

Études littéraires africaines

Memory and exile: The transatlantic and diasporic dimensions of the myth of Ashanti Princess Abla Pokou

Kouamé Adou



Number 39, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1033138ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1033138ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association pour l'Étude des Littératures africaines (APELA)

ISSN

0769-4563 (print)

2270-0374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Adou, K. (2015). Memory and exile: The transatlantic and diasporic dimensions of the myth of Ashanti Princess Abla Pokou. *Études littéraires africaines*, (39), 145–159. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1033138ar>

Article abstract

Transmis par la tradition orale à travers les contes, le mythe de la reine Pokou a traversé les âges pour être perçu de nos jours par certains critiques, sociologues et anthropologues comme le mythe fondateur de la nation ivoirienne. Selon le mythe originel, la confédération *Ashanti* créée en Afrique de l'ouest vers 1690 fut âprement déchirée par une guerre de succession après la mort d'Osei Tutu en 1718. Cette guerre intestine prit une ampleur significative au point que la princesse Abla Pokou dut fuir le royaume avec ses partisans. Mais, pour pouvoir échapper à leurs ennemis qui les poursuivaient, Pokou fut obligée de sacrifier son fils unique afin de rendre possible la traversée du fleuve Comoé. Le but de cet article est de montrer que ce mythe d'origine, longtemps confiné aux oeuvres littéraires des écrivains ivoiriens, a récemment pris une dimension littéraire transatlantique et diasporique grâce aux écrivains migrants et multiculturels tels que l'Ivoirienne Véronique Tadjou et le Britannique d'origine jamaïcaine Dean Atta.

MEMORY AND EXILE :
THE TRANSATLANTIC AND DIASPORIC
DIMENSIONS OF THE MYTH OF ASHANTI
PRINCESS ABLA POKOU

RÉSUMÉ

Transmis par la tradition orale à travers les contes, le mythe de la reine Pokou a traversé les âges pour être perçu de nos jours par certains critiques, sociologues et anthropologues comme le mythe fondateur de la nation ivoirienne. Selon le mythe originel, la confédération *Ashanti* créée en Afrique de l'ouest vers 1690 fut âprement déchirée par une guerre de succession après la mort d'Osei Tutu en 1718. Cette guerre intestine prit une ampleur significative au point que la princesse Abla Pokou dut fuir le royaume avec ses partisans. Mais, pour pouvoir échapper à leurs ennemis qui les poursuivaient, Pokou fut obligée de sacrifier son fils unique afin de rendre possible la traversée du fleuve Comoé. Le but de cet article est de montrer que ce mythe d'origine, longtemps confiné aux œuvres littéraires des écrivains ivoiriens, a récemment pris une dimension littéraire transatlantique et diasporique grâce aux écrivains migrants et multi-culturels tels que l'Ivoirienne Véronique Tadjou et le Britannique d'origine jamaïcaine Dean Atta.

*

Only a few African historical and mythical figures have a continental dimension insofar as writers from different countries have depicted them in their works. For instance, Chaka (1786-1828), the Zulu emperor, has been represented by Thomas Mofolo in his second novel entitled *Chaka*¹. The representation of this political leader by West African writers such as the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Guinean novelist Seydou Badian shows the literary posterity and fecundity of this historical figure who is not only seen as a Southern African figure but as a continental one. Even if Sundiata Keita (1190-1255), the political leader from Old Mali, does not have the same continental influence, his myth first narrated

¹ MOFOLO (Thomas), *Chaka*. London, Ibadan, Nairobi : Heinemann, African Writers Series, n°229, 1981, XXIII-168 p.

by Djibril Tamsir Niane in *Sundiata : an Epic of Old Mali*², has a regional importance that gives it a certain legibility. In contrast to these male myths, female ones tend to have a marginal status as most of them are confined to their national dimension. For instance, in spite of her bravery, Sarraouina, the female anti-colonial opponent in Niger whose story was narrated in 1980 by the Niger writer Abdoulaye Mamani³, can be referred to as one of them. In the same line, until recently, Ashanti princess Pokou (1700-1760) who went into exile in present Ivory Coast and founded the Baoulé kingdom was to be ranked in this category because her story is narrated only by Ivorian writers.

The aim of this article is to show that recent literary works by multicultural and migrant Black writers, namely the Ivorian Véronique Tadjo and the British-born Jamaican poet Dean Atta, have given Anglophone and diasporic dimensions to the myth of Princess Pokou. In so doing, through a socio-historic and literary study, we will revisit Pokou's founding myth of origin before laying the stress on the Atlantic and diasporic perspectives taken by this narrative in literary works such as Tadjo's novel *Queen Pokou : Concerto for a Sacrifice*⁴ and Atta's play *Queen Pokou*⁵. While the socio-historic approach will allow us to capture the historic dimension of this oral narrative, its literary study will enable us to understand the way the above mentioned writers re-appropriated and rewrote this myth and the values they convey through their works. The article also seeks to examine how the rewriting process of this myth participates in the quest for identity in the African diaspora and how it can be related to the defense of Black historical consciousness in modern and contemporary cultural space.

² NIANE (Djibril Tamsir), *Soundjata ou l'Épopée mandingue*. Paris : Présence africaine, 1960, 157 p. ; *Sundiata : an Epic of Old Mali*. Translated by G.D. Pickett. London : Longmans, Forum Series, 1965, IX-96 p.

³ MAMANI (Abdoulaye), *Sarraouina ou le drame de la reine magicienne*. Paris : L'Harmattan, coll. Encres noires, n°4, 1980, 159 p.

⁴ TADJO (Véronique), *Reine Pokou. Concerto pour un sacrifice*. Arles : Actes Sud, coll. Afriques, 2005, 90 p. ; *Queen Pokou : Concerto for a Sacrifice*. Oxford : Ayebia Publishing Limited, 2009. All subsequent quotations will refer to this english edition, 70 p.

⁵ We would like to thank Dean Atta for accepting to send us the manuscript of his play.

The Original Myth of Princess Pokou : Exile and Nation Founding

The story of Pokou is generally referred to as a legend by some scholars when others define it as a myth. That is certainly due to the relationship and the narrow frontier between the two words. It is commonly admitted that a narrative is referred to as a legend when there may be proof to support the story as it reportedly happened during a specific historical time period whereas it is seen as a myth when there is no evidence or time frame to support that the people were real or the events in the myth actually occurred. However, what is fundamental in the study of African oral narratives is less the definition of genres or subgenres than the way the shared history articulates the content of the past (who did what, and when) and why certain events are important and how they connect to the present world. In this study, the concept of myth is given more room because we think it is more fecund and it better conveys the story of Pokou. This word has acquired a tremendous range of associations, including the religious, spiritual and psychological domains but, as noted by Stephen Belcher, it can be wholly defined as « a story that explains origins and the roots causes of things »⁶.

Transmitted by West African oral tradition through storytelling and history, the myth of Queen Pokou crossed ages to be nowadays collected by certain critics, sociologists and anthropologists as the founding myth of the Ivorian nation. According to the original myth, the Ashanti confederacy created by 1690 in Western Africa was piercingly shaken by a war of succession after the death of King Osei Tutu in 1718. This civil war took a significant scale to the point where Princess Abla Pokou had to flee the kingdom with her partisans. But to be able to escape their enemies who pursued them, Pokou was obliged to sacrifice her only son to make possible the crossing of the Comoé River. They eventually settled down on a place which would take the name of the Ivory Coast after the French colonization. Contrary to most African myths, it is a European who first transcribed this myth. Indeed, in his desire to preserve indigenous African culture, the French administrator Maurice Delafosse transcribed Pokou's and her followers' exodus in 1901 in a textbook (on the Agni language spoken in the oriental half of the Ivory Coast) which was accompanied with a collection of Agni legends, tales and

⁶ BELCHER (Stephen), *African Myths of Origin*. London : Penguin Books, coll. Penguin classics, 2005, XXVIII-511 p. ; p. XIII.

songs and a study of the origins and migrations of Agni-Ashanti tribes. He wrote :

A war arose between Queen Pokou and the Ashanti, they fought for a long time, and Pokou and her partisans, pushed away by the Ashanti, fled and arrived on the edges of the Comoé River. Then Queen Pokou said : « You who are all here, you are going to take your newborns and throw them into the river. » But they refused. Queen Pokou had an only son ; she took golden jewels in considerable number, dressed the body of her child in it and precipitated it into the river. A big silk-cotton tree rose on the other bank : it bent and its summit came to touch the bank where Pokou and her partisans were. All then rose on the trunk and advanced on this bridge : the crossing lasted for a long time. At the end of sixteen days it was not yet finished : eighteen days had been necessary for them to cross the river. [...] Then, Queen Pokou, in memory of the death of her son that she had thrown in the Comoé and who had drowned, said : « We shall call this country Baoulé (the child is dead) because the death of this child had caused her some pain » [Translation ours]⁷.

Delafosse put this myth into written form and since the publication of his book, it has known a great literary posterity inasmuch as several major Ivorian writers authored works (especially novels and plays) based on Pokou's exile from the Ashanti kingdom to the Baoulé forest.

This narrative can be subdivided into several parts which, probably, had diverse origins and which can be found in various places. According to János Riesz, three main themes can be clearly noted in this myth : the theme of the exodus, the flight in front of an enemy strength ; that of the crossing of a river, the Comoé River ; the sacrifice of a child and the reorganization of the fugitives who took possession of a new land⁸. The variations of the versions of the myth of Queen Pokou are often based on one or two of these components and one can notice that it produces a new sense in the work of each writer. In Delafosse's version, what is quite obvious at once is that the narrative is about the legitimization and the implementation of a

⁷ DELAFOSSE (Maurice), *Essai de Manuel de la langue agni parlée dans la moitié orientale de la Côte d'Ivoire*. Paris : J. André, 1900, XIV-226 p. ; p. 162.

⁸ RIESZ (János), « La Reine Pokou, mère fondatrice du peuple baoulé : mythe fondateur de la nation ivoirienne ? », in *Les Héros culturels. Récits et représentations*. Sous la direction de Dominique Ranaivoson et Valentina Litvan. Saint-Maur-des-Fossés : Sépia, 2014, 208 p. ; p. 91-108.

political power. Pokou is a queen from the beginning of the narrative since it was her who took the initiative of the exodus and who gave commands to those who followed her ; nevertheless the narrative insists on the fact that she claims to have deserved her rank by sacrificing her only son to obtain the passage of the river and so save her people. Other versions such as that of Denys Ferrando-Durfort confirm this idea. The title of his graphic novel, *Pokou, la Fondatrice*⁹ (Pokou, the Founder) introduces the figure of Pokou as the founding mother of the Baoulé land.

Among the writers who used this myth before the 2000s, Ivorian Marxist writer Charles Nokan is the only one who empties the narrative from all its mythical substance. Indeed, in his drama « Abraha Pokou ou une grande africaine »¹⁰ (Abraha Pokou, a Great African), he reinvents the figure of Pokou by proposing a rational explanation for most of the key elements of the foundational tale. First, Pokou does not sacrifice her baby to save her people. He is accidentally killed by a dissident slave who was dissatisfied with the form taken by the exodus. Then, the Comoé River is crossed by the fugitives thanks to their own work and not by a divine or unnatural intervention as they used boats. Finally, in Nokan's version, Pokou is not a queen as she is democratically elected head of the new people. As can be noted, Nokan empties the myth of its structure and substance. Analyzing Nokan's representation of Queen Pokou, Jean-Noël Loucou underlines the gap between the original myth and Nokan's portrayal of the figure of Pokou. According to him, Nokan imitated ancient Greeks by separating the *logos* (the controlling principle in the universe) and the *mythos* (word or story) so as to propose an ideological interpretation that espouses his Marxist convictions¹¹.

Véronique Tadjó's re-appropriation of the same myth might have followed the same pattern with the difference that she goes further in her defiance of established readings of Pokou's story and Ivorian collective oral memory.

⁹ FERRANDO-DURFORT (Denys), *Pokou, la fondatrice*. Dessins, Bernard Johner. Yaoundé, Boulogne : ÉdiSavana ; Paris : diff. Chiron, coll. Mémoire africaine, 1989, 45 p., ill.

¹⁰ NOKAN (Zégoua Gbessi), « Abraha Pokou ou une grande africaine », in *Abraha Pokou et trois autres pièces*. Paris, Dakar : Présence Africaine, coll. Théâtre, n°12, 1984, 150 p. ; p. 14-44.

¹¹ LOUCOU (Jean-Noël), « Le mythe de Aoura Pokou », Paper presented at the round table « Le mythe en question », organized by Bin Kadiso – Arkadi in Abidjan, 30 October 2004, p. 5.

Rewriting and Deconstructing the Myth : Pokou and the Atlantic Passage in Véronique Tadjo's *Queen Pokou*

Véronique Tadjo can be described as one of the strongest and most vibrant writers in postcolonial African literature. Indeed, after the publication of *Latérite* (Hatier, 1984), her first collection of poems, she emerged as an authoritative Francophone poet, novelist, writer of children's books and painter whose talent is renowned in African academic and intellectual circles. Tadjo, who has a French mother and an Ivorian father, is a typical globe-trotter. Apart from the Ivory Coast where she has lived most of her life and completed her studies, she has travelled extensively and lived in various countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, before being currently based in South Africa where she has worked as Professor and Head of the French Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg since 2007.

Tadjo herself admitted in an interview with Marie-Léontine Tsibinda that she was born from traveling and that it was incidentally at the heart of her life : « When we think about it, I am a person born from the journey. Indeed, my father met my mother when he left the Ivory Coast to go to study in France. I was thus, from the beginning, intended to be a globe-trotter. And it is true that I draw a great experience from it »¹². When analysing her family and professional backgrounds, one easily understands why the motif of border-crossing is recurrent in her work. Her novel *Queen Pokou : Concerto for a Sacrifice*¹³, with which she won the 2005 Grand Prix of Black African Literature, is not outside this evidence, for travel and exile dominate her appropriation and recreation of this myth kept alive by the Ivorian collective memory. For the comfort

¹² TSIBINDA (Marie-Léontine), « Véronique Tadjo : Poète, romancière et peintre », *Amina*, n°472, August 2009, p. 1 & 12. Interview.

¹³ In an interview with Stephen Gray, Véronique Tadjo deplored the lack of bridge between English and French in Africa. She said : « Yes, if we say Africa is divided mainly between French and English, without for the moment talking about the many other languages... let's say that there is a big problem between the two, as we are not communicating enough. And therefore, when we are faced with similar problems, we are not talking about solutions together. With the Francophone sphere and the Anglophone sphere and rarely a bridge between the two, it is a big shame for the continent. We need to work at it much more ». « Interview : Véronique Tadjo Speaks with Stephen Gray », *English in Africa* 29, n°1, May 2002, p. 111. However, it is worth noting that apart from *Queen Pokou* translated in 2009 by Amy Baram Reid, four of her novels have been translated from the French to the English : *As The Crow Flies* (2001), *The Shadow of Imana. Travels in the Heart of Rwanda* (2002), *Red Earth/Latérite* – a bilingual edition French/English (2006), *The Blind Kingdom* (2008).

of the reader, Tadjó found it useful to explain how this tale attracted her attention before beginning her narrative :

The legend of Abraha Pokou, Queen of the Baoule people, was told to me for the first time when I was about ten years old. I remember how the story of this woman, who sacrificed her only son to save her people, caught my imagination – the imagination of a young girl living in Abidjan. I saw Pokou as a kind of Black Madonna...

Later, when I was in high school, I came upon the story of the sacrifice again, this time in my history book... Pokou grew in me. I gave her a face, a life, feelings...

Several decades later, violence and war engulfed our lives, making the future seem uncertain. Then Pokou appeared to me in a more cynical light : as a queen thirsting for power ; listening to whispers of secret voices ; ready to do anything to ascend to the throne (Tadjó, *Queen Pokou*, p. V).

Thus, the story of Pokou did not only have an impact on Tadjó's teenage years ; it also kept on having a deep sense in her life as an adult and creative raconteur. As noted by Kofi Anyidoho in the introduction to the English translation of Tadjó's novel, « in oral tradition, a good tale, especially a tale worth the name of legend, takes on a new life with each narration, each performance »¹⁴. This « new life » given by Tadjó to this tale is undoubtedly to be found in the many faces Pokou is endowed with through a series of concentric « maybes » and « what ifs ». Véronique Tadjó has skillfully deconstructed the version transmitted by the Baoulé collective memory which linked their kingdom to ancestral Ashanti royal origins. When her novel keeps a tight link with the original version of Pokou's exile, her omniscient narrator (or storyteller) extensively contests this established belief. Pokou no longer plays a role like that of Moses in the Old Testament leading his people to the Promised Land. Unlike Moses, her ambitions are constantly revised. Indeed, her image as a leader sacrificing her son for the sake of power is progressively overwhelmed by that of a loving mother struggling to keep her son alive. By the same token, the lure of power and the course towards royal glory are replaced by a flat refusal to offer her child to save the fleeing people ; it is worth

¹⁴ ANYIDOHO (Kofi), « The Legend of Queen Abraha Pokou : An Introduction », preface to V. Tadjó's *Queen Pokou : Concerto for a Sacrifice*, Oxford : Ayebia Publishing Limited, 2009, p. VII.

noting that this about-turn opens new horizons to the tale which is narrated in a limpid authorial voice and style.

Tadjo depicts Pokou as a leader who refuses any compromise with her supporters about the life of her child. From the image of the female rebel refusing to submit to the monarch's authority, she will take that of the Amazon taking up weapons to defend her people. Pokou's refusal to sacrifice her child is probably comparable to Tadjo's own opposition to the recurrent association made in African literature between human blood and political ambition as initiated by Thomas Mofolo whose protagonist (Chaka) had to kill his fiancée (Noliwa) to obtain the power in his father's kingdom.

Tadjo uses her powerful and fertile imagination to rekindle this ancient Akan myth. Indeed, Pokou's involvement in the Atlantic Passage is to be perceived as one of Tadjo's literary innovations because her writing across geographic borders definitely takes on a new dimension. Indeed, until now, there had been two conflicting reasons which justified the success of Western imperialism in Africa. First, there was the perfect warfare organization of the Westerners which annihilated the military defense of the Africans who could not do anything against barbaric acts and the use of methods such as kidnapping. Secondly, certain historians asserted that the purchase and the capture of the African slaves were made without violence (between slave dealers and local middlemen) with the agreement of the African leaders. This point is corroborated in recent research that describes slavery as a practice which occurred in West African societies before its first contacts with Europe. For instance, Sandra Greene's historical study *West African Narratives of Slavery* « attempts to expand the discussion about the impact of the slave trade and slavery on West Africa by highlighting how West Africans themselves, specifically those who never left the continent, thought about, remembered, and were prepared to discuss their lives in both slavery and freedom »¹⁵. As demonstrated by the five narratives of slavery featured in her study, slavery was a current practice by which some African were deported from their native homes to other African areas.

Without confusing historical evidence with literary reality, Tadjo's representation of Princess Pokou in the second part of her novel leads us to believe that slavery was an institutionalized practice that had only been reinforced by Western imperialism. In fact,

¹⁵ GREEN (Sandra E.), *West African Narratives of Slavery. Texts from Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Ghana*. Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indianapolis University Press, 2011, 300 p. ; p. 1

through *Queen Pokou*, a powerful connection is made between the figure of Pokou and the Atlantic slave trade. In « The Atlantic Passage », the narrator explores both the possible outcome if Pokou had refused to sacrifice her child, and the unimaginable horrors of the slave trade. As the inhuman conditions of slaves in the American plantations have been widely proved by historical and anthropological studies, the first is more deserving of the reader's attention. In the foundational story, Princess Pokou was constantly relegated to one heroic act : the sacrifice of her child that subsequently led to the foundation of a nation. Unlike this position through which she is victimized after her exodus, in « The Atlantic Passage », she is depicted as a rebellious figure refusing to sacrifice her son and defying by the same token not only the authority of the king of Ashanti kingdom but also, more importantly, the gods and her followers :

She stiffened her back, held her head high and declared in a loud and clear voice : « No, I will not sacrifice my son ! I want to see him grow up. I want him to become a man. And, when the time has come, he will be the one to prepare me for burial. »

The fugitives listened to her in a silence heavy with fear. Did the queen know what she was doing ? Had she really weighed the consequences of her decision ? Going against the will of the gods would only bring distress and calamity.

Ignoring the diviner who tried to interrupt, Pokou continued : « I refuse to throw my child into the tumultuous waters of the Comoé River. Do not ask that of me. Our warriors are brave. Together we will be able to defend ourselves against the army of our foes and their dogged hatred » (Tadjo, *Queen Pokou*, p. 31).

Tadjo subverts mythic reality by transforming the helpless princess into a woman authoritatively determined to escape collective will. The narrative presents some aspects of a feminist discourse, but very probably the main focus of Tadjo's text is not situated at this level. Indeed, there is neither bravery nor glory for Pokou at the end of the story insofar as her people are caught by the pursuing army and sold into slavery :

The general of the royal army could not contain his disdain for Pokou : « If it were up to me, I would have already cut off your head and displayed it to the whole of Kumasi ! But the king ordered me not to shed a drop of your blood. You'll be sent somewhere else to rot ». [...] The ship was a black ghost on the

mourning sea ; a silhouette rocking impatiently, performing a macabre and revolting dance (Tadjo, *Queen Pokou*, p. 33-34).

Symbolically, this marks the beginning of the Atlantic Passage which is further referred to by the narrator as « the great exile », a forced migration that caused Pokou's lamentations, sorrow and vain resistance. In fact, during her exile, the enslaved queen bears a second son, a boy of mixed blood, raised with his brother to refuse oppression and the authority of the white power. However, at the end of the story, both young men are captured and hanged for their participation in a slave revolt and Pokou eventually bears the image of « an earth-mother, guardian of the most ancient of sufferings » (p. 38). In spite of the « distress and calamity » brought by her refusal to accept the will of the gods, the dominating image of the story is that Pokou seems unable to escape her destiny to become a leader and to lose her child.

Amy Baram Reid's translation of Tadjo's novel has made this delightfully elusive work available to a broader audience including the Black diaspora whose initial departure from Africa is symbolically caused by Pokou's refusal to surrender. Its appropriation by the diaspora teaches us that new stories can be developed from African legends and myths if we dare to revisit and deconstruct them.

Re-appropriating Pokou's Myth in the African Diaspora : Dean Atta and Black Historical Consciousness

In *Diaspora*, Kevin Kenny asserts that « the idea of an African diaspora emerged from the world of Atlantic slavery »¹⁶. This means that the term « African diaspora » refers to the descendants of Africans who were shipped to and enslaved in the Americas by way of the Atlantic slave trade. Though these people have now new citizenships and nationalities and have built new identities, their cultural ties to the African continent remain tight. In spite of their migration out of the African continent, they have built a collective memory in which their experience as slaves and the victims of racial segregation and oppression plays an important role. Recent research such as Martina Urioste-Buschmann's study, « The Caribbean Allegory of Mami Wata : A Decolonial Reading of Gendered "Plantation Memories" within Contemporary Jamaican Fiction »¹⁷ neatly shows

¹⁶ KENNY (Kevin), *Diaspora : A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, coll. Very short introductions, n°361, 2013, XVII-123 p. ; p. 24.

¹⁷ URIOSTE-BUSCHMANN (Martina), « The Caribbean Allegory of Mami Wata : A Decolonial Reading of Gendered "Plantation Memories" within Contemporary

that some of the African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latin Americans and Black Canadians try to revive their Africanity by re-appropriating African myths, mainly West African ones. Furthermore, the process of exchange and transformation between Africa and its diaspora has given rise to original cultural and literary productions. *Queen Pokou*¹⁸, a play by the emerging poet Dean Atta, is undoubtedly to be classified as one of the vibrant symbols of this interaction between Africa and the African diaspora. Atta, a British-born Jamaican writer, burst onto the literary scene with his debut poetry collection *I am Nobody's Nigger*. In this poem, he gave voice to the struggle for belonging by exploring issues such as race, identity and sexuality. Through the controversial poem «I am Nobody's Nigger» written to commemorate the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a young Black British man, by a group of white people in London (22 April 1993), he asserts his right to live simply as a human being and not as a «nigger», a word that constantly reduces Black men to subhuman beings :

I am nobody's nigger
 So please, let my ancestors rest in peace
 no turn in their graves in Jamaican plantations
 or the watery graves of the slave trades
 Thrown overboard into middle passage
 [...] I am not a nigger ...in Paris
 I am not a nigger in London
 I am not a nigger in New York
 I am not a nigger in Kingston
 I am not a nigger in Accra¹⁹.

Atta's writing shows a historical consciousness that constantly draws him back to his African roots ; his way of dealing with the issues of race and identity highlights an awareness of being part of a community which has its own distinctive traditions in spite of long contact with Western culture in all its facets. However, it is through his rewriting and re-appropriation of the myth of Queen Pokou that Atta clearly shows his awareness of West African history and the centrality of Black values in his social and literary vision. On a flyer announcing the performance of the play in 2011 in London at the

Jamaican Fiction», in ROBERSON (Susan), ed., *Essays: Exploring the Global Caribbean*. Cambridge : Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2013, 235 p. ; p. 2-19.

¹⁸ ATTA (Dean), *Queen Pokou*. Unpublished play first performed in 2011 in London.

¹⁹ ATTA (D.), *I am Nobody's Nigger*. London : The Westbourne Press, 2013, 112 p. ; p. 9-10.

Stonecrabs Theatre (29, 30 July), the issues raised by the play were clearly stated :

Is she a Black Madonna, a West African hero or a Powerful Sovereign willing to do anything to reign ? A tale of identity and power, « Queen Pokou » is based on the life of Ashanti Princess, Abraha Pokou, and her legendary quest to build a new, stronger nation. This piece of poetic drama uses oral history to tell Pokou's story ²⁰.

Through the prologue of this play which brilliantly translates to the stage a story of power, sacrifice and freedom charting Pokou's legendary journey into creating a new nation, Dean Atta shows a tacit knowledge of Ashanti collective and cultural memory ²¹. Indeed, echoing the culture of oral story-telling which is deeply rooted in West African tradition, the narrator informs the audience about key aspects of Pokou's story :

In the story of Abla Pokou
 Much has come before this
 So allow me to fill you in
 On what you have missed

 At birth a Divine prophecy
 Named her the future Queen
 The Diviner spoke truthfully
 Of what for Pokou he had seen

 Her parents cried every night
 Rivers of grief in advance
 The Diviner was always right
 Her brother stood no chance ²².

This enables the audience to have the cultural background that allows grasping the complexity of the story so as to understand Pokou's dilemma between her only son and the urge to create a new nation to save her marginalized clansmen. By paying tribute to the raconteurs who enable Pokou's legend to survive from generation to generation, he joins in the tradition of West African storytellers.

²⁰ See back cover of *Life in Colour Magazine*, Issue 31/2, June 2011. Online : <http://issuu.com/level7media/docs/issue31/2> ; accessed 15 march 2015.

²¹ For a detailed definition of the notion of « cultural memory », read : ASSMANN (Jan), *La Mémoire culturelle : écriture, souvenir et imaginaire politique dans les civilisations antiques*. Translated from the German by Diane Meur. Paris : Editions Aubier, 2010, 372 p.

²² ATTA (D.), *Queen Pokou*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Atta's work is undoubtedly poetic on both the visual and narrative levels ; however the originality of his play lies in the incorporation of costumes, drums and songs in Ghanaian vernacular language. The tune of the songs « Medi mido kesi (I'll give love to my neighbour, so shake my hand) » contrasts Pokou's spirit of peace with her uncle's repressive and violent attitude towards his clansmen.

If old plays such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) are still performed and continue to arouse emotions in European audiences, one can wonder about Atta's motivation to rewrite and perform Princess Abla Pokou's legend in the United Kingdom just when the story has a flavor of déjà-vu in the Ivory Coast and is completely ignored in Ghana where it has no trace in Ashanti oral memory and historical records. This question deserves to be put as far as this myth escaped the attention of a lot of Anglophone and Francophone African researchers, historians and anthropologists. For instance, Professor Kofi Anyidoho, who is a renowned poet and scholar from Ghana, reveals a kind of cultural amnesia which shocked and frustrated him when he tried to trace the legend back to its ancestral origins : « Could it be that the legend of Queen Abraha Pokou has been expunged from official Ashanti historical memory ? [...] But to the ruling elite of their royal ancestral home in Ghana, it must be a story that carries a huge burden of embarrassment and guilt, maybe even pain »²³. Actually, for West Africans, it is likely that moral considerations get the upper hand over the historic or mythical reality in such a context or maybe we just have to see this stammering of the collective memory as what Anyidoho himself referred to as « the paradox of African historical consciousness »²⁴ in a short and provocative essay that opens his collection of poems *Ancestrallogic and Caribbeanblues*.

However, as shown by anthropological and historical studies such as Amzat Boukari-Yabara's *Africa Unite*²⁵, contemporary cultural and literary events and philosophical thoughts conveyed by movements such as Panafricanism and Afrocentrism or Egyptology aggressively demonstrate that the salvation of Black Africans and the African diaspora does not lie in a repudiation of their history of pain and of

²³ ANYIDOHO (Kofi), « The Legend of Queen Abraha Pokou: An Introduction », preface to V. Tadjó's *Queen Pokou : Concerto for a Sacrifice*. Oxford : Ayebia Publishing Limited, 2009, p. XXI.

²⁴ ANYIDOHO (Kofi), *Ancestrallogic and Caribbeanblues*. Trenton (NJ) : Africa World Press, coll. African writers library, 1993, 98 p. ; p. XI

²⁵ BOUKARI-YABARA (Amzat), *Africa Unite ! Une histoire du panafricanisme*. Paris : La Découverte, coll. Cahiers libres, 2014, 316 p.

endless fragmentation but in a cultural revival that will certainly allow them to connect the past to the present and the future. This is why Dean Atta's powerful 75 minutes of theatre couldn't have more contemporary relevance. Indeed, staging Pokou's and her followers' migration is comparable to depicting exile as a shared experience. At first sight, the historical context of Pokou's exile may introduce her legend as a remote story dealing with issues completely different from the realities of postcolonial societies. However, an analysis of the narrative allows us to realize that it is not as anachronistic as we could initially think. Edward Said notes that exile is not a new phenomenon but « the difference between earlier exiles and those of our time is, it bears stressing, scale : our age – with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers – is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration »²⁶. Through his staging of Pokou's story, Atta, as a member of the African diaspora, is connecting the past with the present revealing by the same token a historical consciousness through which he enables everyone to think about the deep reasons for contemporary migrations.

*

The history of postcolonial societies is characterized by the displacement of populations of diverse origins whose migratory flows and cultural diaspora transform the cultural space to the point of redefining our very conceptions of space and territorial relations. Africans both at home on the continent and dispersed abroad do not escape this process as they have experienced forced and voluntary exiles in various ways. This exile from their motherlands nourishes in many ways a literary imagination that hinges around the tension between geographic remoteness and cultural proximity. In analyzing the transatlantic and the diasporic dimensions of the myth of Princess Pokou, we realize how the exploitation of resources from the collective memory can engender a plurality of literary visions which however reinforce our cultural identity. Negotiating their relationship with the past, Véronique Tadjo and Dean Atta, two writers from the African diaspora who live respectively in South Africa and England, have shown a cultural proximity with successful literary adaptations of a tale transmitted by West African oral tradition. Their works illustrate the idea according to which the notions of

²⁶ SAID (Edward), *Reflections on Exile and other and Literary and Cultural Essays*. London : Granta Books, 2000, XXXV-617 p. ; p. 174.

transmission and transgression are concomitant in the exploitation of the collective memory. While the two narratives highlight the oppressive strategies used by the king of Ashanti to rule his kingdom, it informs us as to how the politically and socially disadvantaged define power, justice and love - indeed the system of cultural identity in which they live. In fact, the myth of Pokou reminds us that as long as we believe in our power of redemption and transformation, we may note that no society is condemned in an irreparable way to stagnation and that it is even possible to break the cycle of damnation. From then on, we understand through the two narratives why Queen Abla Pokou is variously described as a loving mother, an apostle of peace and a symbol of resistance and freedom by opposition to the king of Ashanti who is depicted as blinded by his power and his narrow-minded interests.

In their rewriting and deconstruction of the myth, one can notice how the narratives insist that the protection of life and the promotion of togetherness can go together with political ambition. Furthermore, the two versions of the myth allow us to note that in recent approaches to literary studies, there is a turning away from an almost exclusive attention to national literatures in favor of a variety of transcultural and transnational approaches. This study, which is focused on Pokou's exodus from present Ghana to the Ivory Coast and from West Africa to the Americas, and which is situated at the crossroads of Francophone and Anglophone studies, is certainly part of this global perspective that will undoubtedly open new horizons.

■ Kouamé ADOU²⁷

²⁷ Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire.