



ENTREVISTA

IN THE LIGHT OF FRANCO-NIGERIAN LITERATURE: A CONVERSATION WITH RAMONU SANUSI, AUTHOR OF *UN NÈGRE A VIOLÉ UNE BLONDE À DALLAS*(2016)

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Q. Who is Ramonu Sanusi ?

A. Ramonu Sanusi is first and foremost a Nigerian who has known a nomadic liferight from childhood. What I mean by this is that I had the opportunity to live and traverse many frontiers even though borders were not broken or raped then as they are today. I had my primary and secondary education in Togo, a tiny country in West Africa. I grew up in Togo during the draconian years of Etienne Eyadema who was later known as Gnassingbe Eyadema. After my secondary education in Togo in 1982, I moved to Nigeria for my higher education. I attended Adeyemi College of Education where I had my BA Ed French degree with a First Class honours in 1992. I was the overall best graduating student. I later went to the University of Ibadan where I got my MA degree in French in 1994. After working for a while in the protocol section at the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, I got a scholarship to do my doctoral research at the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris III in France. I was in France when I got another scholarship to start my PhD at the University of Oregon, Eugene in the United States of America. I equally had the opportunity to teach in that University before moving to George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia still in the United States of America for a couple of years. From the United



States of America, I moved to Canada before returning to Nigeria in June 2009 to take up a teaching appointment in the Department of European Studies, University of Ibadan where I teach African and Caribbean literatures and cultures.

Q. You are a writer and scholar, how do you combine both vocations?

A. I have to be honest with you that some of us who are creative writers and still engage in research are very fortunate. To be a creative writer has to do with talent. It does not require you having a PhD or being a Professor. I quite remember when I was in the United States and I started writing, one day one of my Professors called me into his office and asked me how do I manage to write novels. He told me that he is a Professor and yet he cannot write a novel. I told him in a laughing mood that Sembene Ousmane did not even finish his primary school and yet, he was one of the finest writers the African continent has produced. I have a passion for academia. When I first got to Paris, I still had a contact with my friend and brother Pius Adesanmi who was then a PhD student at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. He told me then that literature in North America is about theories and that I should focus my time while in Sorbonne to read thinkers like Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Said, Bhabha, Mudinbe, Mbembe, Antonio Gramsci, among others. Honestly, his advice helped me a lot and that is why I find it a lot easier to combine creative writing with research work. One has to be careful though, so that when you engage in creative writing, you don't end up writing an article or a critical piece.

Q. The writer-scholar phenomenon is rampant among literary writers, what is the perceived relationship between literary writing and scholarship?

A. Hardly can you find a writer who has not read voraciously. Creative writers are very much influenced by a lot of things they read and that is why at time



you find the hybrid nature of their writings. It is at time difficult to separate literary writing and scholarship because writers always want to educate people. Writers read about almost everything due to be more effective. When you take Ahmadou Kourouma's **Quand on refuse on dit non** for instance, you realize that Fanta in the novel plays the role of a teacher. She is the one teaching Brahima, history, geography of Cote d'Ivoire, among others. In my novel, **Un nègre a violéune blonde à Dallas**, you will see the same trend. Writers have to be versatile and that is why they often establish a relationship between literary writing and scholarship.

Q. Writer-Scholar hyphenation started with first generation of African writers such as Chinue Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J-P Clark and others who wrote much about Africa; it now appears to be predominant among contemporary African migrant writers, does it have to do with overcoming nostalgia?

A. Writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J-P Clark, among others who you are referring to had their formative years both at home and abroad as you know. The first writers read Western writers besides being taught by them. All their creativity has foreign touch when it comes to the style and even inspiration. They simply adapt their themes to their *milieu*. There is no doubt that writer-scholar hyphenation started with them. Don't forget that some of them were African migrant writers. Remember that Wole Soyinka wrote **The lion and the Jewel** when he was at University of Leeds. It certainly has to do with overcoming nostalgia that contemporary African writers are engaged in this habit. But, it dates back to the generation of Soyinka. I remember too quite well that Camara Laye was suffering from nostalgia when he wrote his canonical book, **L'Enfant noir**, translated in English as **The African Child**. A lot of contemporary writers are nowadays migrant writers.



Q. Does it equally explain why your writing career debuted in the US with *Mama Tutu et crisnègres* which was eventually published in 2003, but in Ibadan, Nigeria?

A. The answer is yes. I must confess that I was suffering from nostalgia and I started writing that novel. Again, I must be honest that I was given a scholarship of five years for my PhD and after three years I was done writing my thesis which I kept with me and I did not know what else to do. It was then that I started writing it and when I visited my friend Pius Adesanmi in Vancouver, I went with my manuscript which he read and liked it. Then, I was very close to Professor Irène d'Almeida and I gave her the manuscript which she read, corrected and encouraged me to publish. It was actually Pius Adesanmi who advised me to publish it in Nigeria. His argument was that a writer has to be known in his country. I yielded to his advice. Getting to Nigeria, my friend and brother Tunde Ayeleru took me to Bounty Press which first published **Mama Tutu et crisnègres** in 2003. I later re-issued with Graduke Publishers in 2010.

Q. *Mama Tutu* and *The Spirit Child* appear an adventure into Yoruba mythology, does Mama Tutu as a character has any resemblance with your personality? What informed the inspiration of your works: socio-cultural reality or factographics?

A. You are very right, **Mama Tutu and The Spirit Child** which was first published by Spectrum Books was also re-issued with Graduke Publishers. Both books are definitely an adventure into the Yoruba mythology. I leaned on Yoruba wisdom to draw all the materials which I needed to write those pieces. You must not forget that people are very much influenced by their cultures. Writers are human beings who live among their people and feel their culture. They simple serve as spokespersons or correctors of the societal ills. Socio-cultural reality mostly informs



my inspiration. The character in **Mama Tutu** has nothing to do with my personality. I simply turned to life in the village, the way it is lived and stories that grandmothers tell their children and I created my novel.

Q. While *Mama Tutu* and *The Spirit Child* represent the African world-view, *Le Bistouri des larmes*, first published in 2005, truly projects the malaise of African postcoloniality, yet all the texts appear to use women as springboard. Does it end you the appellation of “feminist”?

A. It is true that **Mama Tutu** and **The Spirit Child** represent the African world-view because of their leaning on African traditional values and mysteries ubiquitous in our African societies. **Le Bistouri des larmes** also reflects African world-view in a colonial and post-colonial era with the only exception that it decries the malaise of the dictatorship days in Nigeria under the military rule. For whatever reason I do not know, women always find a place in my heart. I lost my father very young and my mother struggled to raise the six children she had but unfortunately, she died along the way. This perhaps, has influenced my writings because my mother did almost everything for us to succeed in life. I don't have anything against you or people referring to me as a feminist.

Q. You were never persecuted like Soyinka, Abani, Kourouma, Beti and other African writers, besides *Le Bistouri des larmes* was written when military coups and rules were no long rampant in Nigeria, why did you invest much fiction in your narrative while it is evident that your “Nigara” metaphorizes and mimics Nigeria as a country? Or is it to create an illusion of reality or ironic distance?

A. There is no writer who has never been persecuted especially when he/she takes up the pen to write about the political malaise ravaging his/her country.



Before I write a novel, I cook it in my mind for a couple of years. It was actually during Abacha draconian years that the novel has been haunting me. I was suffering in silence especially that most things that I talked about in **Le Bistouri des larmes** happened during Abacha's era. Except Chris Abani, Soyinka, Kourouma and Beti are of a different generation. They witnessed a lot in their life-time, starting from colonial era to present-day. They were persecuted and are still till-date. It is a sad situation that things, despite the struggle of these militant writers, have still not changed for better. My narrative in that novel actually mimics Nigeria as a country. Nobody has to be reminded that the country I am referring to is actually Nigeria right from the first lines of the novel.

Q. Back to *Mama Tutu*, the literary work takes a form of postmodern montage: hybrid, houses a prose and poetry. What informed such a marriage of genres?

A. Yes, I wanted the book that way. As a writer, one should have the liberty to break with the classical way of doing things. Actually, the boy Ade, who is the scribe wanted to be like his grandmother who he admires so much. After the latter died, he wanted to write. He found it difficult to dissociate his writing from that of his grandmother and that is why he did not hesitate to publish his poetry in the same book his grandmother's stories were published. It is a postmodern approach when it comes to the style and even the content, especially when you consider how hybridized the text is, housing both the prose and poetry and even the language and the diasporic nature of some of the poems.



Q. In *Septième Printemps/Seventh Springtime*, published by les Editions du Pangolin in Belgium, why did you engage in self-translation? In addition, this poetry collection represents the unheard cries of an exiled subject, are they your exilic experiences or those of others?

A. I decided to translate **Septième Printemps** into English so as to give it a wide readership. Besides, it is very much easier for me to translate the poetry collection than the novel. It takes a longer time to translate a novel than a poetry collection. The time that I will take to translate a novel is longer than the time I will need to write a novel. In fact the voices you are hearing in that poetry collection are multiple: that of the poet (me) and those of the numerous immigrants that I met mostly in clubs when I was in France, the United States of America and Canada. I listened to those immigrants and I even listened to their silences in the clubs at nights and when I get to my apartment, I start composing poems on my computer. I represent at that solitary moment, the voice of the voiceless. I reflect on their misadventures, their disillusion and their nostalgia.

Q. Your poetry collection is represented as “souvenir d’un vieux Nègre”, who is this old Negro? Is it the same old Negro whose story is now retold in your new novel, *Un Nègre a violé une Blonde à Dallas* which has just been published in 2016?

A. No, it is not the **souvenir d’un vieux Nègre**, that you find in the poetry collection that I transposed into “**Un Nègre a violé un blonde à Dallas.**” In this novel that you are referring to, the story is entirely different. The story is about a young Negro boy who found himself in an adventure that he never prepared himself for. His uncle Ali Baba forced him into what became a compulsory exile that turned him into a gangster in all the continents he found himself: Africa, Europe and America. You can now see that in that novel it is about a young Negro boy while in the poetry collection, it is about an old Negro man.



Q. In my private discussion with you in Bayreuth, Germany, you had wanted to write the novel in English, why did you change your view? Does it have to do with economic factors or audience?

A. You are very right! It is true that during our discussion in Bayreuth, I told you that I wanted to write the novel in English but along the line I changed my mind. As a polyglot, I am always confronted with what language should I use to write my creative work. Most of my creative works are written in French language with the exception of **The Spirit Child** which was written in English. It is worthy of note that I sold fourteen thousand copies of **The Spirit Child** to Yaba College of Technology alone. You know, Nigeria being an English speaking country with a huge population. If you think along that line, you might be tempted as a writer to write in English and make more money. I did not want to be lost in that river of thought.

Q. Your *Un Nègre a violéune blonde à Dallas* can be said to be truly a literary work that deals with the question of emigration that reflects three continents of old triangular trade: America, Europe and Africa; are your characters, the Nigerian Ajanaku and the American Jennifer Lebronsky representational figures?

A. You are correct! Just like I said, Ajanaku, the protagonist of **Un Nègre a violéune blonde à Dallas**, as destiny will have it journeyed into different continents: from Africa to Europe, and from Europe to America. Well, a triangular trip as you observed but fortunately enough for him, he made a 'return to his native land' after his adventure/misadventure.



Q. In September 2015, Julien Rochedy tweeted that a German girl was raped by an African in a Park and it is equally reported that 37.000 white women are raped by black men in the US; is your fiction informed by a specific event and why the choice of Dallas?

A. If you follow closely what has been happening recently in the US, you will but agree with me that Blacks are still victims. Many young Blacks were fatally shot dead in America for crimes they did not commit. Ajanaku (Jean-Claude Paccino) is simply a victim. He never raped Jennifer Lebronsky as the title of the novel suggests. What I wrote is simply the mirror of current happenings in American. Racism, take it or leave it is still there. Nothing has changed.

Q. Though Ajanaku never raped really Jennifer, “Violé” [Raped] appears to be the focal point of your title *Un Nègre....*, If subjected to postcolonial discourse, does it have any figurative connotation, knowing the traumatic history of “Us” and “Them” or Black and White?

A. I do not agree that [Rape] is the focal point on my novel, **Un nègre a violé une blonde à Dallas**. I created a protagonist who first was a victim in the hands of his uncle who treated him like a non-being. His uncle was actually the one who threw him into the streets and he (Ajanaku) later became a dangerous gangster who found himself in diaspora as an armed robber. Luckily for him, he was never caught in Lagos, Paris, New York, Las Vegas or Dallas before returning to Boripe, his native land as a rich man through his robbery. The novel can be subjected into postcolonial discourse in many aspects: postcolonial African malaise, cultural and identity issues, hybridized language, minority maneuver as Homi Bhabha calls it, diasporic issues and White / Black issues, among others are elements of reflections in the novel.



Q. You had the plan of writing this novel, *Un nègre a violé une blonde à Dallas* in English as you whispered to me while we were in Bayreuth, Germany in 2015, are you planning its English version soonest?

A. It is true that I initially had a plan to write **Un nègre a violéune blonde à Dallas** in English but along the line pressure was so much on me from friends, majority of them from UFTAN (University French Teachers Association of Nigeria), who persuaded me to come out with another novel. They told me how much they enjoyed and still are enjoying **Le Bistouri des larmes**. I succumbed to their request and I dropped my initial idea of writing the novel in English. A scholar-friend (Joel Akinwumi) who translated the only novel I wrote in English – **The Spirit Child** – into French, has decided to translate **Un nègre a violéune blonde à Dallas** into English. I am sure he will be done with it in due course so that the novel can have a wide readership. Not only this, DrMufutau Tijani of the Ahmadou Bello University, Zaria is currently translating **Le Bistouri des larmes** into English. I am glad to know that my creative works are enjoying the attention of academia.

Q. Finally, reading culture is in its decline as experts have decried in Africa, how do we encourage readership of African literary works?

A. It is true reading culture is declining but one also has to recognize the fact that even prior to the advent of various electronic gadgets that are ubiquitous in the streets of Nigeria today, we did not have good reading culture in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole. I would like to lean on my late friend Mongo Beti, to say that in Africa, people prefer to use their money to buy food and not books because of poverty. But today, as I said elsewhere, people prefer to use their money to buy expensive phones: Nokia phones, iPad, BlackBerry, iPod, among others and not books. When you visit university campuses in Nigeria for instance, you see young boys and girls holding very expensive phones and busy chatting, messaging, talking



all day-long, all night-long on these gadgets. They don't have time for books. Even in the classrooms, you will be hearing all sorts of ring-tones that distract you as a teacher from all serious academic affairs. That is sadly the situation in which we find ourselves. I hope that reading culture does not die entirely in the world because even in the developed countries, the trend now is to listen to recorded books on tapes, CDs, external Memories, etc. while driving. When I was in America and Canada, this was in vogue but at the same time I have to admit that I have a great respect for North Americans. They read a lot despite the fact that gadgets are there to read for them. Government has to do something through their Ministry of Education so as to revive the dying reading culture in our schools.

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