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Writing Sample

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Excerpt from the novel TALITHA KOUM OR MAD VIRGINS.

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Excerpt from the novel *TALITHA KOUM OR MAD VIRGINS*

STAVE

I wish I would have been born differently. It was not possible.
This song that the young girls sing in the high school courtyard messes up my already obtuse thoughts:

IGNO BÄ (bis)
IGNO IGNO BÄ (ter)
GNO BÄ (bis)
AN'NA EH - EH (ter)
EH EH (bis)

Minzi (which means “I don’t know” and became “Ignorance”) was the eldest of our ten siblings. Her name, as each of the names of our brothers and sisters, was the fruit of a snub from my father to colonization.

He himself lost his first name to become anonymous and to be called mister. As for his name, the given name, the name that defines him, he was determined as soon as he went to school to transform it into a weapon. From “N’Sikafoue,” he became “Prosperous,” Mr. Prosperous, a name which has the merit of, in addition to being western, having universal value. Indeed, who would have guessed by listening to “N’Sikafoue” -- so difficult to pronounce -- that it means “Those who are wealthy?” This “N” apostrophe would itself be enough to build not only an impassable linguistic barrier, but also cause a comprehension gap! Humgloups!

He used to tell us about his graduation. On the day he returned to his village, as the first son of the region to have succeeded at “the whites’ school,” the entire district gathered to welcome him triumphantly. From one village to the other (there weren’t that many in fact; 17 at the very most), he was introduced to the local chiefs and presented as a hero. In one of these hamlets, he lost his pencil when he wasn’t paying attention. He was already on his way to the next village, when a messenger arrived out of breath. This messenger had been sent by the chief of the previous village to bring him his mysterious and precious stick from the whites’ school: his pencil in other words!

The legend could have continued with him, smiling and putting this pencil in his front pocket. But no! The legend ends there because at the time, the Saharan shirt with front pockets had not yet been invented by Yves Saint Laurent! So my dad had no pockets.

And so begins the tremendous story of Ignorance, Hope, Constant and the other children of the Prosperous family.

In Africa, more precisely in Ivory Coast, in the AGNI¹ tribe, the sex of the eldest child doesn’t matter, as long as it’s a boy.

Madam Love Prosperous, the well-named wife of Mr. Prosperous, gave birth to Ignorance during the rainy season. What an idea to give birth during the rainy season, when it is impossible to visit friends and perform one’s neighborly duties and the basic courtesy due on such an occasion: a birth?

Don’t you have a feeling of “déjà-vu,” dear reader?

And yet! In Africa, everything starts with the birth because there is nothing before! Who can recall the memory of the grandfather of his grandfather? In most cases, nobody. Anyway, in Africa we

¹ Agni : very proud tribe from eastern Ivory Coast, from which I partially descend

solved this problem by calling them Ancestors. This avoids the unpleasant lack of memories of elders.

So, please permit me to start with this common birth, in a banal country, in a continent transformed into a bunch of banana regimes.

Let's go to the definition/description of Madam Love.

Love: A delicate and fragile thing who went to school without attending school.

Checkers and running champion, she regularly ran past the market, obsessed by the desire to conquer distances.

Firm throughout the ages, or in spite of them, both literally and figuratively. Actress and poet at times.

I wish Madam Love was beautiful, ethereal and delicate. She was all that and even more.

However, this was insufficient according to the canons of the African beauty, born in the tropics.

Weight and measurements required:

- 190 centimeter waist
- 90 kilos
- 90 E bust
- + a minimum of 2 tires at the abdomen, like the Michelin man
- + beautiful Balladurien streaks at the neck
- + other vertical stripes (commonly known as stretch marks, I think) on the arms and legs, as signs of well-maintained affluence.

Mr. Prosperous loved her slender figure and waist, for he could at least go around it with his two clasped hands.

How did they meet? Not important.

Did they fall in love right away? Maybe yes, maybe no.

Since you are interested in other people's affairs and you naturally need a story in this History, here's one:

It seems that when they first met, Mr. Prosperous, who was already Prosperous, saw an atypical girl, far different from the fat women who were regularly introduced to him, and said:

"Hello. I'm called Prosperous. At this moment, Mr. Prosperous Shy, for your beauty scares me so much."

"Hello, Mr. Shy. Am I so terrible, with my flesh stuck to my bones like a chewing gum without sugar?² I often have cried a river because of the few assets given to me by Mother Nature. Don't make me regret being so slender."

"You misunderstand my intentions," said Mr. Prosperous Surprised. "On the contrary, I wish to enter into a win-win³ contract between our two families, which could, why not, result in marriage.

² Chewing gum already existed at that time, the late sixties.

³ Ah shit! Anachronism! Here, it is rather from the 90s. Let's just say that Mr. Prosperous was a visionary, ahead of his time.

You know, I'm already very Prosperous⁴. I'll take care of you like a queen, of your family as if it were my own family," he mumbled to finish his clumsy intervention.

"Can you assure me that you will love me, really? If love was sold in the market, Mr. Prosperous, perhaps you would be even richer, and everyone would be equipped with it. This is not the case for the moment. So how can I be sure that you will love me now and forever?"

"This is why I mentioned marriage," said Mr. Prosperous, this time self-confident.

At the second mention of the word marriage, any normal single woman, no matter which tropical region, could only agree. This is what happened. End of the story of the meeting.

Madam Love was so beloved that two years later she gave birth to Patapa (which means "the fighter"), a strong and good boy, with a well-tempered temperament. He was born in the dry season, when the heat burns the skin so much that it is far better to stay in the cool shade of the little hut to take advantage of the little fresh air available. Such weather does not encourage one to go out, even if the Prosperous family is growing, right?

It was the early sixties, this time of decolonization, and Mr. Prosperous, content with the birth of this child, baptized him "Violence." It is because he kept all this violence inside himself, that he armed his son with this warrior name. Why "Violence" instead of "Violent" for a boy? Because a lance is more significant – not too trivial for an African.

When Violence grew up, he took other nicknames as evocative as his own.

When Mouglo (or "I do not like it," commonly called "Intolerance") came into the world, an unsuspected calamity occurred in the family. The elder brother of Mr. Prosperous, whose wife had just died in childbirth, requested that Intolerance and her cousin and sister Agniboule (which means "Jealousy") who had survived childbirth, be raised together, by the wife of Mr. Prosperous, at Mr. Prosperous' house.

"Do not worry, big brother. I will adopt Jealousy as my own daughter. "

Mouglo and Agniboule – Intolerance and Jealousy – therefore grew up together in perfect harmony. They played together, spoke in chorus, smiled at the same time, supported each other without fail.

Mr. Prosperous had loved his wife so much, that after three well received children, it was high time that he desired another woman. So, accordingly, he said:

"I respect you so much that it is time for me to take a second wife."

With this terse sentence, fraught with tears, Mr. Prosperous said, "I am leaving. I'll be back."

He came back with Madam Desire, who in addition to her superfluous kilos brought two other children from a previous adventure (to remain restrained).

How did Mr. Prosperous meet Madam Desire? Nobody knows and I do not want to know either.

⁴ That's why the term "contract" is used above; however, there is always a hand out at the end.

According to Madam Desire, they did not meet at the market, otherwise everyone would have heard about their affair, even Madam Love who seldom went there.

Madam Desire conceived a pair of twins with a chubby cheeks and rosy complexions from her first experience with a legionnaire at the French military base where she held on to a position as a cook. Their names: Excellent and Economical. Why? Nobody knows, since the legionnaire returned to France three months before their birth. She decided on her own.

From this experience, during which Mrs. Desire discovered all aspects (especially odors) of world cuisine, the matron learned two things:

- Never take for granted the statements of love of a man, especially a legionnaire;
- The definition of love for a legionnaire is the exploitation of man by man.

Where, when and how Minzi learned to lie?

With her height of eight years⁵, Minzi was the first to see the arrival of the Desire family, as the family of Madam Love later called them.

"Hello auntie, she said with her childish voice.

"I am your second mother, little one. My name is Desire. These are your future brothers: Excellent and Economical. I already know that I love you as much as I love them (that is to say, not at all). Any questions?"

"Madam ..."

"Do not call me Madam," cut in the matron. "Call me Mom."

"Mom? But you're not my mother! You can never be," said Minzi with a trembling voice.

"You will learn, little one, that being a mother once, is all it takes to embrace the world with maternal love. I love you like your mother does and as much as I love your father. There is nothing more to add."

Mr. Prosperous, who was meanwhile giving instructions to Madam Love on where to store the baggage of his new, second family, came at this moment.

"So did you introduce yourselves?"

"Yes, Prosperous, and your daughter Minzi is not well-raised. She questions my abilities as a mother and claims that her mother is a better mother than I am. A mother in Africa acquires this name by the simple fact that she is a woman. Your own mother is a woman, is she not? Because there is nothing more beautiful and higher than that. By being the mother of two children, I am potentially the mother of all people. I am the origin, because I have given life, like Eve. The attitude of our daughter Minz, Minze, eh, Minzi is insufferable. Moreover, these absurd African names scorch my tongue. Derived from Agni, aren't they!

⁵ The threshold of seven years of married life seems true everywhere!

From now on, we will now call our children by the French meaning of their names."

Mr. Prosperous Concerned, said nothing. Minzi, aka Ignorance, lied for the first time! Ignorance, therefore, grew with the lie and gathered strength from it:

M'MOH-BA⁶
M'MOOOH-BA

Jealousy gripped the hem of the pagne dress of Madam Love as she discovered her rival for the first time. She regretted only one thing: Madam Desire was all that she was not, that is to say, fat and chubby as any woman who wants to be respected in this country needs to be.

This did not prevent Madam Love from exercising her frenetic talent as in child bearer, giving birth two years later to Madafissou ("I slept over," "I hoped," or in other words: "Hope"), an insignificant thing that everybody tended to forget over the years.

Mada, as everyone called her, or Hope, was born at the time of a plague of locusts. Yes, locusts! In a forested zone! Hope's birth surprised the family, relatives, friends and neighbors of Mr. Prosperous even more than the fact there had never been locusts in the area, never in man's living memory at least. Let's not talk about any woman recalling anything of the kind. It was deduced that Hope thoroughly deserved her name, not only for arriving as no one expected, but also for breaking impossible barriers, even if the locusts themselves did not suit anyone, except when eaten roasted.

The month after the birth of Hope (since no one had the right to call her Mada), Madam Desire, for the sake of competition, gave birth to Koumba ("it is the same," which is equivalent to "Constant"). When Constant was born, the weather was mild. There was neither rain, nor flies, nor mosquitoes, nor burning sun. A dead calm. Too weird for a Prosperous son, so these unusual circumstances were interpreted in different ways. Why was he born under normal conditions? And why this name in a family that was accustomed to giving everybody names that defy imagination? He surely wasn't a true Prosperous. There had to be something that wasn't told. This version persisted for a long time.

The following year, Madam Love responded with Yobiékoun ("I persevere," which made us call her "Perseverance"). It was her last child.

Two months after the birth of Perseverance, since Mr. Prosperous had in every matter a high sense of equality, Madam Desire welcomed into the world Perfect Prosperous. Unfortunately, Perfect Prosperous died at eight months of malaria, a disease which we all know is the first cause of mortality in the world. Didn't you know that?

Mr. Prosper Philosopher concluded:

"A perfect black/ African is a black/ African dead. This is why there is a multitude of conflicts on the continent to achieve perfection!"

⁶ "Thank you, child.

Mom, come. '

These are the phonetic subtleties of the Agni language!

The annals of the baccalaureate exam in Africa

At this stage, what should we remember about the Prosperous family?

To respond to the question: "Why are there so many women in such a prosperous family?" Mr. Prosperous liked to retort: "Because there are no African men who are smart enough to prosper without them. Otherwise it would have been known by now!"

Other, more realistic Africans, faced with the impressive number of female births, would have stated that it helps to increase ignorance, intolerance and violence with a sense of tragedy that is specific to women.

To Mr. Prosperous, the following logical reasoning was obvious:

Ignorance begets Intolerance.
 Intolerance begets Violence.
 Violence begets chaos, which generates a return to balance.
 Balance begets Hope.
 Hope without the force of Perseverance is nothing.
 Perseverance without the rigor of Constance is nothing.
 Constance without Excellence is nothing.
 Excellence without rigor and the sense of Economy is nothing.
 Economy without Reason is nothing.
 But Reason is not Perfect without Wisdom.

So, he decided it was high time to stop having children and to get a new wife. Wise decision.

Obviously, there is no place for Jealousy in this family so Prosperous ...

Isn't there a déjà-vu feeling again? This déjà-vu isn't related to "The Banquet" by Plato?

Not so sure...

Chapter 3

NOTES OR "THE CRIPLED DO NOT RUN"⁷

Mr. Prosperous established as a basis of the education of his nine children (do not forget that we lost Perfect), that they all develop a complete autonomy of thought.

Unlike the nobles of the region who hid their offspring when the colonists were looking for children of the same age to make them go to school, Mr. Prosperous considered it a point of honor that his children did as he did and assimilated to the Western thought, so as not to replicate it but rather to adapt it and make the most of it from an African perspective.

For him, the education given in the sacred woods⁸ had this peculiar aspect that, apart from the common sense and wisdom typical of Africa, it did not provide space for the expression of individual freedom. For example, in his time, nobody could refuse initiation because the penalty was death. Multiplying the number of forbidden things without justifying them killed Reason by mitigating, minimizing, rounding, weighing, exceeding, negotiating or balancing when there was no need to.

Reason divides and objectifies, even though it can be subjective. At the very least, it separates truth from falsehood, good from evil, happiness from grief.

He said it was easier to talk about wisdom, which, although it was the highest Virtue, was only a quality – evoking African beliefs. He said that wisdom was used rather than granting reason to the “Black Man,” as this would qualify him simply as a “Man.”

Yet he himself had experienced initiation, essential to acquire the status of man. Not that he regretted this period, from which he had inherited the nickname N'Sikafoué. It had allowed him to discover his wealth as an African. He previously felt that he had the worst fate in the world, being Black, moreover African. While the entire human species was progressing, he had just acquired the right to not do Forced Labor for the colonists settling in his county⁹.

Mr. Prosperous hated this superhuman strength that Nature had given him and that had pushed other men to regard him as a pack animal. In this, he felt all of Africa by being only himself.

He knew nothing of the grandfather of his grandfather, but saw that a pen could make a messenger run. He had to pass this power to his children. If the grandfather of his grandfather had a pen, he would have known fragments of his life. But there was only him, N'Sikafoué, to testify that this ancestor had existed. Was he a red albino? Was he squat, rather paunchy or athletic? A drunk or a gambler? Wise or temperate? Did he have a job? Did jobs exist at that time,

⁷ Quote from the professor of philosophy, not of the author!

⁸ Sacred Wood: term used to refer to initiation.

⁹ Forced labor: mandatory work that African people had to perform for colonists throughout Africa under French colonization. It was abolished in 1946, after more than 50 years of suffering very similar to slavery.

by the way? How was his house? Deeply inside him, something was telling him that nothing had changed since the grandfather of his grandfather: huts, raised attics, homesteads, collective land cultivation (a primal form of communism or simply a necessity of efficiency?).

But he knew nothing and that hurt him. He could not change this pre-history, but had changed himself and would change everything after him.

All of his children attended school, without exception.

Ignorance, the first one, excelled in everything. She absorbed her courses like a sponge, cutting through with the scalpel of her intellect all the concepts and definitions that she happened to learn, in order to make her painful name a lie.

She came home from school every day with a new existential question:

"Dad, what is development?"

"Development is when man reaches the state of wellbeing."

"Dad, how would you define colonization?"

"Colonization is when someone tries to make you well with forced development."

"Dad, why does Africa refuse development?"

"Africa refuses forced development."

"Dad, I reviewed my history lesson, from Soni Ali Beir to Sundiata Keita or Soumangourou Kante. As far as I can go, the history of the western part of Africa doesn't go further back than the 14th century. Was there nothing before?"

"Ah! Thought is universal! You are raising the same questions that I asked myself long ago. This is why I sent you to school, so that your generation may find the answers. Because I wasn't able to find any. It is not because there are none. It is simply that nobody knows. Don't worry: the grandson of your grandson will know the answers. He will because scientific progress (archeology, anthropology, genetics, etc ...) and, at last, an increasing interest of Africans in their own History will resurrect our past. Besides, does the truth lie in the past? I do not think so."

"Dad, why are you Black? And why am I Black too?"

Translated from the French by the author, with ND
