MODERN CLASSICS

Yambo Ouologuem

Bound to Violence

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Yambo Ouologuem was a Malian writer born into an aristocratic family. His poetry has been anthologized in *Poems of Black Africa*, edited by Wole Soyinka, and *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*, edited by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier. Met with critical acclaim in France, Ouologuem won the Renaudot Prize for his debut novel, *Bound to Violence*. He died in 2017.

Ralph Manheim was a Jewish-American translator of German and French literature. He translated the works of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Günter Grass, Peter Handke, Martin Heidegger and Hermann Hesse, among others. Manheim received the 1964 PEN Translation Prize, the 1970 National Book Award in the Translation category and a 1983 MacArthur Fellowship in Literary Studies. He won the PEN/Ralph Manheim Medal for Translation, a major lifetime-achievement award in the field of translation, in 1988. He died in 1992.

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Translated from the French by Ralph Manheim
With a Foreword and annotations by Chérif Keïta

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Tracking the Trickster in Mali: My Encounter with Yambo Ouologuem

My brief encounter with the author of *Bound to Violence* happened in February 2002, during a twelve-day road trip I took every other year through Mali and Burkina Faso with a group of about twenty Carleton College students. During these long excursions, we travelled in the footsteps of a picaresque trickster character called Wangrin (Samba Traoré was his birth name), a colonial interpreter whose life and epic-like adventures in the French colonial service have been depicted by Amadou Hampâté Bâ, a Malian author, in his novel *L'Étrange Destin de Wangrin*, published in English as *The Fortunes of Wangrin*. This exciting road trip was an important component of my ten-week off-campus experience titled 'The History and Culture of Mali', an immersive experience focusing on a multifaceted study through literature, cinema and popular culture. It was an ideal opportunity to visit the country's fabled places along the Niger River (Ségou, Djenné, Mopti, Timbuktu), even venturing into the hard-to-reach areas of central Mali (the Dogon plateau and cliffs), thus adding a practical dimension to an intellectual approach to Mali's literature and folklore. Although Yambo Ouologuem was not on my list of authors to be studied during this programme, I would always speak to my students about his unique place as the author of *Bound to Violence*, the most iconoclastic novel to have come out of Africa. That year, as in subsequent ones, I told them that our trip would take us

through the author's hometown of Sévaré, the gateway into the legendary Dogon country, the region of Mali's cliff-dwelling culture. This group, whose advanced notions of astronomy and intricate cosmology have fascinated European anthropologists since the 1930s, is Ouologuem's ethnic group, the mysterious Dogon of the cliffs of Bandiagara.

Since 2000, the year I established the programme, I had wanted to meet Ouologuem, the enigmatic writer and *enfant terrible* of African literature in French. In 2002 that opportunity presented itself during our stop in Sévaré to refuel the six or seven SUVs that made up our caravan of vehicles and to buy the much-needed food supplies for the long road ahead. At the busy gas station where we stopped, I asked a young man about Yambo. He told me that he knew him and offered to take me to meet him. I enthusiastically accepted the offer. But having been warned about the writer's aversion to certain types of people since his return to his hometown in the early 1970s, out of caution I asked my group to stay behind while I was visiting with Ouologuem.

As soon as we walked into the family property through an iron gate, we saw Ouologuem at the far end, sitting on the edge of a patio doing his ablutions. We stopped to greet the elderly woman my guide had identified as the author's mother and exchanged with her the traditional words of Malian civility, inquiring about her health and about the well-being of her household members and neighbours. She pointed us in the direction of Yambo, who by then had had enough time to smell out the strange visitor accompanying his acquaintance. It was not the hour of any of the five mandatory prayers. We nonetheless walked toward him with great precaution so as not to take his attention away from his ablutions, which, I thought, had gone on a bit too long already. Aware that we were standing and waiting for him, he would quickly glance in our direction without interrupting his ritual, without saying a word or even making a

welcoming gesture. Embarrassed by this intrusion on our part, having come unannounced, we did our best to stay far enough from him as a sign of respect. I must say that according to all the rumours I had heard, Yambo spent quite a bit of his time praying at the mosque, supposedly to avoid certain types of people he considered undesirable. Those undesirable people were the Western-educated African intellectuals or white Westerners who would be inclined to engage him about his writings. Was I surprised to see him getting ready for prayer? No, I was not. However, the unusual length of his ablutions was puzzling to me. Five minutes, ten minutes had passed, and we were now close to fifteen endless minutes. I started to suspect that Ouologuem had detected something in my appearance and was intentionally delaying the end of his ritual, in the hope that we would leave on our own. Seeing that we were not leaving, suddenly he did the most unexpected thing. He picked up from the cement floor, next to him, a small transparent plastic pouch containing a mixture of what looked like tree bark and other medicinal substances. Turning toward my guide, he said in our Bamana lingua franca: 'Give him this, have him mix the contents with his bathwater and wash himself with it!' After this exchange, disconcerting to say the least, Ouologuem calmly returned to his ablutions, without looking at us again. Not knowing if my companion shared my great surprise and confusion, I understood clearly that Ouologuem had just signalled the end of our visit in the most baffling fashion. We left quietly and exited the house, bidding farewell to the elderly lady on our way out. Thus, Ouologuem had succeeded in deflecting for the *n*th time the danger he had been running from since the day he returned home from Paris, barely able to stand on his feet, after years in Europe filled with both great glory and crushing ignominy. To shoo me away, he had resorted to an effective albeit strange trick: he acted as a healer, even though I had not come

to him for a consultation, and better, as a diviner, one who was able to detect a hidden ailment in his visitors without even exchanging a word with them. Once back on the street, I felt more saddened by the scene I had witnessed than disappointed for missing a long-shot opportunity to chat with Ouologuem. To help me regain my composure, my kind companion told me that visibly Ouologuem was not having one of his best days. He admitted that although the writer often came to sit and chat freely and coherently with him and his friends in a public space, he would now and then walk up to the nearby police station and hurl all sorts of insults at the officers and their staff, for reasons not always clear. That was how people had learned to live with him in the decades since his return from France physically and mentally wrecked by the scandal surrounding the publication of *Bound to Violence* in 1968. He had come a long way from his last days in Paris, when he feared persecution and death by poisoning at any moment, at the hands of anyone around him, including his cousin on whose couch he had found his last refuge in Paris; from being unable to stand on his feet the day he landed in Bamako, Mali's capital city, he is said to have been completely healed, in the words of his own mother, by his father, a man who combined his European education with a deep knowledge of Dogon traditional medicine. Thus, Ouologuem had managed to build a new life for himself in Sévaré, with a new wife and children, on his parents' large property.

After my unsettling encounter with Yambo Ouologuem that day, I could not help thinking about the Malian saying, 'Words can eat a person', especially when those words are hard truths spoken too soon, as in Ouologuem's case, in his brilliant and visionary novel *Bound to Violence*. Yambo's acerbic pen spared no one: neither the former colonizer, France, and the power it was still wielding from Paris, nor the new governments that had taken over in the new African republics, regardless of their

alignments in the Cold War world of the 1960s. Because Ouologuem had dared to portray the African masses, which he calls *la négraille*,[1] as having been systematically victimized by the most ferocious exploitation over centuries, if not millennia, by 'traditional colonizers', he was labelled a self-hating black man by both the new African political leaders and the intellectual elite, who felt targeted and lampooned in his novel. It is true that, when reading the novel, one cannot help but think of leaders from both left and right on the continent: Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Modibo Keïta of Mali and Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea, among many others, whom Ouologuem viewed as puppets of both the former or new European colonial masters and of the local feudal dynasties that managed to perpetuate themselves by enslaving and skilfully mystifying the masses through religion: traditional animism as well as the faith systems imported from the Arab-Muslim East and the Judeo-Christian West. Ouologuem writes:

> There followed a rush for that precious raw material, the *négraille*. The Whites devised a system of international colonial law consecrating the principle of spheres of influence and legitimizing the rights of the first occupant. But to Nakem the colonial powers came too late, for with the help of the local notables, a colonial overlord had established himself long since, and that colonial overlord was none other than Saif. All unsuspecting, the European conquerors played into his hands. Call it technical assistance. At that early date! So be it! Thy work be sanctified, O Lord. And exalted.

With Ouologuem, we are definitely far from the language in which the African writer had pandered to the condescending expectations of the Western reader since the early days of the African novel in the 1950s. Up until the late 60s, African authors were known to write, in a predictably polite and classic French, both in

poetry and prose, about the identity drama into which the colonial experience (education and displacement) had plunged them, individually or collectively. Ouologuem realized that such well-behaved writers would not make history inside the rigid and patronizing world of French literature. To attract the attention of the Paris literary salons, Ouologuem knew that it was necessary to smash all the sacrosanct rules and radically disturb the status quo of Franco-African relations or *Françafrique*, a nebulous system established in the early 1960s by France to continue its colonial dominance. To the discourse of his predecessors – i.e., the generation of the founding fathers and of the Négritude movement, in which pre-colonial Africa was often celebrated as the pristine paradise that preceded the intrusion of the white colonizer – Ouologuem counterposed an Africa not unlike other parts of the globe, where sex, greed and lust for power bred barbarism among humans and turned them into wolves toward one another. Ouologuem simply wanted to prove that Africans are human. Does that sound familiar? Thus, with tongue in cheek and clearly revelling in the delight of his own verbal dexterity, he writes:

On the evening of this seventh day all the prisoners, glutted with palm wine, drunk on millet beer, were howling like dogs. At midnight, they died on the wood fire, in the crackling hiss of their fat, presenting to the expert fingers of the cannibals human flesh as white as that of a suckling pig. The brains and the women's sexual parts were set aside for the 'eminent men'; with clearly aphrodisiac intent, the chief's testicles were sprinkled with pepper and strong spice, to be relished by the women in their communal soup. Ordained by hatred, innate evil, bloodlust, thirst for vengeance, or perhaps by a desire to inherit the qualities of the devoured victims, the ghoulish feast ended in an orgy of drinking. Cannibalism was one of the darkest features of that spectral Africa over which hung the malefic shadow of Saif al-Haram. A sob for her.

Nothing explains better the fire and the rage Ouologuem unleashed in the heart of French letters than the words of Aïssata Karambé, his unschooled mother: 'Yambo was extremely gifted as a child. He was unbeatable in Koranic learning. He was unbeatable in the French school. He used to ask me, "Mother, why do people always say that they wish one day I could be like my father? That's like wishing me bad luck." "My grandfather was only a guard for the white District Commissioner, he would follow him around on horseback; and then my father became a teacher in the school of the whites; I must surpass him." "Surpassing my father is the only way I can give meaning to my life," he would say.'

For the people who are familiar with the Bambara language and who have an intimate knowledge of the Mande world in which Ouologuem was born and raised, one thing becomes clear: Ouologuem was driven by one of the most powerful forces that determine personhood or *mògòya* in that part of West Africa: the quest for a personal name (first name in Western cultures), a *tògò*, a term that refers also to one's reputation (celebrity) in life. From its etymology, the word refers in general to what individuals conquer and acquire through their own efforts and that they will leave to the community when they depart this world. Thus, *tògò* is derived from two words, *tó nkò*, meaning 'to leave behind', 'what you leave to posterity'. As you can see, Ouologuem the Malian writer wanted what every writer has always dreamed of, since time immemorial: to triumph over death and gain immortality by leaving to posterity something memorable. To achieve this goal, he needed to compete not only with his patrilineage in general, but also and particularly with his father, Boucari Ouologuem, a pedagogue who had achieved great notoriety, first within the colonial education system of the French Sudan (colonial name for Mali), and later in the Republic of Mali. In the mind of Yambo, it was

his duty to write in the French language in order to kill the beast that his grandfather had served, and against which his father and his generation of intellectuals had fought, but not successfully enough in Yambo's eyes, for the claws of neocolonialism were now gripping the whole continent of Africa. Thus, Ouologuem said this about the French colonial master: 'What do you do when someone attacks your father? You fight that person yourself. You may lose your life, but you do not call on anybody else to fight that fight for you. And what did the French do during World War II? They acted as cowards by failing to safeguard their country and by calling on us and the whole world to go fight [the Nazi invader] for them. You have certainly read in Corneille the story of the Cid. Rodrigue, the hero, avenged by himself the affront his father had suffered. Did he call on the world to help him? No! The French would rather have the Black man die on his behalf to save his own life. And after the Black man had died for them, their way of saying "Thanks" was to create a [Jacques] Foccart to foment pro-French coups all over Africa.'

It has been more than five decades since the publication of *Bound to Violence*. So much has happened on the African continent and, unfortunately, not on the positive side for the most part. If there is a time when we should be paying more attention to Yambo's words, it is today. If we do, we will recognize that the warnings he gave about Africa in the depth of his rage in 1968, were, as Mande wisdom puts it, like the 'dark droppings of the hyena, that become whiter and clearer the longer they are exposed to the elements'. We understand today that Yambo loved his continent and wanted the black people of Africa and its diaspora to take the longest and widest possible view of the continent's past in order to chart a better path for its future. If Yambo was not the diviner he tried to make me believe he was in February 2002, he was the visionary who in 1968 could already detect in the grandiose

promises of the founding fathers of the new republics, the spectre of politicians and their clans morphing into bloodsucking and kleptocratic dynasties like the Saifs of Nakem. What Ouologuem feared for his continent is sadly on full display today: autocracies, fabricated religious wars, economic distress caused by the new scramble for Africa's resources, the mass exodus of young and old in search of survival. The list is long.

Thus, in 1968, the world failed to hear fully Ouologuem's dire prophecy about the impending doom tyranny and greed were inflicting on Africa and the world. The 'gods cut his tongue', just like the trickster character of the Pale Fox (*Vulpes Pallida*), who acts as the agent of disorder and confusion in the creation story of the Dogon people. The powerful censors of the day did not like Ouologuem's challenges to the status quo. Thankfully, today the modern Dogon trickster has reappeared after finding a new voice in the present edition of *Bound to Violence*, in a language that has not lost any of its brutality and poetic brilliance in the decades since the book's publication.

Finally, let's speak about the accusations of plagiarism levelled at Ouologuem a couple of years after the publication of his award-winning novel. Just as quickly as the twenty-eight-year-old Malian writer rose to worldwide fame in 1968 with his Renaudot Prize, France's second most prestigious literary honour, he was knocked to the ground and vilified by accusations of plagiarism and a subsequent lawsuit from the English writer Graham Greene. While it was proven that Ouologuem had borrowed and masterfully reworked a few pages from *It's a Battlefield* by Greene, just as he had from the Bible, the Koran, and many other sources, the whole situation raised strong suspicions of a racist conspiracy and double standard aimed at stifling the newest 'authentic' voice from the African continent. Was it Ouologuem's own difficult and highly abrasive personality or his crude ('immoral', said Senegal's powerful president Léopold

Sédar Senghor) and outrageously bold language that made him an easy target for such devastating treatment? Or a combination of both? In any case, the young writer was 'eaten by his words', as the Mande would say, and like Yurugu (the Pale Fox or Jackal), the trickster whose tongue was cut by Amma the Creator in Dogon mythology, the 'gods' of the French publishing world withdrew from the market the French version of *Bound to Violence*, for reasons still unclear to this day. This decision was all the more surprising as André Schwarz-Bart, the award-winning French Jewish writer whose epic of his persecuted people Yambo had adapted for his novel, had been very supportive of his literary experiment that consisted of deliberate parodies and pastiches. The latter said that he was flattered to see that his 'apple tree' had found fertile soil in Ouologuem's hands and added that he was the one indebted to Ouologuem and not the other way around. So why did Le Seuil, the publisher of both writers, decide to pull the plug on Ouologuem in French, while the English edition continued to be available through the Heinemann African Writers Series in the United Kingdom and the Anglophone world until 2003? Let's leave this extremely complicated question to the literary detectives, who are still at work fifty-five years later. For now, the readers of today, whether they be general readers, political scientists, historians or literary scholars, should be given a chance to discover for themselves a captivating text that speaks to all the burning issues of our time and a literary genius who paid a hefty price for his refusal to conform to any of the norms established for the African writer.

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To the humble companion of bad days and worse.

Since this book is a work of fiction any resemblance to real persons would be fortuitous.

PART I

The Legend of the Saifs

Our eyes drink the brightness of the sun and, overcome, marvel at their tears. *Mashallah! wa bismillah!* . . . To recount the bloody adventure of the *négraille* – shame to the worthless paupers! – there would be no need to go back beyond the present century; but the true history of the Blacks begins much earlier, with the Saifs,* in the year 1202 of our era, in the African Empire of Nakem south of Fezzan, long after the conquests of Okba ben Nafi al-Fitri.

The fame of that Empire spread to Morocco, the Sudan, Egypt, Abyssinia, and to the holy and noble city of Mecca; it was known to the English, the Dutch, the French, the Spaniards, and, it goes without saying, the Portuguese. An account of its splendour would be empty folklore.

What is more interesting, when the elders, notables, and griots,† peering wide-eyed into the bitter deserts, speak of that Empire, is the desperate flight, before God's implacable 'blessing', of its population, baptized in torture, hunted as far as the Rande, dispersed along the barren mountains of Goro Poto Zinko, strewn about the islands of the Yame River for a distance of more than fifteen hundred miles downstream from Ziuko, occupying remote

* Pronounced Sah-yeefs.

† Griot: a troubadour, member of a hereditary caste whose function it is to celebrate the great events of history and to uphold the God-given traditions. Y.O.

frontiers on the Atlantic coast, scattered over the savannas bordering on Equatorial Africa, forming groups of varying sizes, separated from one another by all manner of tribes – Radingues, Fulani, Gonda, nomadic Berbers, Ngodo – torn by internecine rivalries and warring with one another for the imperial power with a violence equalled only by the dread it called forth.

By way of reprisal the Saifs – with cries of 'For the glory of the world!' – stained their assegais in crime and tribal exactions.

In that age of feudalism, large communities of slaves celebrated the justice of their overlords by forced labour and by looking on inert as multitudes of their brothers, smeared with the blood of butchered children and of disembowelled expectant mothers, were immured alive. . . . That is what happened at Tillabéri-Bentia, at Granta, at Grosso, at Gagol-Gosso, and in many places mentioned in the *Tarik al-Fetach* and the *Tarik al-Sudan* of the Arab historians.

Afterward wild supplication was heard from the village square to the dark thickets where the hyenas sleep. Then pious silence, and the griot Kutuli of cherished memory ends his tale as follows: 'Not far from the bodies of the countless slaughtered children, seventeen foetuses were counted, expelled from the gaping entrails of mothers in death agony. Under the eyes of all, those women had been raped by their husbands, who then, overpowered by shame, had killed themselves. And they could not shrink back from this suicide, not even to save the life of one of their brothers, a helpless witness to the scene, whose expression, marked by the incredulity of despair, was judged – *Al'allah!* – to be "unduly tearful" or "less terrified than usual".'

The village chief, his lips parted in silent, breathless resignation, drew the conclusion that human life was vain. Though he was shaken to the point of madness, it was nevertheless his duty to discourage rebellious minds by displaying, on a fan plaited from reeds, the earlobes of other rebellious men from the

neighbouring village, whose bodies had been converted into ashes and scattered over the river . . . The malefic spirits of those beggars, so it was said, contaminated the waters for at least three years, obliging the few able-bodied men in the village to dig wells at a safe distance, which were guarded at night against the spirits of evil: upon them the mercies of the Most-High and the choicest of blessings.

But there is nothing unusual in this story: many others relate how terror enslaved the populations and stifled every attempt at rebellion throughout the Empire. For two more centuries the heart of Nakem bore such humiliations and ignominies with patience; the Crown forced men to swallow life as a boa swallows a stinking antelope, and rolled from one inglorious dynasty and sibylline genealogy to another, falling lower with each new act of vileness . . . Against this background of horror the destiny of Saif Isaac al-Heit stands out most illustriously; rising far above the common lot, it endowed the legend of the Saifs with the splendour in which the dreamers of African unity sun themselves to this day.

To picture that renaissance of the Nakem Empire through the person of Saif, one must have heard the dismal litany of the imperial dictatorships of those days from the mouths of the elders. It came to pass that one day in the year 1420 Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain – after hearing the words of a soothsayer who predicted that he would be overthrown by a child to be born during the coming year in Tillabéri-Bentia, capital of the Nakem Empire – ceased to ignore the strange cravings of pregnant women. He consigned all newborn babes to the red death and lined up their shrunken heads along the wall of his antechamber. But one mother, Tiebiramina – how much more fortunate than the rest! – saved her newborn babe under cover of night and fled, followed by her husband and three faithful servants, to Gagol-Gosso, where they settled.

When this son, Isaac al-Heit, had grown to be a strong, brave man, he went off with a troop of warriors.

At this point tradition loses itself in legend, for there are few written accounts and the versions of the elders diverge from those of the griots, which differ in turn from those of the chroniclers.

According to one version, Isaac al-Heit, even before going to war, was a mighty lord whose parents were living out a happy old age among the princes of Rande province. In another version his parents were massacred by one of the punitive expeditions sent out by Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain; himself pierced by an assegai, he was saved by a Gonda peasant, who cared for him and after many moons healed him. Still others claimed that he joined the troop of warriors because he was drawn to the glory and splendour of warfare.

When the Immortal One makes the sun – diamond of the house of His Power – set, then, along with the tales of the oral tradition, the elders intone the famous epic (the value of which some contest, because they deny Saif's Jewish descent, insisting that he was a plain ordinary nigger) written by Mahmud Meknud Trare, a descendant of griot ancestors and himself a griot of the present-day African Republic of Nakem-Ziuko, which is all that remains of the ancient Nakem Empire:

The Lord – holy is His Name! – showed us the mercy of bringing forth, at the beginning of the black Nakem Empire, one illustrious man, our ancestor the black Jew Abraham al-Heit, born of a black father and of an Oriental Jewess from Kenana (Canaan), descended from Jews of Cyrenaica and Tuat; it is believed that she was carried to Nakem by a secondary migration that followed the itinerary of Cornelius Balbus.

The Most-High did this in His infinite mercy – prayer and peace upon it! – in order to bless the tradition of the Saif dynasty, rooted in the greatness of one man, the most pious and

devout Isaac al-Heit, who freed a slave each day. The source of his power was his righteous sacrifice in renouncing his princely possessions to join a passing band of adventurers.

And now behold: The brave and daring Isaac al-Heit knew hunger, thirst, fever, the tumult of battle, and the sight of the dying. A hundred times he was given up for dead. Each time, thanks to the favour of the most-just and compassionate Master of the Worlds, he escaped, for his death would have been intolerable to God and to the righteous: *wassalam!*

And behold further: Amid the mounds of corpses left by the passage of Saif Moshe Gabbai of Honain (God's curse upon him!) the noble ardour of Isaac al-Heit (God refresh his couch) awoke to new life. He drew his sword: the sun and the moon shone on its blade and in it the earth was reflected as in a mirror.

And lastly: the Eternal One blessed Isaac; fugitive slaves, insurgent peasants, the poor and honest, soldiers, adventurers, orphans, all manner of brave men flocked to his banner and formed his army.

It grew. He became famous. And sought-after.

Terrible in battle, he defeated the Berbers, the Moors, and the Tuareg, recognized the Sheikh Mohammed ben Abd-al-Karim al-Meghili, the Sheikh Shamharouk of the race of the Jinn, and the Hassanid Sherif Mulai al-Abbas, Prince of Mecca: God hold them all in His compassion! In Bengazi he fought the enemies of the Imam Abu Bakr ben Omar al-Yemani, in Tripoli he destroyed the usurpers who were plotting to assassinate the Qadi Abd-al-Qahir ben al-Fizan, and one day when he was staying with Beni Tsa'aleb in the province of Algiers, the Sheikh Abd-ar-Rahman al-Tsa'albi brought him the prophecy of Imam Mahmud, Grand Sherif of Mecca: 'There will come a new Saif, who will quench the thirst of the men of the Nakem Empire: thou, Isaac al-Heit, art that man, thou art the first, for thou art the water and the salt and the bread, thou art holy and wilt be