempt to discover «Africanness» outside the parameters of colonialism, Condé begins *Ségou: les murailles de terre* in 1797 and the novel is specifically dedicated to the author's «Bambara ancestress», but was also clearly conceived for all Blacks of the African diaspora. Although Condé doesn't mention how she knows her ancestors are Bambara, or even if they are, it is extremely important to her that her «forebears» are comfort-

able, of princely family, and physically beautiful. Furthermore, they have never even imagined the scourge of slavery, at least not themselves being victims of such an institution, for they did have their own slaves and the pre-colonialist intra-African practice of slavery and its justification by all civilizations and religions in the region is discussed in some detail in the novel.

The Bambara civilization, that astounded the early Scottish explorer of Africa, Mungo Park³ upon his arrival in Segou around 1797, is represented in the novel by Dousika Traore's family, which is gradually modified by and ultimately partially converted to Islam during one of the major phases of its expansion into black Africa later in the nineteenth-century.

The prime areas of cultural difference between the two civilizations as represented by Condé are 1) their attitudes toward sexuality and 2) their conceptions of the nature of God. Condé's Bambara civilization is characterized by bare-breasted fifteen year-old girls, a generally facilitating attitude toward sexuality, polygamy as well as by polytheistic ancestor worship. In marked contrast, Moslem women, for example, will be veiled and hidden. Young male «fetishists» (clansmen worshiped «boli or clay models of their ancestors) also chaff at Moslem restrictions on their right to drink «dolo», their indigenous alcoholic beverage.

Islamic civilization will make inroads on the traditional African ones via its belief in monotheism and its literacy, i.e., its alphabet and Koranic schools. Young «fetishists» like Tiekoro will be fascinated by Arabic and the advantages learning brings, especially in understanding and communicating with the outside world. Some will see the universal Moslem religion as a possible solution to tribal violence, and many will also be impressed by the Moslems' architectural skill as manifested in their mosques. Tiekoro converts and becomes a sort of saint, responsible for the spread of Islam by his austere, meditative lifestyle, his learning and the miracles he allegedly performs in prison. He is ultimately brought to death, though, by machinations initiated by members of his own family who continue to support ancestral values. Even in the case of conversion, often for political or «survivalistic» reasons, there remains the same cultural tension, inside each Bambara, between his former traditional beliefs, reinforced by clan life, and Islam.

Especially in *Ségou: la terre en miettes*, Condé interjects frequent holy sayings and verses from the Koran to render more concrete the spiritual force of Islam at that time although the primary cause of the expansion of Islam was the «jihad» launched by El-Hadj Omar Saidou Tell. Like Achebe, and as will be the case with regard to the intrusion of the French colonialists later in the second volume, Condé's sympathies are with the threatened traditional way of life. In response to questions about possible biases in her presentation of Islam, however, Condé claims that her portrayal of this period of Moslem expansion aimed at being both historically faithful and objective and that she was equally critical of Christianity when its links to colonialism merited such criticism.

The principal protagonists of *Ségou: Les murailles de terre* are male. When questioned about this, Condé responded in her iconoclastic way that

she wasn't interested in sword-bearing feminist militants and that that's how things were in Africa then, i.e. women were oppressed⁵. In the novel, the role of women is limited to the family, and they are never included in discussions of important community matters in either of the two cultures. In the Bambara culture, for example, if a woman's husband dies, she is automatically remarried to the youngest living brother. Women rarely seem sentimentally satisfied. Two women of Segou, Siga's mother and Nadie, unhappy with their treatment by men or by the clan, commit suicide by throwing themselves, Nadie with her child, into the village well. Condé insists research backs up her fictional practice⁶, which runs contrary to conventional ideas about the rarity of suicide in traditional African civilization.

A family saga, *Ségou: Les murailles de terre* deals with the self-perpetuation of the Traore family. Thus, the importance of sexuality. In this novel, as in Condé's work in general, when characters, male or female, experience sexual desire, they generally satisfy it expeditiously without Proustian digressions. Tiekoro, to cite only one example, more or less rapes Nadie in the privy behind a bar when he first sees her. The female characters are obviously more circumspect, yet they mock the men they like, send secret letters, etc. in the sequel, with the arrival of Islam, the male surrendering to such non-spiritual impulses will feel obligated, or be forced, to legitimize them by marriage. Thus, they obey the Koran that says, «If you 'burn', you must marry».

Published in 1984 and a best-seller in France having sold some 300,000 copies for Laffont, *Ségou* has now been canonized with its edition as a «Livre de poche». Viking Penguin has published both volumes in translation. This success is somewhat of a mixed blessing for a serious novelist, it does, however, reveal the relevance and the originality of the novel's subject matter, especially for its non-African readership.

From Africa, Condé shifts her attention to the Caribbean and America in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière... Noire de Salem*, published in France in 1986 and *La vie scélérate* originally published. in 1987. The Guadeloupan writer maintains that *Moi, Tituba, sorcière...* is not a historical novel like her Segou novels⁷, but clearly a major part of its initial impact is its new historical perspective and highly successful effort to recuperate from obscurity the black woman that writers and historians had forgotten.

The title is a clever and a significant one. The word «I» is an affirmation: it affirms that Tituba exists⁸, and it indicates that the focus is more on an individual than on the collectivity as was the case in her Segou novels. Furthermore, the reason Tituba is forced to say «I» is that no one else attributed any existence to her because she was a black woman slave from the Caribbean and lived in the 17th century. The oft stated goal of both Tituba's first person narration⁹ and the author¹⁰ is to resuscitate that existence.

The title also insists on her prime activity, i.e. that of being a witch, or «sorcière». This is a function generally attributed to her by others, and even in Barbados, against her will. In fact, she is surprised at the persistent negative evaluation of her skills and finds it unfair. After the brutal death of her

mother, Tituba is initiated into the secret world of Barbadian plants by an old woman of Nago origin called Man Yaya in Creole. Tituba is subsequently called upon to cast spells, which she reluctantly does, but only to make things better not worse. In Salem, for example, she refuses Sarah's request to get rid of Priscilla Henderson, the former's unhappy mistress that beats her servant. She is visited frequently by her dead mother and the latter's lover, Yao, whereby Condé makes clear the connection between African ancestor worship and new world «voodoo», a theme she also deals with at great length in *La vie scélérate*.

The narration begins on a slave ship crossing the Atlantic; thus, the understood origin of the plot and of Tituba is Africa. The novel retraces the slave triangle, but with a significant new twist since the narration's geographic focus moves from Africa, to Barbados, Salem, and then back to Barbados. In the first paragraph, Condé makes clear, by having Tituba's mother, an Ashanti named Abena, raped by an Englishman in front of his mates on the deck of the slave ship, «Christ the King», that Tituba's future existence is determined by her skin color and the institution of slavery. She is the racially mixed result of colonialist male aggression. After Abena is sold to a Barbadian plantation owner, she stabs him when he, too, tries to take the not yet sixteen year-old girl by force. As an example to other slaves, she is hung, and her black lover, Yao, the Ashanti who gave Tituba her name, commits suicide upon being sold to another plantation as a punishment.

Arthur Miller's rendering, in his play, *The Crucible*, of the essential material of the Salem witch trials from the perspective of the 1950's and McCarthyism has re-familiarized us with the historical setting. He makes clear that petty interests, relating primarily to the economics of the parish of Rev. John Parris, and adolescent manipulation of the Puritan belief in the devil were at the origin of the Puritans' shift from passive intolerance to murder. He also makes clear that Parris was a seemingly unsuccessful merchant in Barbados, where he bought Tituba, before he entered the ministry for which he was little qualified. Furthermore, in his first speech in the play, Parris yells «Out of here!» at Tituba in order to get her away from his sick daughter and is thus already attributing responsibility for her sickness to Tituba. He illustrates one of the key themes in Condé's novel, i.e., the transferal of the Evil in him and his community to the powerless black woman, who, in the novel, goes to considerable pains, not without positive results, to cure both the daughter and Mrs. Parris of their various physical ailments.

Although he is clearly sympathetic to Tituba, Miller, too, relegates her to the minor role of an eccentric, mistreated slave. Like Miller, Condé makes clear that Tituba was freed because she confessed and because she denounced two other women. By saying she was a witch Tituba was absolved. Those who didn't admit to sorcery were punished. Condé qualifies Tituba's conduct as a «black» way of getting by inspired by the conduct and counsel of her black husband, Indian John, who became a Christian and generally played the clown and abandoned his identity in order to survive.

Justifiably, Condé maintains her novel is a work of imagination¹¹. She states she couldn't rely on historical documents concerning Tituba because there weren't enough. She did use the trial proceedings she found, though, and quoted the references to Tituba where they were appropriate. Her imagination, however, was perhaps too fertile. In jail, Tituba meets, and is consoled by, Hester Prynne, recuperated by Condé from *The Scarlet Letter*. At one point, they embark on a contemporary dialogue about feminist questions, and Hester asks Tituba if she's a feminist. Tituba responds that she hasn't heard the word before and asks what it means¹².

Condé revealed in interview that this scene was a sort of joke that constituted one element in a larger pastiche of all the clichés of a heroic novel with a feminine protagonist¹³. To my mind, the scene wasn't successful although it does bring to mind Condé's repeated assertions that she doesn't consider herself a feminist and doesn't want to be branded as one, that she just writes stories as they come to her.

Perhaps more significant than the author's link to feminism is Condé's imagined ending to her novel. The African-American writer Anne Petry, had already elaborated, in a book for children, an ending for Tituba according to which, after her imprisonment, she led a good life with her husband, John Indian, in Boston¹⁴. Condé uses the basic historical fact: that Tituba was sold, after her release, to pay for her prison fees – something that didn't happen to the imprisoned white women who weren't forgotten by history, either to have her fictional protagonist resold and eventually find herself back in Barbados after having been given her freedom by her new master, a Portuguese Jew, himself a victim of New World intolerance.

The West Indian author then assumes the poetic liberty of displacing to Barbados the Jamaican tradition of the «Maroons», a tradition she introduced in both her Segu novels. Back in Barbados, Tituba still hasn't lost her sexual identity. In fact, throughout the novel she serves as a counterpoint to Rev. John Parris' wife, who is embarrassed to undress the girls when the doctor comes to examine them looking for tangible marks of the devil, and to the unhealthy, sexually-repressed Puritans in general. In Barbados, Tituba becomes involved with Christopher, the polygamous leader of the small «Maroon» community isolated in the mountains of the island. He is interested in Tituba only so long as he thinks that she, as a witch, can make him invisible. His ego, his illusions (he thought he was immortal and could already imagine plantation blacks singing a song about him he'd made up himself, and his male chauvinism are boundless. His courage is quite limited, though, as he, in keeping with the history of the decidedly less than heroic last batch of the «Maroons» will enter into an agreement of complicity with the plantation owners stipulating that the remaining «Maroons» will be left alone in the mountains if they denounce potential plantation uprisings. Although he has fathered Tituba's child, he squeals on her and her new young lover, Iphigene (Yes, he's male!), who is the real leader of the revolt that will be mercilessly repressed

before it breaks out. Both are hung by the colonialists. The young leader first. The last slave hung, Tituba surrealistically narrates her own death.

Condé's novel, then, insists not only on having Tituba return to her native Barbados, but also in creating an active last image of her dying at least preparing to fight slavery. Condé asserts she does not write programmatic feminist novels. Nonetheless, she gives added impact to her resuscitated heroine by relating her to the legend surrounding Nanny, the famous female leader of the slave revolt in Jamaica.

To reinforce the positive re-valorization of Tituba in the context of Caribbean civilization, Maryse Condé adds an epilogue in which Tituba reappears, as her parents and spiritual mentors did, in Barbados after her death. There she hears a young Barbadian boy chanting a song about Tituba's heroic activities as a revolutionary. She is so happy that she drops three mangoes onto the ground in front of him. By that action and her subsequent affirmations, she indicates that she will always nourish the islanders' dreams of liberty. Thus, in the end, Tituba inscribes herself, in the minds of the islanders, back into history and hopes to be inscribed in their future freedom.

As for her persecutors in Salem, she doesn't use her powers to do anything evil. She knows someone else will take care of them!

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NOTES

¹ Condé relates that the idea was originally that of a former editor at Laffont who pointed out to her the lack of a great historical novel on Africa. Cf. Françoise Pfaff, *Entretiens avec Maryse Condé*, Paris, Karthala, 1993, p. 174.

² F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, p. 62.

³ «The view of this extensive city, the numerous canoes upon the river, the crowded population, and the cultivated state of the surrounding countryside, formed altogether a prospect of civilization and magnificence which I little expected to find in the bosom of Africa.» Cf. Basil Davidson, *Africa in History: Themes and outlines*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, p. 213.

⁴ F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, pp. 82-83.

⁵ F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, pp. 82-83.

⁶ F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, p. 78.

⁷ F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, pp. 88-89.

⁸ Kathleen M. Balutansky, «Creating her own image: Female genesis in 'Mémoire d'une amnésiaque' and 'Moi, Tituba, sorcière'», *LHétage de Caliban*, Eds. Maryse Condé, et. al., Guadeloupe, Editions jasar, 1992, pp. 29-47.

⁹ Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière*, Paris, Folio, p. 173.

¹⁰ F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, p. 91.

¹¹ F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, p. 89.

¹² M. Condé, *Moi, Tituba*, p. 160.

¹³ F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, p. 90.

¹⁴ F. Pfaff, *Entretiens*, p. 90.

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