

# Ken Bugul and her arrival in Europe: gender and humor in *Le baobab fou*\*

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## Abstract

This article analyses *Le baobab fou*, a novel by the Senegalese writer Ken Bugul, to study its representation, through humor, of the emancipation of African women and their view of traditional values and changing customs after Senegal and other African nations achieved independence in 1960. A sociocultural theory of humor is used to conduct the analysis.

**Keywords:** Ken Bugul, Le Baobab Fou, Journey, Gender, Humor.

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A deep reading of African literature reveals two constant elements: humor and irony, which are present in literature from Francophone Africa, since its beginnings, and their use has become increasingly frequent today. There is a desire by writers to disassociate themselves from a universe of novels that they themselves had created. Facing tragic and unsustainable situations, they decided to use jest in their writing as a balsam for the social pain they portrayed. To understand this phenomenon, we must analyze the construction of characters and contexts in which these comedic situations are produced. One important point of reference in our study has been the novels of Sub-Saharan Francophone Africa in the colonial period, such as *Monné, Outrages et Défis* (1990) by Ahmadou Kourouma, or *Le Vieux Nègre et la Médaille* (1956) by Ferdinand Oyono.

Both works reveal how parody became a weapon, a form of criticism, that turns to jest, so that truly tragic moments lead to absolutely comic situations:

In reality, the function of the grotesque is to free man from the forms of inhuman need in which conventional ideas are based. The grotesque destroys this need and discovers its relative and limited character. Need has historically been presented as something serious, unconditional and peremptory. In reality, the idea of need is relative and universal. Jest and a carnivalesque cosmology, which are at the base of the grotesque, destroy the unilateral seriousness and the pretensions of unconditional and atemporal meaning and simultaneously release human consciousness, thinking and imagination, which thus become available for the development of new possibilities (Bajtín, 1971:50).

Bakhtin is referring to funny situations, recognizing their social origin, in which symbolic power is maintained on the social scene.

Humor is a way of seeing the world, of representing it. It is also a way of being of the individual, of a human being in relation to society, as Noguez expresses well:

It is a strategy, indeed it is a strategy against adversity. Prohibiting negative affective reaction, fear, anger, suffering or despair, which is what would be expected, the humorist saves his phlegm and responds with a joke. That is why René Le Senne, in his *Traité de caractérologie*, makes this a particularity of phlegmatics – active and secondary beings relatively devoid of emotion: in its essence, he explains, humor consists in transferring to the plane of intelligence what should remain on the plane of emotionality. Can a man be strongly moved by an event he has lived through? Humor consists of presenting an event as an element of the order of the world.<sup>1</sup>

We understand that humor is a sociocultural phenomenon. This will be the premise of our study. There are few investigations about humor as a category. We find them in Baudelaire in *Lo cómico y la caricatura* (1988) or in Mijail Bajtin in *La cultura popular en la Edad Media y el Renacimiento* (1971). We also find other works such as those of Manuel González and Sergio Fernández in *La caricatura política* or that of Maurice Blanchot, *La risa de los dioses*; that of Eça de Queiroz in *La decadencia de la risa* and of Alfred Stern in *Filosofía de la risa y del llanto*:

But it is not necessary to indicate that there are not many scientific efforts that directly address humor as a category. One of the studies is that of Michael Bakhtin (1971), author of *La cultura popular en la Edad Media y el Renacimiento*, another is by Charles Baudelaire (1989) whose work *Lo cómico y la caricatura* is frequently mentioned in investigations related to the theme of humor. The work of Robert Escarpit (1962), author of *El Humor*, is no less important. Nevertheless, the analysis and use of some concepts such as the grotesque, ugliness, degradation, etc. have been theoretical essays that sought to construct “specific” categories. Jest, for instance, is not considered in the understanding of humor, without it being accepted as an

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<sup>1</sup> “C’est une stratégie, en effet, une stratégie contre l’adversité. S’interdisant la réaction affective négative, peur, colère, souffrance ou désespoir, que l’on attendrait, l’humoriste garde son flegme et réplique par une plaisanterie. C’est pourquoi René Le Senne, dans son *Traité de caractérologie*, en fait une particularité des flegmatiques – êtres actifs et secondaires relativement dépourvus d’émotivité : Dans son essence, explique-t-il, l’humour consiste à transférer sur le plan de l’intelligence ce qui devrait être sur le plan de l’émotivité. Un homme est-il en passe d’être violemment ému par un événement auquel il assiste ? L’humour consiste à présenter cet événement comme un élément de l’ordre du monde” (Noguez, 2000:15). (The citations were translated by the author).

element alien even to its domains, which is regularly present as a phenomenon with its own life with its own configuration (Yupanqui, 2008:249).

Our intention here is to present the theory of humor from a sociocultural perspective, that is, to find the humor in a scene, representing it as a complex sociocultural phenomenon (Bergson, 1939:58).

We can say that all comedy is not, thus, anything that produces laughter. Even if in general there is a tendency to confuse comedy with humor, it is necessary to recognize their differences. While the comic derives from comedy, humor is a sociocultural phenomenon. Irony is distinct, it is a complementary, rhetorical figure, which places the sign face to face with the symbol, and in which words have meanings that are different from the literal. Irony is a reflection, in which mockery becomes the protagonist of action, something like the “black humor” of which Eduardo Stilman (1967) speaks. A reflection that resorts to contempt from an absorbing perspective (1967:248), a contempt that we do not see in the perception that Bugul has of European civilization, but that we do see in the vision that Kourouma offers us of African society and its African political bosses in *Monné, Outrages et Défis* (1990) or in *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998).<sup>2</sup>

Various sociocultural contexts and scenes can produce errors of interpretation of reality. This is where humor has space, as we will see in this article, in which the reader will gain access to a dual relation between Europe and Africa, through Senegalese writer Ken Bugul, and her virgin perspective upon discovering the West for the first time.

Why have we chosen the literary genre of the novel as an object of study, which is paradoxically the farthest from the African literary tradition? Because it is certainly the novel that is responsible for initiating the journey of African literature written in European languages. And because the novel reflects on the new African societies, changing societies that question their traditions. To question tradition as an element that impedes modernization of this tribal society is a central theme of the African novel and writers usually do so through their characters. This is precisely what we will see in the scenes ripe with naivete that Bugul presents in *Le baobab fou* (1982)<sup>3</sup>, tradition in the face of modernization, surprise and astonishment on the bridge between African tradition and the recently discovered European civilization, through the vision that our young woman writer presents to readers through her arrival to Europe.

Ken Bugul was the youngest daughter of a large family. Abandoned by her mother at five years of age and living with a father older than 85, she had a childhood marked by loneliness and separation from her progenitor, an abandonment that she details in *Le baobab fou* (1982).

Passionate about the future, the African women writers begin writing of their journey from the time of their mothers. Selecting the French language as their “house of writing” they rattle borders, choosing to be women from two or more shores and set off for new horizons and readers. This is certainly the immense strength of the ink and the pages that redefine borders and open them to the world. Sharing the French language creates this vast female community of writing and of being, a place to meet, beyond preconceived ideas.

As the central objective of this work, we propose a look at Francophone African literature, based on a study of humor from a sociocultural perspective in literature written by women.

Why did we choose Senegal and not another Sub-Saharan country, and why this novel? Because through the analysis of *Le baobab fou* we will discover the emancipation of a woman and her vision of tradition, as well as the change of customs that began to take place with independences in 1960 in Senegal and other African countries.

To use the novel as a means of expression is to issue messages to a possible readership, it is to participate in this interchange between writer and reader, narrator, readers, authors. An attentive

<sup>2</sup> Humor and irony, applied to difficult and unsustainable colonial and postcolonial situations will allow, the Marfileno writer mentioned, to draft a political speech, as a denunciation, in which he characterizes, using fiction, real African dictators and in which he speaks of all of the suffering that, both French colonizers, as well as autochthone leaders, cause African society.

<sup>3</sup> This first novel was followed by *Cendres et braises* (1994), *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (1999), *La Folie et la mort* (2000), *De l'autre côté du regard* (2003), *Rue Félix-Faure* (2005), *La Pièce d'or* (2006), *Mes hommes à moi* (2008), *Aller et Retour* (2014) and *Cacophonie* (2014).

reading of African works reveals a constant element in all of them: jest expressed through humor and irony. These two figures are present in Francophone African literature since its beginnings. Nevertheless, some authors such as Ousmane Sembène, criticize this ludic aspect of humor in the African novel of the new generation, for its carnivalesque quality. Others, such as Kourouma, in turn, praise writers who have spoken in a sarcastic tone of colonial power, and of Independence leaders, as a way to fight against social injustices. It is surprising that, facing tragic situations, the Sub-Saharan authors do not fail to use humor in their writing, employing the technique of jest as a tool of protest and criticism of *their* reality, by means of a language, that is not at all aggressive.

In terms of the methodology used here, our literary analysis will travel from the interior of these novels to our reality, that is, we will extract these narrated lives of female characters from Sub-Saharan Africa to tell their stories and make them known. To do so, are conducting a theatrical adaptation of two novels: *Le baobab fou* (1982), and *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (2001), in which the narrator and protagonist of both, Bugul, is a young woman who has lived in Europe and has returned to the African country of her birth, accepting to be one of the co-wives of a mature and respectable *seriñe*<sup>4</sup> in her native African village. Two theatrical adaptation exercises will be examined, the first in French, working and adapting the original text in this language. The second, and for wider dissemination, will undertake an exercise of translation, interpreting these texts in Spanish. The theatrical adaptation in French will be performed in an academic and university context, in various Spanish universities, and in French bilingual high schools in Almería. In turn, the theatrical adaptation in Spanish will be presented in various towns in the province of Almería, on days dedicated to women.

To understand this phenomenon well, we will analyze the female characters, and particularly the context in which they live. The play that we are now preparing and whose first act we analyze in this article, involves the theatrical adaptation of *Le baobab fou* (1982) and *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (2001), which correspond to the first and second act respectively. The first part, focused on the adaptation of *Le baobab fou* is structured as a monologue, in which the writer tells us, in astonishment, her first impressions and surprises, full of ignorance and discovery, upon her arrival to Europe, coming from the African village of her birth. The objective of our analysis here is solely the first part, this first act, a detailed study of the first novel, in which we learn of the emancipation of an African woman and her vision of tradition and a change of customs, through humor. In this monologue, the protagonist, as the sole character, enters the scene and confesses to this varied public, during this first act, all the experiences she lived through, after her arrival in Belgium, in search of new horizons<sup>5</sup>.

### **Gender and humor in *Le baobab fou*...**

Inspired by Ferdinand Oyono we reach the conclusion that jest is not something new in African literature. To the contrary, it has been present since its beginnings. Its place has grown to the degree that Sub-Saharan literature has advanced over time. Nevertheless, before beginning with the analysis of *Le baobab fou* we should specify the notion of humor and irony as distinct perspectives: What is the origin and relation between the terms? Is irony a component of humor? What is the relationship that humor and irony have with what is serious and with what is not?

The phenomenon of jest is not only born from comedy, but also from humor and irony. However, humor is not the same as irony. The term humor appeared in France in the eighteenth century, when theories about the term began to arise. If we consider humor from the perspective of language, it is possible to associate it to different levels of discourse, allowing speaking of serious and not serious discourse. Humor is the consequence of the opposition between the two, it is an effect of contrast, of contradiction between these two registers. Both humor and irony are realities of a

<sup>4</sup> A *Seriñe* is a spiritual guide in the Muslim communities of Senegal.

<sup>5</sup> The second portion, which will be the theatrical adaptation of the novel *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (2001) will be part of the second act, in which polygamy becomes the central focus and, consequently, a theme that corresponds to a different and later work, as important as this one, but where humor would have no place.

language that emanates from the perception of the world. Depending on the perspective through which this reality is seen, either humor or irony is used.

Beyond the philosophical and psychological considerations, irony is also an aesthetic form, a way of seeing and conceiving reality. It is this critical aspect that is often employed in African literature. At a literary level, irony is an often-used rhetorical form, it is a technique of staging, between reality and its representation. As Schontjes (2001:109) made clear, the artist uses it to represent something and its opposite:

Art is displayed to allow a renewed vision of reality: the artist strives to present an original truth of things by hiding their conventional aspect, which involves its traditional representation. To renew the vision of the world, it must therefore simultaneously deny what is conventional about the object and recreate it. The use of irony allows the first moment, which is necessary to reach the second: the original creation, freed from constraints.<sup>6</sup>

As we see in the words of Schontjes, irony represents a play of glances, a reflection on the image itself. It positions the image and thinking face to face, creating a split between the identical and its opposite... between the character and its reflection.

In African literature, irony is a technique often used by male writers. Among them we can highlight Kourouma in his novels *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1980) and *Monné, Outrages et Défis* (1990), in which the author creates ironic caricatures of old dynastic tribal chiefs and dictators to manifest his criticism of the systems of government imposed on the African continent.

Following the distinction made by Noguez of the difference between humor (love) and irony (contempt)<sup>7</sup>, we separate the humor produced by the female African authors from what they believe in. If male writers use irony more often in their political protest against the social system in Africa, women writers use humor more often. They use it as a literary weapon to denounce a patriarchal society<sup>8</sup> in which women are considered as sexual objects and an object of exchange, through marriage. Bugul shows us this on her trip to Europe, a trip that she presents in *Le baobab fou...*

### **Ken Bugul and her arrival in Europe...**

The new scene awaiting her in Europe was quite different, a culture quite distant from hers. The plane was her first contact with a new civilization. We could say that Europe, through the eyes of our writer, gave light to a new citizenship. By means of her adolescent gaze of a new arriver, trying to understand our reality and how it functioned, we perceive the contradictory feelings, full of admiration, bewilderment, and humor in her first contact with the new culture:

After departure was announced, I felt like running to the plane. The plane I didn't dare look at. That beast that so often made me raise my head in my village when it looked like a bird without wings flying through the sky – then we would cry airplane! – when, suddenly, the distant bleating of a lamb, perhaps having its throat slit, turned my head. My God, I was leaving the ground that had seen me born! The country was shining with light and sun, and yet I was so eager to save myself, far from there. For a few moments I feared that we would never leave that place, but then, from some speakers, which more than listen to you had to decipher, came an anonymous voice, which made the announcement (Bugul, 2020:40).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> “L’art se montre afin de rendre possible une vision renouvelée de la réalité ; l’artiste s’efforce d’établir une vérité originale des choses en minant leur aspect conventionnel, qui passe par leur représentation traditionnelle. Pour renouveler la vision du monde, il aura donc simultanément pour tâche de nier son objet – dans ce qu’il a de conventionnel -et de le recréer. Le recours à l’ironie permet de réaliser le premier moment, nécessaire pour accéder au second : la création originale, libérée des contraintes” (Schontjes, 2001:109).

<sup>7</sup> “Humour, c’est l’amour ; ironie, c’est mépris” (Humor, es amor; ironía es desprecio) (Noguez, 2000:164).

<sup>8</sup> Patriarchy is a form of society that relegates women, the feminine, to a secondary plane. It is a society in which men, the masculine, are supreme simply by being born male. That is, it is a qualifier that grants greater authority to males in a social group.

<sup>9</sup> “À l’annonce du départ, j’eus presque envie de courir vers l’avion. L’avion que je n’osais pas regarder. Cet engin qui m’avait fait lever la tête combien de fois dans le village quand dans le ciel il ressemblait à un oiseau sans ailes – nous l’appelions “roplane” – lorsque le bélement lointain d’un mouton, égaré peut-être, me fit retourner la tête. Oh Dieu, je

The words in this passage “and yet I was so eager to save myself, far from there”, reflect the desire of our young writer to abandon Africa, to run off in search of new horizons. As she herself confesses, although Africa was the light, Ken wanted to leave the sunny land where she was born. Our writer is the child of an African society educated under Western values of the French colony, the daughter of a polygamous marriage, in short, the hybrid fruit of a recently independent Senegal. After attending a French school in Ndoucoumane, her native village, she headed to Dakar, to the university, where she continued her studies. With Bugul, there was a change of customs among African women. Ken represents an emancipated woman who abandons her native African village to head to Europe. Our writer embodies the new model of Sub-Saharan woman, free and independent, who parallels the period of independence in Senegal since 1960. The comparison of the plane with a bird that the young Bugul saw as she looked to the sky contemplating its flight, as well as its sound as it takes off, comparing it with “, the distant bleating of a lamb, perhaps having its throat slit”<sup>10</sup> makes the scene more than comic and tender. Our narrator leaves the land that had seen her grow. Her fear of the unknown, of the immediate departure, of the voice that she hears coming from speakers, a voice that startles her, a voice that is anonymous and omnipresent:

After two falls, I finally rushed into the device. Oh! It was icy and lit up like a tender lover under a full moon night. I shivered with cold and nerves. A young girl who seemed to be kind to everyone installed me and cast a smile at me, to which I responded mechanically. I fell into the seat that caught me, it was comfortable and reassuring. I sniffled for quite a while and I couldn't calm down, I couldn't get rid of that feeling. I noticed my heart beating in my chest. I felt the noise of the motors like empty barrels rolling. When all the passengers, to whom I paid no attention, were seated and take-off became imminent, we heard a voice just as anonymous and soft as the one in the airport, which, after giving us a series of indications and information about the flight, urged us to fasten our belts, put out our cigarettes, raise our seat trays and be ready for takeoff. The engines accelerated their movement, the device began to roll slowly, heavily, on the runway, with its load of beings, objects, smells, memories, gifts, life, and death... I looked through the opening and saw that I was leaving, I observed that that opening was the most disturbing window I had ever seen. The noise of the engines had replaced the bleating sheep. Sweet music coming from everywhere caressed my ears; the cool breeze of the air conditioning took me away from the sun and the heat, to which I was accustomed, because it was all I knew. After having rolled for a few minutes on the runway, the plane stopped. I did not understand the reason for that stop and at that moment, my eardrums seemed that they were going to burst, from the real departure (Bugul, 1982:40-41).<sup>11</sup>

The airplane is an icy space, our protagonist passes from the warmth of the African village to the cold of the new world that awaits her. With her heart stricken with emotion, she finds the comfort of the airplane seat peculiar. She can't even recognize the flight attendant who serves her,

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*quittais ce sol qui m'avait vu tomber du ventre de la mère! Le pays était vibrant de lumière et de soleil, et pourtant j'avais tant hâte de me sauver au loin. J'avais peur de ne plus croire au départ immédiat, quand des haut-parleurs qu'on devinait plus qu'on ne les entendait, une voix anonyme mais présente l'annonça*” (Bugul, 2020:40).

<sup>10</sup> “Le bêlement lointain d'un mouton, égaré peut-être!” (Bugul, 2020:40).

<sup>11</sup> “Après deux chutes, je m'engouffrai enfin dans l'appareil. Oh, il était glacial et illuminé tendrement comme une amante par une nuit de lune. Je frissonnai encore plus et du froid et des nerfs. Une jeune fille qui semblait avoir été gentille avec tout le monde m'installa et me fit un sourire auquel je ne pus que répondre mécaniquement. Je m'effondrai dans le fauteuil qui me happait; il était confortable et rassurant. Je soufflai un bon coup, sans pour autant être dégagée, libérée. Mon cœur tambourinait dans ma poitrine. Le bruit des réacteurs me parvenait comme un roulement de barils vides. Quand tous les passagers auxquels je ne faisais aucune attention furent installés et que le départ fut imminent, nous fûmes priés par une voix aussi anonyme que celle du hall de l'aéroport et aussi suave, après un souhait d'accueil et des informations sur le vol, d'attacher nos ceintures, d'éteindre nos cigarettes, de redresser le dossier de notre siège, d'être prêts. Les réacteurs avaient accéléré leur mouvement. L'appareil roula lentement, lourdement, sur la piste, avec son chargement d'êtres, d'objets, d'odeurs, de souvenirs, de cadeaux, de vie et de mort. Je regardais par le hublot et voyais que je partais; je trouvais que le hublot était la fenêtre la plus inquiétante que j'avais jamais vue. Le bruit des réacteurs avait éteint le bêlement du mouton. Une musique douce émergeant on aurait dit de partout me caressait les oreilles; la brise fraîche de la climatisation m'éloignait du soleil et de la chaleur auxquels j'étais habituée, car je n'avais vécu rien d'autre que cela. Après avoir roulé pendant quelques minutes sur la piste, l'avion s'était immobilisé. Je ne comprenais pas pourquoi et c'est à ce moment que mes tympanes furent crevés par le vrai départ” (Bugul, 1982:40-41).

the pleasant young woman who greets everyone. Bugul has never been in an airplane. Everything was quite strange to her...all of this that pertained to the new world that awaited her, it was the bridge to her emancipation as a woman, far from African traditions.

Each representation of the world or of the real constitutes the view that a subject projects on an object. From there, all kinds of perceptions are born that range from the objective to the subjective. That is, at times, all types of questions and doubts can be raised, depending on the angle from which one is observing. Schopenhauer spoke of representation as a distinct form of will:

I hope I have managed to soundly prove that this world, in which we live and exist, is simultaneously and in all its being, will, representation; that the representation supposes, as such, a form, that of the object and that of the subject, and that, consequently, this is relative, because if we ask ourselves, what is left, an abstraction made in this way and of all those that are subordinate to it and that are expressed by the principle of reason, this residue, considered as different in every respect, from the representation, can be nothing other than the will, that is, the thing itself. (Schopenhauer, 1966:213).<sup>12</sup>

The plane is a bridge that joins her land of origin and the new world. We face the meeting of Africa and Europe, the colonized and the colonizer, the two totally different universes:

The same soft voice arose from I don't know where and scared me to death, announcing the landing in Paris in a few minutes. The arrival seemed like the departure. The same movements of the engines. Once again I grabbed the seat, the same anguish, the desperate cry of the beheaded sheep came to my mind, as if by magic, from the depths of memory. I closed my eyes until the wheels hit the runway a bit violently, The speakers played soft music, and everyone began to gather their things, just like at takeoff (Bugul, 1982:66)..<sup>13</sup>

Bugul, half asleep, does not understand anything about the whole situation she is experiencing. Where do the voices come from that she hears on the speakers? Ken feels the new reality that awaits her, the moment she lands in Paris. This fear of air transport is her first relationship with the West. Bugul describes to us, step by step, the discovery she experiences, through a virgin adolescent gaze, in her first contact with the land of the colonizers. This ingenuity is tinged with humor and affection in the account, when she details for the reader the new scenery that she is witnessing:

The bus trip was silent. Each time we exited a tunnel I looked left and right, the giant buildings, the shops lit up, though they were closed. People walking, a few cars, circulating and turning in all directions, even at times above us. Although I was tired, I couldn't help but raising my head. It was the first time I had seen cars above my head, and it was hallucinating... Was it fear, amazement, or perhaps admiration? It was all marvelous... (Bugul, 1982:40)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *“J’espère avoir réussi à prouver d’une manière certaine que ce monde, où nous vivons et existons, est à la fois et dans tout son être partout volonté, partout représentation ; que la représentation suppose déjà, comme telle, une forme, celle de l’objet et du sujet, et que par conséquent elle est relative, qu’enfin, si nous nous demandons ce qui subsiste, abstraction faite de cette forme et de toutes celles qui lui sont subordonnées et qui sont exprimées par le principe de raison, ce résidu, considéré comme différent en tout point de la représentation, ne peut être autre que la volonté, c’est-à-dire la chose en soi proprement dite”* (Schopenhauer, 1966:213).

<sup>13</sup> *“La même voix suave surgit de son nulle part et me surprit bursquement, annonçant l’atterrissage à Paris, dans quelques minutes. L’arrivée ressemblait au départ. Les mêmes mouvements des réacteurs. Je me suis à nouveau cramponnée aux accoudoirs, le même étouffement et c’est à ce moment aussi que le bêlement désespéré du mouton égaré me revint, comme par magie, du fond de la mémoire. Je fermai les yeux jusqu’à ce que les roues aient heurté un peu violemment la piste. Les haut-parleurs diffusaient de la musique douce et tout le monde s’affairait, comme pour les départs”* (Bugul, 1982:66).

<sup>14</sup> *“Le trajet en bus se faisait en silence. Chaque fois que nous sortions d’un tunnel je regardais à gauche et à droite, les immeubles géants, les magasins illuminés alors qu’ils étaient fermés. Quelques passants, quelques voitures, qui roulaient et tournaient dans tous les sens, même parfois au-dessus de nous. Malgré la fatigue, je n’avais pas pu m’empêcher de lever la tête. C’était la première fois que je voyais des voitures au dessus de ma tête et cela faisant un drôle d’effet. Etait-ce la peur ou l’étonnement, ou l’admiration? Car c’était merveilleux, on n’en mourrait pas”* (Bugul, 1982:40).

The trajectory of the bus, the second means of transportation that takes her to her place of residence, is the tie that joins our protagonist with her new life. Humor impregnates the entire scene. We imagine an African student leaving this unknown tunnel, within the bus that carries her, seeing on her left and right buildings (which to her are giant) as well as large, illuminated department stores, even though they were closed (in her native African village this was not common). Even fear, disguised as astonishment, invades her when she sees, for the first time, cars above her head... “without this causing death”, something that leaves her amazed, and yet it was wonderful.

Though this parody, in which our writer is the protagonist, we access the change of customs in the life of an African woman, the before and after. The choice of the narrator is not casual. Her view is important to the degree to which it has various functions, some more explicit and accentuated than others, according to the author’s stated objective. Gérard Genette, in his work *Figures III*, attributes four functions to the narrator: the function of narrative itself, which consists in telling the story; the function of organizing the account; the prophetic function that establishes or maintains contact with the narrator; and the emotive function that accounts for the narrator’s involvement in the story, of the relation she has with the story (1972:262).

We can speak of an emotional function in the description that our narrator makes of the room where our narrator ends up after her first moments in Europe:

It was a small room, with a small bed, a small closet, a small table, a small chair, and above the bed, a small cross, Christ. It was the first time that I implored my country for help. I was afraid of everything that surrounded me. Especially the loneliness, the cold, the small Christ above the small bed [...] I undressed, carefully avoiding to look at the small Christ hanging above the bed, and who was barely clothed. I never understood why Catholic saints were represented in indecent clothes. Christ’s chest, his belly, his thighs. I finally got between the sheets. Exhausted, I turned out the light after some sighs and sniffles. I felt the small Christ above me. After an imaginary trip, I slept until the next morning, and quite well. At first the bed was cold as ice, but soon became warm, and good, and I was comfortable, as if I was in my grandmother’s skirts. Like a child I said to myself (Bugul, 1982:40).<sup>15</sup>

In her repeated use of the qualifier “petit” we appreciate the subjectivity in the words used by Bugul (“petite chambre”, “petit lit”, “petite armoire”, “petite table”, “petite croix”, “petit Christ”). The size of things, in this new reality, is infinitely smaller than that with which our writer was accustomed to seeing in Africa. The play of words created by our writer-narrator, in this passage, about what is icy (West) and what is warm (Africa) has the reader sense the border between these two so-distant continents. The passage portrays Bugul’s immersion in this new Western world where she will be a free and emancipated woman, far from the traditional women of her village. To be free in Europe, for a newly arrived adolescent from Africa is not always easy. Bugul uses jest to describe the amazement of our narrator in this process of adaptation to the new European civilization, which is reflected in the small room of the student residence that comes to be her new home, with this small half naked Christ at the head of her bed. The dimension of space, considering what is vast (Africa) and small (Europe), represents the passage of her submission as a woman, in Africa, to her liberation in the West.

In this sense we can mention Voltaire in *L’Ingénu* (1990) and Montesquieu in *Les Lettres persanes* (2006) when they speak of ignorance, native naiveté, the image of the primitive, as a narrative strategy, or Mongo Béti in *Désir d’Afrique* (2002) who uses the purity of childhood to

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<sup>15</sup> “C’était une petite chambre, avec un petit lit, une petite armoire, une petite table, une petite chaise et au dessus du petit lit, une petite croix, le Christ. Pour la première fois, j’appelais chez moi, je criais au secours. J’avais peur de tout ce qui m’entourait. Surtout la solitude, le froid, le petit Christ au-dessus du petit lit [...]. Je m’étais déshabillée en évitant soigneusement de regarder le petit Christ suspendu au-dessus du petit lit et qui n’était pas si couvert que ça. Je n’ai jamais compris pourquoi dans la religion catholique, les saints étaient représentés dans des tenues indecentes. Le torse du Christ, son ventre, ses cuisses. Enfin j’avais fini par me retrouver entre les draps. J’éteignis la lumière après quelques soupirs et reniflements, épuisée. Et je sentais le petit Christ au-dessus de moi. Après une promenade dans l’imaginaire, je m’endormis jusqu’au matin, assez bien. Le lit était glacial au début, mais vite il devint chaud et bon et je m’étais mise à mes aises, comme j’avais toujours envie de me mettre sur les cuisses charnues de grand-mère. Une enfant, me disais-je à moi-même” (Bugul, 1982:50-51).



denounce the incoherencies of European civilization. Primitive and adolescent are two qualifications that characterize the account of our narrator in this female Catholic school, who is ignorant of all the political, religious and cultural symbols with which the other European citizens identify. This is the source of the humor in Bugul's speech, the naiveté of her words:

Everyone acted like robots (...) Walking through the streets. They went so fast, all those people. And I was used to dipping my feet in the warm and comforting sand. Everyone walked so fast here! And I seemed like a fawn in the bush. I was jostled, thrown from side to side. I had to stop several times to try to sneak between these people who were running in almost every direction. And they didn't pay attention to me. What was going on here? Was there a fire? Was it the end of the world? Don't you see me? Don't you recognize me? It's me! (Bugul, 1982:55).<sup>16</sup>

It seemed like a world haunted by a monster. Along all the streets and avenues, you couldn't walk a hundred meters without finding a bar, a tearoom, a pub, a restaurant. People ran in and sat down, others ran out, they had no time to breathe, it seemed like an endless marathon. (...) Why didn't they greet me? They didn't even greet each other? I didn't understand anything. I had to walk faster if I wanted to get out of this crowd, without getting crushed like a worm...(Bugul, 1982:53).<sup>17</sup>

Bugul presents the facts as she sees them. That is, she provides a definition of what she sees, with a certain sense of bewilderment. Here we can visualize our author, astonished, invaded by crowds of European pedestrians on the streets. She does not understand why no one greets her, or why they don't greet each other. She finds no explanation for these social customs, which are new to her, a fact that provokes bemusement in the Western reader. This reader is surprised that in the writer's vision, the entering and leaving of public spaces, is like a "marathon". This exaggeration by the author contains a certain humor in the interpretation of the words, streets are presented with people moving in both directions, running from one side to another. The rhythm in the European streets may be faster than on African streets, but not to the extremes that she perceives them.

The desire for integration and the need for affection lead Ken to an unwanted pregnancy. Once again humor takes over the scenes Bugul describes for us when she confirms she is expecting a baby:

"- and yes, you're pregnant". It seemed as if he was telling me I had a cold, that I had caught a stream of air between the shoulder blades. I remained silent as if I did not understand. Well? – I don't know doctor – How can you not know with whom you are pregnant? Is he White or Black? His question surprised me [...] Is he White or Black? What kind of a question is that? A White man or a Black man? For the first time I realized that a woman could become pregnant from a Black man or a White man (Bugul, 1982:70-71).<sup>18</sup>

Effectively, for the first time, Bugul realizes that a woman could become pregnant from a Black man or a White man. And what if it was a Black man? Or if it was a White Man? The sarcasm of the gynecologist who attends her when he asks: How can you not know with whom you are

<sup>16</sup> "Tout le monde s'exécutait comme des automates (...) J'avais avancé dans les rues. Comme ils marchaient vite, ces gens-là. Et moi qui était si habituée à plonger mes pieds dans le sable chaud et réconfortant. Ici tout le monde marchait trop vite. J'avançais aussi nonchalamment qu'un fauve rassasié en promenade dans la brousse. J'étais bousculée, parfois projetée de tous les côtés. Je m'étais arrêtée à plusieurs reprises pour chercher à me faufiler entre ces personnes qui couraient presque dans tous les sens. Et ils ne faisaient même pas attention à moi. "Qu'est-ce qui se passait donc ici? Un incendie s'était-il déclaré, propagé? Était-ce la fin du monde ou quoi? Vous ne m'avez pas vue? Vous ne m'avez pas reconnue? Mais c'est moi" (Bugul, 1982:55).

<sup>17</sup> "Un monde comme poursuivi par quelque monstre. Le long des rues et des avenues on ne marchait plus de cent mètres sans voir un bar, un salon de thé, un pub, un restaurant. Les gens y entraient en courant et il y en avait qui s'installaient, d'autres sortaient en courant; ils n'avaient l'air de prendre que du répit dans un marathon perpétuel (...) Et pourquoi ne me saluaient-ils pas? Même entre eux ils ne se saluaient pas! Je ne comprenais vraiment pas. Je devais absolument presser le pas si je voulais sortir de cette foule qui n'allait pas tarder à m'écraser par terre comme un ver" (Bugul, 1982:53).

<sup>18</sup> "-Et oui, vous êtes prise." C'était comme s'il disait que j'avais un rhume ou que j'avais reçu un courant d'air entre les omoplates. Je restai silencieuse comme si je ne l'avais pas entendu ou compris. "Alors? –Je ne sais pas, docteur. – Comment vous ne savez pas? C'est un Blanc ou un Noir?" Sa question m'avait prise de court[ ...]Un Blanc ou un Noir? Qu'est-ce que c'était comme question? Un Blanc? Un Noir? Pour la première fois, je me rendais compte qu'une femme pouvait tomber enceinte d'un noir ou d'un Blanc. (Bugul, 1982:70-71).

pregnant? If he is White or Black? (71) leads her to consider the distance between the races and continents, and to feel, for the first time since her arrival in Europe, different, even though she was educated following the canons marked by the French school and by the civilization that welcomes her and where she feels like a free woman. In short, we can say that Bugul's character embodies the category of the colonized Africans. She demonstrates a particular singularity: nearly bordering the ridiculous. The representation that she herself makes hints at a colonized woman, just like the "millions of men taken from their gods, from their land, their customs, their lives, from life, from dance, from wisdom".<sup>19</sup>

Through the humor in *Le baobab fou* and in the hands of Bugul, we witness the representation of these two worlds, that of the privileged and dominant and of the dominated. Bugul does not understand what happens in this new situation, where she is now an active part, the world of the powerful, where the Whites instantly apply a protocol that is totally unknown and new to her. What is most interesting in the description of these two universes, is the vision that she projects on the civilization of the *Other*:

He had told me his mother would come one morning, and that I shouldn't worry if she was cold with me. So that morning, I got into bed, something that I had been doing more frequently. The window directly overlooked the sidewalk. And I enjoyed the spectacle of the legs passing on the street. Naked legs, clothed legs, men's legs, women's legs, legs in skirts, legs in pants, agile legs, thin legs, fast legs. Heavy legs, thick ones, legs that dragged. I saw two hesitant legs, in fine stockings, and I knew that it was Louis' mother, I had never seen her, because there was never a question that we would be introduced (Bugul, 1982:74-75).<sup>20</sup>

Our narrator serves as a mirror to reveal the true motives and actions of other colonized people who come to the West. The real is conditioned in the eyes of the protagonist by this ignorance of European civilization. The norms that she knows, those of her native Senegalese village, are not the same as those she observes in Belgium.

Due to her Westernized education, our narrator wants to escape from an environment where she is suffocated, annulled as a person, to renew herself and change the scenery to discover herself and be able to see herself in the promised land, which they sold her so well, as a student in the French school in Africa. And so she does, she works hard to get the scholarship that would take her to Belgium. In *Le baobab fou* we discover the Western world through her eyes in scenes tinged with humor, through her personal experiences, which are always accompanied by lessons, as conscious and immediate as they are unconscious and deep, which makes us realize that we have changed, when we have completed a personal learning process.

### **In conclusion**

While authors like Kourouma, disguising his speech in an ironic and burlesque tone, could tell the world what was happening and denounce the events in those moments of independence of African countries, writers like Bugul, in turn, abandon this tone of mockery, irony or caricature in their stores.

Following the words of Noguez (2000:164), we dare to affirm that the humor that Bugul reflects in *Le baobab fou*, is love, a pure humor, without second intentions, a humor that is transformed into a writing technique and a way of perceiving reality.

<sup>19</sup> "Millions d'hommes arrachés à leurs dieux, à leur terre, à leurs habitudes, à leur vie, à la vie, à la danse, à la sagesse" (Césaire, 2004:25).

<sup>20</sup> "Il m'avait annoncé la visite de sa mère pour un matin, en me demandant de ne pas trop m'en faire si jamais elle se montrait froide avec moi. Ainsi, ce matin-là, j'étais allongé sur le lit, ce que je faisais de plus en plus. La fenêtre donnant directement sur le trottoir, je jouissais de ce spectacle qu'était la rue des jambes. Des jambes nues, des jambes habillées, des jambes d'hommes, des jambes de femmes, des jambes en jupe, des jambes en pantalon, des jambes agiles, des jambes minces, des jambes rapides. Des jambes lourdes, grosses, traînantes. Je vis deux jambes hésitantes, serrées dans des bas de qualité, et je sus que c'était la mère de Louis, je ne l'avais jamais vue auparavant, car il n'avait jamais été question que nous soyons présentés" (Bugul, 1982:74-75).

The first generation of African writers of the 1970s, anonymous African women, without being aware of the importance of the fact that they were giving voice to what they witnessed, broke the silence of their mothers and grandmothers, with simple autobiographical stories. In turn, the generation of writers of the 1980s, which includes Bugul, denounced problems that affected women in their society, issuing a sign of revolt. They offered denunciations, without aggression, and with a strong dose of humor.

Behind our young writer's fear of all the new things she witnessed as a spectator upon her arrival to the Civilization of the *Other*, we bring to the scene the subtlety of our narrator, who makes humor an element in the transition from her role as a woman in patriarchal African society<sup>21</sup> to her role as a liberated woman in the new world that awaited her. In summary, we can say that, through Bugul's use of humor as her main literary tool, we observe this change of customs in Senegal, which was a consequence of the African independence movements in the 1960s.

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<sup>21</sup> Qualifier that grants greater authority to the male in a social group.

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