

# Primacy, polemic, and paradox in Ken Bugul's *The abandoned baobab*

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## Abstract

Arguably considered the prototype of African postcolonial feminist writing by reason of its poignant depiction of taboo subjects such as lesbianism, prostitution, drugs, and suicide, Ken Bugul's *The abandoned baobab* has elicited sustained interest from the academy. This paper seeks to contribute to the debate by examining the strands of counter-discourse and postcolonial complicity within the context of the primacy ascribed to myths, the baobab, and the mother. It is driven by nativism and postcolonial theory. Far from constituting impregnable defense systems against hegemony, these primal forces prove to be limited in their protection of the protagonist. The paper concludes that even if the narrative foregrounds the mirage of hermetic identities and norms, it also defends Afrocentric development in the postcolony.

**Keywords:** Ken Bugul, postcolonial theory, myth, baobab, mother

**Epigraph:** *"The past dissolves in the present, so that the future becomes (once again) an open question."* (Homi Bhabha)

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## Introduction

Ken Bugul, "The Unwanted One" in Wolof, is the pseudonym of Mariétou Mbaye-Biléoma<sup>1</sup>, one of Africa's foremost writers. Since the publication of her first fictional autobiography, *Le baobab fou* (1982), later translated into

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<sup>1</sup> Her maiden name is Mariétou Mbaye; Biléoma is the patronymic of her late husband, a Beninese doctor.

English by Marjolijn de Jager as *The abandoned baobab: The autobiography<sup>2</sup> of a Senegalese woman* (1991), she has written five other semi-autobiographical narratives and four satirical/political works, most of which have been the focus of critical inquiry.

The title of the French original, *Le baobab fou*, literally means “The mad baobab.” The novel has also been translated into German, Dutch, and Spanish (*Die Nacht des Baobab*, *Die Gekke Baobab*, and *El Baobab que enloqueció*, respectively), with the epithetic “mad” maintained in these titles. If the “madness” is evocative of the lunacy of the baobab tree, a national symbol of Senegal, it also reflects the protagonist’s neuroses and deviances. In many respects, the baobab is the protagonist’s alter ego.

Provocative, haunting, and multi-faceted, *The abandoned baobab* has attracted much interest from scholars. Blair (1984, p. 121), Cazenave (1996, p. 305), and Garane (2008, p. 163), for example, consider it to be the Urtext of African postcolonial feminist fiction. While scholars such as d’Almeida (1994), de Larquier (2009), Mahou (2012), Silva (2017), and Diop (2020) have focused on the protagonist’s alienation and identity crises, Borgamano (1989) and Gallimore (2000) have rather examined the place of the baobab in the narrative.

Having benefited from all these perceptive studies, this article seeks to contribute to the discourse on Ken Bugul’s *The abandoned baobab*. Specifically, it will attempt to interrogate the polemical and paradoxical dimensions to the novel as these have received scant attention from critics. The exploration of both strands will be undertaken against the backdrop of the primordial role of the mother, the baobab, and myths in the autofiction. To what degree do these defense systems protect her and the postcolony from colonial/Western/imperial domination? In an attempt to answer this question, after a brief overview of the theoretical framework, each of the three interrelated parts of

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2 Given the incorporation of fiction into Ken Bugul’s life history, it might be more appropriate to describe it as an autofiction, semi-autobiographical novel, or fictional autobiography. See also Garane (2008, p. 173).

the study will respectively evaluate the importance of origins, oppositional discourse, and postcolonial contradictions inscribed in the narrative.

### **Conceptual framework**

Nativism will be deployed as a methodological tool to examine the recourse to the primordial resources of myths, the baobab, and the mother in Ken Bugul's first autofiction. Coker (2015, p. 15) defines nativism as "an attempt to preserve or rehabilitate indigenous culture in opposition to assimilating imperial/colonial culture." The term "counter-discourse" will be used in this paper to refer to polemical texts or activities that resist or attempt to resist colonialism. As Burney (2012, p. 107) puts it, a counter-discourse, in postcolonial studies, is "a form of deep resistance that speaks through creativity, words, and actions, deliberately negating the dominant discourse of colonialism. A counter-discourse is a re-inscription, re-writing and re-presenting in order to reclaim, reaffirm, and retrieve subject peoples' ownership of their own lives, which had been appropriated by the colonizers." Crucially, postcolonial theory also sheds light on the paradox of counter-discourse or what Terdiman (1985, p.16) calls the "conflicted intimacy" between hegemonic discourse and anti-hegemonic discourse.

### **Primacy**

#### ***Storyline***

At age five, the hypersensitive and delicate Ken, the persona of the author, is so devastated by the abrupt departure of her beloved mother that she decides never to forgive her. In order to fill the deep emotional gap left by the mother, Ken immerses herself in formal education at the village colonial school, thus transferring her affective investment in the mother to the colonial Other/Western order. From the university of a now independent Senegal, she wins a scholarship for further studies in Brussels.

Once there, she soon starts an affair with a Belgian student. Much against the wishes of the lover, she undergoes an abortion. With panache, she subsequently engages in exhibitionism, lesbianism, free love, and prostitution becoming in the process a school dropout, an alcoholic, and a drug addict. The nightmarish experience with an opulent John (powerful symbol of patriarchy and capitalism) nearly results in the death of the client and her suicide. With her awareness awakened by the sheer brutality of this experience, she returns to Senegal for much needed self-rehabilitation.

### *Network of primary forces*

For Parry (2004, p. 10), nativism-driven recuperations are not undertaken to uncover unsullied origins but rather to construct an insurgent black subjectivity. These attempts at leveraging the primordial are visible in Ken's exploitation of the myth, the baobab, and the mother. In the fictional context of *The abandoned baobab*, the three function as a lexical field of aboriginality and primacy in this tale of origins, Romantic quest, and imperious hunger for identification. They not only provide the *genius loci*, the prevailing atmosphere, for the repeated enactment of primal, aberrant, and redemption-driven desire but also function as catalysts and the driving force behind most of the action. Above all, Ken's self-created myth, the baobab, and the mother are primarily designed to provide her with a shield to protect her from inimical external forces.

### *Myth*

Ken Bugul recasts her birth and the foundation of her fictional village in a myth ("Ken's prehistory"), replete with subtle references to taboos, primordial incest, the original sin, and the Fall. The prehistory seemingly casts a deterministic shadow over happenings and activities in the second part, "Ken's history." Inclusive of these events and processes are the consolidation of Empire, nomadism, maternal negligence

occasioning tragedy, Ken's self-mutilation, and the remarkable evolution of the baobab. Jung defines a myth as the "primordial language" reproduced in figurative speech which is "the language of the symbols, the original language of the unconscious and of mankind" (2014, p. 15). These symbols, in the novel, include the mother, the father, the sun, the fruit, and the ageless visionary who prides himself on his omniscience, omnipotence, and ubiquity as well as the Tree of Life (baobab as source of life and medicine), Tree of Knowledge (baobab as source of wisdom and vehicle of language, "tree of words"), and Tree of Temptation (the baobab fruit as source of enticement). In resorting to these mythical symbols, Ken seems to be tapping into the arcane collective unconscious, composed of "pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which give definite forms to certain psychic contents" (Jung, 2014, p. 43). She also appears desirous of reproducing happenings surrounding her birth but preceding the formation of her ego. If "Ken's prehistory" by its fluidity abolishes temporal demarcations, it also represents the hazy and nebulous world before entry into consciousness.

In the mold of a "writerly"<sup>3</sup> text, according to the Barthesian taxonomy, "Ken's prehistory" is traversed at once by elasticity, opacity, and poetry which lend themselves to different and contradictory interpretations as it challenges readers to participate actively in the generation of meaning in order to enjoy artistic bliss. For Ricœur, a myth is "a disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an opening onto other possible worlds which transcend the established limits of our actual world" (cited by Lategan, 2016, p. 177). In effect, the recourse to myth helps in the fictionalization of Ken Bugul's life story and deepens its aesthetic appeal/engagement, artistic fictionalization which starts with the adoption of a pseudonym by the author and invites readers into the infinite realm of possible and extraordinary experiences.

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3 Cf. Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z: An essay* in which the French literary theorist establishes the distinction between "readerly" (i.e. straightforward) and "writerly" (arcane, challenging) texts with each procuring for the consumer pleasure and bliss, respectively.

Of equal importance is the author's palpable desire of mystifying and sanctifying her origins and those of her village by means of this myth. This obsession reflects her profound Romantic quest which does not brook half measures in attachments and desire, commitments and attention.

But above all, the myth in Ken Bugul's autofiction constitutes a visceral search for ancestry and reconnection with the past, reminiscent of Negritude, but this time, from a Black woman's perspective. The search for ancestors established in "Ken's prehistory" allows readers to appreciate the general tenor of the work: the need for a spiritual and healthy relationship with one's endogenous past and the imperative of self-discovery, particularly given the genealogy of Gallic ancestry imposed on educated and colonized natives by French assimilationists. Citing Toni Morrison's elucidating observation "When you kill the Ancestors you kill yourself" (Morrison, 1984, p. 341), Mudimbe-Boyi (1993, p. 212) perceptively explains:

the search for ancestors becomes a legitimate quest and strategy for survival. Far from being a paralyzing force, this search operates rather as a dynamic power in bringing awareness of one's "entanglement," that is one's present and interiority, and leading to an exodus, that is one's descendance and future.

By means of this myth, Ken, in nativist fashion, proudly traces her pedigree to the venerable migrant, famed for "his faith in God, his honesty, and his generosity" (p. 17). Significantly as a founder and a forebear, he has built a home in front of the baobab, to put an end to his nomadism, exhorting his wife and three children to dedicate themselves to the sun of their new land and to rebirth (p. 13). Into this abode, the holy progenitor later takes the nubile maiden next door as his second wife. It is from this union that Ken will be born.

Beyond this primary mythopoesis is the constellation

of colonial myths which all cohere, in the second part of the autofiction, to provoke the protagonist's quest and alienation: imperialist myth of Gauls being the ancestors of conquered/assimilated francophone indigenes (Africans, Indo-Chinese, Antilleans, etc.), Eurocentric myth of universalism, myth of the Whiteman's burden, myth of the Global North as the Promised Land as well as myth-triggered eroticism and exoticism about Blacks.

To a large degree, Ken Bugul's fictional autobiography demands of readers the appraisal of the potency of Ken's ameliorative myth on her origins as a tool to neutralize depreciative colonial/Western myths. Put another way, to what extent does Ken's primordial myth serve as a reliable rampart against the sustained onslaught of foreign alienating myths?

### ***The baobab***

By reason of its primitivism and impressive carriage, the baobab inspires pantheism, numinosity, and myths. Portrayed as "a symbol of a previous life" (p. 12), "linked to an event that would shake an entire generation" (p. 14), the baobab comes across as a sacred symbol of resilience, impervious to both lethal inundation and conflagration. The centrality of the baobab to the diegesis is perceptible not just in the title but also in the opening and ending of the story. The story opens on Fodé Ndao's attempt at extracting the coveted *ndiambâne* drink from the fruit of the baobab and ends with the wordless eulogy pronounced by Ken at its apparent death. Beyond its titular/paratextual preeminence and strategic position in the narrative, the anthropomorphized and mythical baobab plays a cohesive role in the work. It provides shade, solace, and succor to the afflicted, not least the protagonist. Its pristine qualities evoke images of pre-Fall paradisiac harmony between humans and Nature as it offers protection and empathy to Ken and bears witness to social transformations, individual tragedies, and communal catastrophes in the biosphere. Among the many trees in her mother's village under whose foliage Ken

can dream ceaselessly and weep out the bitterness of her soul, the baobab trees stand conspicuously high as beacons of life: “the infinite baobabs always flamboyant ..., the infinite giant trees with their thick foliage and every sound of life (their) rhythm” (pp. 121-122). It is worth noting, in this respect, that both Borgomano (1989) and Gallimore (2000) rightly stress the baobab’s primacy in Ken Bugul’s first novel.

Famed for its longevity, the baobab, in most African cultures, is a sacred presence that symbolizes ancestral wisdom and heritage, inspiring awe and veneration. Remarkably, in Tadjó’s *En compagnie des hommes* (2017)<sup>4</sup>, the anthropomorphized baobab, one of the key characters of the novel, calls himself the first baobab, a venerated entity, and a tree symbol, deploring the current hiatus between humans and nature, as opposed to the distant past of communion between all living organisms. Tadjó’s baobab is also very proud of the capacity of all baobabs to constantly renew themselves and to connect humans to the past, the present, and the future.

Ken’s obsession with the baobab is equally perceptible in the invented name that she gives to the village of her birth as Gouye, the Wolof word for “baobab,” when in reality her maternal village is called Malem-Hodar. To that extent, all the plethoric references to Gouye in the novel are, in truth, references to the baobab. When Ken uses the term, “land of the baobab” (p. 15), she extends the scope of the baobab to the whole of Senegal by virtue of which extension, Gouye/baobab becomes the synecdoche or microcosm of the nation.

Significantly, the baobab on account of its primeval, cultural, and religious attributes, was chosen as a national symbol of Senegal soon after independence. The new nation wanted to benefit from the aura of invincibility, robust growth, and immortality that the baobab promises. From its privileged presence in the title and story, the baobab emphatically connects the novel to the birth and tribulations of the Senegalese nation-

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<sup>4</sup> *In the company of men*

state, thereby establishing a close parallel between individual and national trajectories and etching, or better still centering, the ecological, the organic, and the arboreal upon the (mis)fortunes of humans, not least postcolonial subjects.

The choice of the baobab as a title, a cherished place of abode, and a reflection of national aspirations underscores palpable want and desire. And yet, its coupling with the depreciative “abandoned”/ “fou” serves to prefigure personal and collective gloom. Linked to covetousness in “Ken’s prehistory,” the drink (*ndiambâne*) made from its fruit incites primordial disobedience, progenitor of future aberrations in the second part of the novel. Its fruit is associated with “the morning of the first day the gods conceived a new generation that would convulse the times” (p.10) (that is, advent of colonialism, era of alienated Africans, post-independence betrayal). If the death of the baobab, as submitted by Mudimbe-Boyi (1993, p. 209), suggests the “disappearance of the Africa of ‘long ago,’” it is also equally worth recalling that the baobab, like the mythical Phoenix, is capable of regeneration. In the view of Gélis (1985, p. 68), the annual metamorphoses of arboreal foliage symbolize the very cycle of life: youthful blossom, fullness of adulthood, withering of old age, and approach of death, and all this, in the expectancy of self-renewal and perpetual self-rejuvenation.

These enviable qualities of the baobab account for Ken’s choice of the tree as her alter ego and a source of protection against colonial/Western hegemony. Ken Bugul’s obsession with the baobab may betray a certain artistic but subconscious interest in the Jungian archetypical Great Mother or Mother-Nature, since the tree and fruits are listed by Jung as some of her natural symbols. Beyond its possible reflection of the collective unconscious, the baobab, in the novel, is associated with germination, pollination, and therefore rebirth and indeed, Phoenix-like regeneration. Appropriately, Borgomano (1989, p. 58) submits that the baobab tree’s roots, which are steeped in time, are linked to origins and self-renewal. In support of

this observation can be invoked the West African proverb on the baobab: “The strength of the baobab resides in its roots. The deeper they plunge into the earth, the higher its branches become” (Lehideux-Vernimmen, 2019, p. 5).<sup>5</sup> At this stage, one could suggest that the tragedy in the novel emanates from the failure and/or refusal of the baobab, Ken, and the Senegalese polity to plunge their roots deeper into the soil, into their history to ensure their survival, strength, and sanity.

### ***The Mother***

The third element in the concatenation of primordial symbols is the mother. In the paratext, Ken Bugul, the name of the author and the protagonist, draws attention to birth and the mother. For, the appellation “Ken Bugul”<sup>6</sup> in the Wolof language of Senegal, the Gambia, and Mauritania, means “The one nobody wants” or “The Unwanted One/Thing.” It conjures a lexical range of negative images: rejection and pariah, depreciation and reification, dehumanization and nothingness, unhomeliness and insecurity. At the same time, since this depreciative name is deliberately given to children by mothers<sup>7</sup>, after a series of miscarriages, to ward off stillbirths, frighten, trick, or discourage death, it has at once a demiurgic, incantatory, and bellicose force aimed at insulating the death-prone reincarnated child from the grips of death. As a death-prevention name<sup>8</sup>, it bespeaks the mother’s preponderant influence on the life of her vulnerable child and the mother-child bond, especially as it reinforces the concept of the mother as a shield and a rampart.

Ken’s possessive and regressive attachment to the mother and the subsequent rupture, at age five, of this dyadic Eden-like bond explain her tragic fall and insecurity. Imputable to this disharmony are the protagonist’s subsequent trauma, neuroses,

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5 My translation of the French original: “La force du baobab tient à ses racines. Plus il les enfonce profondément dans le sol, plus haut il portera ses branches.”

6 The real Wolof spelling is *kenn bëggul* (Garane, 2008, p. 174).

7 In other circumstances, it is the prerogative of the father to provide a name for the child.

8 For more on death-prevention names, see Obeng (1998), Agyekum (2006), Mensah (2015), and Sagna and Bassène (2016)

and infatuation with colonialists/Westerners. In her desperate need for love, she adopts the defense mechanism strategy of identification with the colonial Other and Western aggressor, but that does not save her. If her subsequent quest for the absolute and Baudelairean “artificial heavens” leads her to alcoholism, drugs (marijuana, opium, LSD), and hallucinatory experiences, her self-objectification finds expression in prostitution, self-exoticization, stripping, display of nude pictures, risqué dressing at high-end night clubs, and self-advertisement at orgies. She justifies her self-objectification in this way: “They (Caucasian clients) desired me, I pleased them; prostitution provided me with a moment of attention, a recognition” (p. 106). She adds, “I wanted nothing other than to be with a white man ... I was looking to be recognized ... I wanted to be recognized” (p. 107). Polyandry, lesbianism, free love, and voyeurism are some other means by which she seeks recognition and love from her Western hosts.

Her ill-fated attempts at replacing the primary love of her life, that is the mother, having failed, she complains to Jean Wermer, her Belgian lover, “You know, Jean, I suffer from a void created by the absence of what is familiar. That is very deep in me” (p. 102). Still with grief in her heart, she confesses, “the void left by the mother’s departure would not be filled” (p. 112). And again, she laments, “I gave myself wholeheartedly to tragedy ever since the mother’s departure” (p. 155).

It bears stressing that her insecurity, sadomasochism, and self-hatred can be ascribed to the perception of maternal abandonment. For such cases of cruel destiny, Guex (cited by Fanon, 2008, p. 55) offers an explanation:

This lack of self-esteem as an object worthy of love has serious consequences. For one thing, it keeps the individual in a state of profound inner insecurity as a result of which it inhibits and distorts every relation with others. It is as an object capable of arousing

friendship or love that the individual is unsure of himself. The lack of affective self-esteem is to be found only in persons who in their early childhood suffered from a lack of love and understanding.

When she does finally break the cycle of her repeated acts of self-destruction, it is to the mother and maternized Africa that she returns, at the end of the narrative, for self-redemption and self-rejuvenation, which may well lead to the regeneration of the baobab, her double.

The image of the mother as soothing, healing, and nurturing fits into the Jungian family archetype of the mother as life-giving, comforting, and placating. In this respect, the depiction of Ken's mother appears to be the protagonist's appropriation of the archetype of the Great Mother. In the view of Jung, "the child...first experiences his mother the archetype of the Great Mother, that is, the reality of an all-powerful numinous woman, on whom he is dependent in all things, and not the objective reality of his personal mother, this particular historical woman which his mother becomes for him later when his ego and consciousness are more developed" (2014, p. 15).

The portrait of the caring, life-giving, and comforting mother as captured in "Ken's prehistory" is not limited to the protagonist's biological mother. The omniscient narrator presents the first wife of Ken's father thus: "the eternal mother, the spring that never dries, the indispensable woman without whom life would not be" (p. 12). Given these qualities, her youngest child seeks not just refuge between her thighs but also reassurance and courage from her presence (p. 12). If she is the last to go to bed, she also is the first to wake up. Again, imbued with feminine intuition, she foresees the danger ahead of her family. Finally, she is called Astou, name evocative of ancient earth goddesses such as Astarte, Ashtart, and Ate<sup>9</sup> and also of Ast, the formidable heroine in Armah's *Osiris rising* (1995).

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Stone, p. 9, p. 22.

## Polemic

### *Counter-discourse*

Although Ken cannot escape the charge of sadomasochism, self-victimization, and self-Othering, she uses her agency as a speaking (post)colonial and female subject to condemn colonialism on account of its exoticism, eroticism, and patriarchal/colonial/racial exploitation of her body and that of other Blacks. As a corollary, it can be said that she appears to have appropriated the battle cry of feminists, “The personal is political.” She justifies her oppositional discourse: “Colonialism had made inconsequential people of most of us. I didn’t want to accept that” (p. 71). For Taylor (1997, p. 98), to the extent that the self-depreciation of Blacks or any oppressed group “becomes one of the most potent instruments of their own oppression, their first task ought to be to purge themselves of this imposed and destructive identity.” Thus conceived, the recourse to oppositional discourse becomes a need, an imperative. Hegemonic discourse and practices dialectically elicit from the oppressed anti-hegemonic discourse and practices. For this reason, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2000, p. 140) affirm that colonial discourse “inevitably embodies the seeds of its own destruction.” In effect, as Terdiman (1985, p. 56) contends, no dominant discourse is ever fully insulated from subversion. Terdiman further observes, “For every level at which the discourse of power determines dominant forms of speech and thinking, counter-dominant strains challenge and subvert the appearance of inevitability which is ideology’s primary mechanism for sustaining its own self-reproduction.” To that extent, Ken’s mockery of Western culture and her contestation of the superiority of Caucasians constitutes ineluctable counter-discourse.

The Eurocentric myths of universalism, Whiteman’s burden, civilizing mission, and Gallic ancestry for the vanquished are all predicated on the fallacy of the fundamental depravity and savagery of colonized natives. Bhabha (1994,

p. 70) postulates that “the objective of colonial discourse is to construct the colonized as degenerate types of racial origin in order to justify conquest.” In writing back to the Empire, Ken dwells upon the degeneracy of Westerners in order to dismantle the myth of Western superiority as she spares no effort in laying bare the perceived depravity and decadence of Europeans, their squandered human legacy, and lost human patrimony. She deplores their vampirism and tendency to suck human blood in the manner of ghouls, alienate children from their parents and cultures, and enslave the colonized. These vampiric tendencies, to her, are also manifest in their exoticization and eroticization of Blacks, both males and females. She further lambastes colonialists and latter-day imperialists for the de-secularization of African way of life, while stressing European essentialization, zoomorphization, and deshumanization of Blacks (p. 100) as well as Western envy of Black people’s emotional wealth. So scandalous are colonial/Western crimes against Blacks/the colonized that some Europeans have developed colonial guilt and frustration complexes.

In her criticism of imperialism and the West, Ken demonstrates as well their penchant for commoditizing human beings. Persuaded that “a woman can be nothing other than consumption” (p. 101), bar owners and other capitalists have constructed a pervasive and pernicious sex industry whose building blocks include prostitution, orgies, group sex, brothels, voyeurism, objectification, and sexual exploitation. In line with this objectification, a Catholic priest attempts to sodomize an African student through financial inducement. Keenly aware of the exploitation of women by all manner of people, Ken describes the abortionist as an executioner and a bulldog, feeding on hapless pregnant women. Remarkably, Ken’s excruciating abortion elicits neither empathy nor sympathy from the mother of Louis, the Belgian lover who impregnates her. Rather she attempts to reify Ken with money to silence her. Ken’s lived horrendous commodification experiences confirm

the postulation by Terdiman (1985, p. 136) that “reification is capitalism’s master trope...reification takes the form of a radical reduction of being to exchange value.”

Ken Bugul’s anticolonial satire extends to her lampoon of post-independence paper tigers, failed neo-colonial African leadership, and blighted independence dreams. Instead of freeing the citizenry from the clutches of colonialism, independence has rather mired them in the formalization of dependence (p. 125), subjecting Africa to the ceaseless assault of neocolonialism and sinking the postcolony into the debilitating quagmire of “Plus ça change<sup>10</sup> (“The more things change”)...” immobility and cynicism.

Contrary to Ken’s expectation that the 1966 first World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar will be used to ameliorate the sociocultural and economic conditions of people of African descent, African elite and intelligentsia rather convert it into an orgiastic forum for the decriminalization of colonialism to the extent that even: “the wreckage that the colonizer had made of the Black man by ripping him away from his dreams was sanctioned in this worldwide spectacle” (p. 130). As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o would say, “it is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues” (cited by Alvares, 2012, p. 142).

Ken also decries the canker of corruption, resents his brother’s alienation, and reproves the assimilationist reflexes of a very determined suitor. Equally implicated in this neocolonial disarray are overzealous African teachers bent on outdoing their colonial masters in acts of sadism and misguided verve of depriving African school children of the linguistic human right to their mother tongues. The insidious infiltration of Western standards into African knowledge and value systems even after independence seems to suggest that Africa has lost the war on the cultural front. Describing Africa as an immense prison

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10 “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” (“The more things change, the more they remain the same”), pessimistic aphorism attributed to the 19<sup>th</sup> century French critic, Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr.

and madhouse, Ken Bugul, in her interview with Man (2007, p. 194), decries the bleak future of African peoples, because detached from their roots and past. They have ignored Lawino's exhortation not to uproot the pumpkin in the old homestead (p'Bitek, 1966).

Ken Bugul's denunciation of neocolonialism and the entrenchment of Western norms resonates with Zeiny's perspective on coloniality (2019, p. 2):

colonialism is no longer identified with the political, economic, and territorial conquest and occupation; it has morphed into invisible patterns of power relations and wormed its way through a delicate deviation of marginalizing the non-Western authors, thinkers, concepts, and theories. This is "coloniality" which refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, inter-subjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration.

In order to free Africa from the neocolonial trap, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 232) proposes the

decolonial option which is a long-standing and long-term liberatory process ranged against coloniality, which denied African humanity. It embraces dewesternization and envisages a pluriversal world in which Africa has a dignified space. Within decoloniality, development is understood as a graduation from coloniality into liberation, and from 'objecthood' into 'subjecthood'. At the power level, development is defined as a triumph over an unsustainable Euro-American centric global status quo in place since the fifteenth century.

The primary resource used by Ken in her counter-offensive is the slumbering but never forgotten attachment to her mother, the baobab, and a certain sense of self.

### **Nativism from a feminist perspective**

Ken's return to maternized Africa is predicated on her quest for the recuperation of a lost childhood and rustic life that had flown away one afternoon, the first time she ever saw a white man (p. 158). In effect, nativism is palpably and strategically constructed by Ken around the mother, the baobab, perceived aboriginal village life, and the land to counter colonialism and westernization, viewed as both alienating and debilitating. From the substratal position of cherished proximity to the mother and the baobab, she nostalgically recalls her origins and Africa: "Over there (in the village)" (p. 121, p. 125), "Ah, the village, down there how pure life was!" (p. 102), "Ah, Africa, despite everything you resist" (p. 103), and "Couldn't we reunite ourselves and emerge... (like) the sun down there" (p. 85).

For Coker (2015, p. 15), nativism, from a broad postcolonial perspective, encompasses liberation movements such as Negritude, Pan-Africanism, and Negrisimo all of which attempt to revive and rejuvenate the past in order to constitute a unifying force guided by the ultimate aim of achieving independence from imperial forces. To the extent that Ken builds her nativism around the mother and the baobab, gives agency to the speaking postcolonial female subject, and never loses sight of the place of the Black woman in the polity, it can be argued that *The abandoned baobab* offers a feminist revision of Negritude. This is all the more so as Negritude is often perceived by critics as a male-dominated movement interested, at best, in the idealization of women but with little or no attention paid to real-life women-centered issues and holistic development. Davies (1994, p. 12) affirms: "The feminine was deployed at the symbolic level, as in 'Mother Africa'... and women functioned as primary workers for a number of nationalist struggles but ended

up not being empowered political figures or equal partners.”

Given her harshly lived psycho-social malaise and the robust foundation of her feminist training laid by Laure, Ken intimately appreciates the problems of African women. Thanks to her new sensitivity, she becomes aware, for example, of the interlocking influence of diverse vectors of oppression (sexism, classism, imperialism, neocolonialism, traditional patriarchy) on her life and that of other women. As James argues, African male and female writers may have the same concern of articulating and denouncing the poverty, corruption, and destructive practices that have impeded development in Africa (1990, pp. 3-4). “However,” James stresses, “women writers appear to treat more intimately the themes of love and death, transcendence and the struggle to rise above the traditional limitations responsible for women’s underdevelopment and oppression” (1990, p. 4). The false dichotomy between nationalism and women-centered consciousness is also deflated by Reagon (1982, p. 81): “In most societies, it is from women that you get the most consistent concept of nationhood of any people. We are at the base of our identities, nationalists.”

Among its many possible interpretations, the “mad baobab” (p. 158 and also the title of the French original) refers to the waywardness of the protagonist and the dysfunction of the African nation-state. If, contrary to the versions in German, Dutch, and Spanish where the qualifier “mad” is maintained in the titles, the English translation rather uses the epithet “abandoned,” it serves to draw attention to the abandonment of the Senegalese vision/ideal of cohesion, guided by the national motto, “One people, one goal, one faith.”<sup>11</sup> It also underscores the fatal rejection by Ken and Africa of their cultural roots, because fixated on exogenous models of skewed development at the expense of strategic nativism, premised on African-oriented traditions and endogenous vision.

Ken seems to suggest that post-independence African

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<sup>11</sup> In French, “Un peuple, un but, une foi.”

leaders have failed because they never based the national developmental agenda on life-giving ancestral wisdom, represented by the baobab. The earlier contention by Morrison (1984, p. 341) and Mudimbe-Boyi (1993, p. 212) on the need for roots, ancestors, and self-discovery assumes then its full significance. Equally pertinent is the moral of the West African proverb (Lehideux-Vernimmen, 2019, p. 5) on the necessity of deepening African roots in order to ensure robust development. The death of the revered tree notwithstanding, there is the possibility of redemption through the resuscitation of the baobab, the postcolonial baobab.

### Paradox

Contradictions and cases of paradox abound in *The abandoned baobab*. Perhaps, the most glaring of these is Ken's acceptance of Gauls as her ancestors, and this, over a long period stretching from her French colonial schooling at age five to her stay in Belgium in her twenties. Her absorption of this myth is all the more difficult to understand given her infatuation for a Caucasian teacher at age fourteen, her own seduction by a French teacher in the high school, her voracious reading in Senegal as a polymath, the independence of Senegal from French colonial rule as well as her pre-departure and arrival formalities. Further, in Belgium, she surprises her Western audience with the encyclopedic breadth of her knowledge. And yet, these events and facts never suggest to her that she is "different" from Westerners/colonialists and that she is Senegalese. It takes her hosts' misrecognition and her image reflected by the glass of a Brussels shop to convince her that she is a stranger and a non-Caucasian: "The front of a shop window of mirrored glass reflected my face. I couldn't believe my eyes. That face couldn't belong to me, I quickly told myself: my eyes were bulging, my skin was shiny and black, the face terrifying. I almost choked; that look there was my face" (p. 37). And again,

How could this face belong to me? I understood why the saleswoman had said she couldn't help me. Yes, I was a Black, a Black woman, a foreigner. I touched my chin, my cheek, to better help me realize that this was my color. *Yes, I was a foreigner, a stranger, and this was the first time I realized it*<sup>12</sup>...I was in such a state of despair I was choking (p. 38).

There are, for this fundamental mystery, three possible interconnected explanations. First is Ken's willful and naive predisposition, even in the face of the contrary, to believe that she shares a common ancestry with the French, in particular, and Caucasians, in general. Second is the depth of her assimilation and internalized oppression, clutched as her instincts are with the shackles of the West (p. 140). She confesses, "I had a family without any structure...above all else, colonialism had created the distortion of the spirit necessary to enslave a race of people. Leaving them no frame of reference" (p. 71). Third, a profound Romantic dissatisfaction with reality that prompts a quest for the impossible. The unacceptable reality, for her, is blackness and the impossible obsession, whiteness, in the contact zone defined by Pratt (1992, p. 4) as the sociopolitical site where "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today."

Not unlike Fanon's deracinated subjects portrayed in *Black skin, white Masks* (2008) who morbidly and obsessively seek identification with the imperial Othering Center and elusive whiteness, Ken, after "discovering" that she is black, ferociously rejects her blackness in a Kafkaesque scene: "I was tearing at my skin until it bled. Its blackness was smothering me. Oh God, the mother was so far away!" (p. 96). With the same frenetic zeal, she confesses, while gripping the body of Laure, her Italian

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<sup>12</sup> My emphasis.

friend with whom she has an ambiguous complex relationship (with maternal, sororal, lesbian, and pedagogical undertones): “I was clinging to her and asking her to rip my skin off; I didn’t want to have black skin any longer” (p. 96). This plea to a friend possessing the hankered after pigmentation and who seems to operate simultaneously as a mother, big rich sister, lover, teacher, and a role model not only invests Laure with unmistakable divine and reproductive powers over the postulant but also transfers proprietary rights over Ken to her. Ken has thus willingly ceded her dignity and individuality to the proud embodiment of the coveted pigmentation and representative of the Caucasian race.

According to Ken, “the arrival of the whites had undermined sacred foundations, had dismembered them, in order to turn the colonized into an anguished people forever more” (p. 85). One of these sacred foundations is the protagonist’s own mythified pedigree in “Ken’s prehistory”. If this myth is crafted to serve as a bulwark against another myth, that of Gallic ancestry, then its apparent failure to insulate Ken from the deleterious effects of colonial paternalism deepens the chasm between the two parts of the novel as there is limited deterministic impact on Ken’s alienation in the second part of the work. The “structural inefficacy” of the myth may well demonstrate the extent of the colonial ferocity in deracinating the colonized. However, if the myth is conceived by Ken Bugul as a constant mnemonic presence to remind Ken and other colonized subjects of their pedigree in order to forestall or reduce the rigor of future alienation, then “Ken’s prehistory” could either be pre-positioned, as it is in the work, or post-positioned.

The polysemic epigraph in the French original, “Les êtres écrasés se remémorent...” (“The vanquished ones recollect their lives”), may at once refer to the plethora of victims, including Ken, crushed by colonialism/westernization, the disintegration of Ken into fragments, the shattering of Ken’s dreams, and even the imperial destruction of her overlapping and contingent

selves. In all these cases, the stress is on the metonymic and the transpersonal.

Significantly, Ken's individualism and scorn for help from the mother's rival as well as the fact of behaving as and feeling like an orphan in the father's polygamous household are at variance with communal living in Senegal. Her possessive personalization of the mother may reflect the dictum, "Ours is ours, but mine is mine" (Achebe, 1987, p. 29). However, as stressed by Serigne Mor Mbaye, a Senegalese sociologist, traditional community-focused Senegalese society abhors such exclusivist "fusional relationships" or bonding between mother and child (Mahou, 2012, p. 51).

Mention can also be made of Ken's mood swings, contingency of choices, and contradictory desires (for example, appetite for a Caucasian lover, Louis, and yet abortion of the resultant pregnancy). However, these can largely be ascribed to her ceaseless bouts of anxiety consequent upon the rupture of the maternal bond. Additionally, writing an autofiction in French, even with the diglossic presence of Wolof, falls within the ambit of imperialism, as it strengthens metropolitan French culture at the expense of autochthonous Senegalese traditions.

Neither is the iconic baobab completely guiltless. For, it is under a denuded baobab that a two-year-old girl<sup>13</sup>, unattended to by the mother, innocently pushes an ill-fated but alluring foreign amber (symbol of external influence) into her ears, thereby imbibing tragic exogenous indoctrination with dire consequences for her growth and future identity formation. Apart from being a witness at Ken's first day in the French school and its general indifference to Ken's self-absorption of foreign culture, it is also accused by Ken of complicity in her abandonment by the mother on the fateful day of the break of paradisiac harmony. It is equally important to note that trees, including the revered ones, draw their vitality, as Gélis (1984, p. 68) argues, not from the world of the living but from the

<sup>13</sup> While the two-year-old old is presented as the child of a primiparous mother in "Ken's prehistory" (p. 17), in "Ken's history", she is rather the last child of a multiparous mother (p. 21).

chthonian sphere, the world of the dead, which in this context could be extended to cover colonial domination.

Further, for all her panegyricized qualities, Ken's mother comes across neither as a precisian nor as the paragon of "Africanism." She abandons her matrimonial home and feeble husband without any clear divorce and allows her fifteen-year old granddaughter to usurp the place of Ken in her affection. Her willful acceptance of colonial rule and the new Western (b)order/Other is manifest in her facilitation of Ken's formal education in the French school (both primary and secondary) and her advice to Ken on how to comport herself once in Belgium. As a pragmatist, she undertakes her travels by train, the French colonial railway, whose construction is only made possible through forced labor, collective pain of Africans, and decimation of natives.

As a rule, these limitations and paradoxes point to a certain postcolonial complicity, that is, facilitation of oppression and colonial presence by some of the main actors in the narrative. Both Terdiman (1985, p. 185) and Ashcroft (2001, p. 19) stress the impossibility of keeping the anti-hegemonic discourse/practice completely free of the hegemonic discourse/practice being contested. In the postcolonial context of the novel, the myth, the baobab, and the mother provide much needed security and sense of identity for individual and communitarian growth. Nonetheless, they cannot offer Ken, the postcolonial subject, and the postcolony absolute protection from external influences. The mirage of maintaining a singular hermetic identity, resuscitating an inviolable aboriginal past, and recuperating unsullied African practices does not, however, mean that Africa's development should be totally Western-oriented. Worthy of note in this respect is the apt observation of Hogarth (2010, p. 109) that Ken's configuration of the mother as Mother Africa is salutary and crucial as the "lack of a grand narrative or ideology of origins inspires a fear of nothingness in a child who finds it difficult to think without some basic reference points." As

a global text, *The abandoned baobab*, is, of necessity, hybrid, even as it celebrates traditional African values. Far from being a normative text, Ken's autofiction has rather sympathetically and artistically drawn attention to the impossibility of impermeable Manichean identities and demonstrated the illusion of the reign of absolute axiological codes of conduct.

### Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to examine the manner in which myths, the baobab, and the mother shed light on the polemical and paradoxical character of Ken Bugul's *The abandoned baobab*. Functioning as a lexical network of primacy, they drive the action, counter-discursive impulse, and postcolonial imbrication discernible in this prototypal specimen of African postcolonial feminist autofiction. By their primordial status as pillars of protection, they serve as evaluative tools to appraise Ken's quest in this semi-autobiography. At the end of her crucible, Ken vitally learns that while origins, ancestors, personalized ecology, and mother-centered values do not completely insulate the postcolonial subject and community from foreign influence, it is still in the interest of such subjects to remember and leverage these primordial elements as foundational stones for sustainable personal and national development.

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