

Lang Fafa DAMPHA

African Aliens



Ecrire l'Afrique
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L'Harmattan

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Écrire l'Afrique

Collection dirigée par Denis Pryen

Romans, récits, témoignages littéraires et sociologiques, cette collection reflète les multiples aspects du quotidien des Africains.

Dernières parutions

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Isabelle JOURDAN, *C'est comme ça, à Ouaga...*, 2012.

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By the same author

1. Nationalism and Reparation in West Africa,
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2. *Afrique subsaharienne : mémoire, histoire et réparation.*
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3. African Attitude, L'Harmattan, August 2013.

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One

Sitting at the bottom of a high mountain, looking up at some alpine flowers, Sainy was waiting. He had to reach the top of the mountain, for he needed the flowers as medicine for a beautiful woman at home who was feverishly ill. He grasped the wall, climbed smoothly, then suddenly lost his grip and was falling. He felt his legs flying, flailing and knocking against some hard object. During the course of this unpleasant descent he heard a distant female voice, appealing, yet authoritative: "We are starting our descent towards Orly International Airport; please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts securely. The temperature in the French capital is 16 degrees Celsius."

When he opened his eyes he was astonished to find most of the passengers staring in his direction. Had he called out during his fall off the mountain? Perhaps he had shrieked all the way down, his black skin reddened in embarrassment. He tightened his seat belt, put his hands over his ears and yawned in a long and exaggerated manner that he hoped suggested to his fellow passengers that he had called out because of pressure in his ears. As if he had triggered a switch, the plane did it again, another stomach-churning drop. It fell a long way rapidly and then struggled to level out, its engines making thunderous noises. Sainy imagined two engines had dropped off and the pilot was fighting to regain control with those that were left. He was a first-time flyer and could feel tension all down his arms to his finger tips, which were now locked around the armrests, pulling them upwards like joysticks to help the pilot keep the plane in the air. He heard a voice calling the crew to prepare for landing, and a little later the wheels of the Brussels Airlines jumbo banged down hard onto the tarmac runway. The engines screamed with reverse thrust, and the ground flashed past the window at horrifying speed. Some of the passengers clapped as though the pilot had pulled off a miracle. Sainy was sure he had just survived one of the world's great near-miss aviation disasters. Knowing how much he had personally helped by pulling upwards on those armrests, he blushed with satisfied pride. Soon the plane's speed diminished to a comfortable trundle, and a few minutes later it eased to a halt amongst a row of big planes from all over the world. What an international world Sainy had just become part of. He was now somebody who had travelled. Life would never be the same again.

"We hope you have enjoyed travelling with us; we thank you for choosing us and hope to see you again on board Brussels Airlines..." said the voice.

The stewards opened the doors, and hundreds of passengers of all races and cultures and shapes surged through to safety, dragging enormous volumes of cabin baggage with them to the waiting coach. A tall angular man in garments as yellow as a golden guinea stepped out of the aircraft and quickened his pace to match the urgency of the other passengers who were hastening past him faster than when they got onto the plane at Banjul International. This was Europe. If you did not run here you slipped back. Sainy was big and fit and confident. He knew he could run with the best of them. He braced his shoulders, lifted his head high and strode boldly forward into his future. On his head he sported a red cap embroidered on the front with a parrot, and the word 'Gambia.' It proclaimed his identity in this new world.

How different Europe smelled, and how drab and soggy it looked outside the windows. He shivered a slightly shuddering shiver that started in his bones and vibrated to the curves of his broad shoulders. Yet it was now the month of March, when Europe was almost out of its sombre season and the weather was only nippy. There was a raw dampness in the air he had never before encountered, not even during the great thunderstorms from the sea at the beginning of the West African rainy season.

He had a relatively easy time at Immigration and now stood near the moving baggage conveyor, waiting to spot his bag with its *Nike* trademark. A number of bags went around many times without his bag showing up. He chewed a small fingernail while considering the implications of this. Then more and more of the other passengers from his flight joined the waiting throng and his anxiety subsided. The plane had been bigger than ten mini-buses going up-country, so the crew must still be hauling the bags out of the hold.

What a baggage hall: it was vast and shining. There were hundreds of people waiting with trolleys, and hundreds more milling about like ants when a stone is turned over, all transporting and restructuring their belongings and home. Then, there it was, his own precious bag with the strong ju-ju *Nike* name that had protected it all the way from the Gambia. He grabbed it with joy, stood upright, and looked around. Momentarily the cautious part of him was gripped by 'what-next' bewilderment, and the home-loving part of him was reluctant to leave the plane's proximity, a psychological umbilical cord, it was going back to the Gambia... But then his enthusiasm and the prospects lying ahead took charge, and stepping smartly forward he ordered his doubts to follow with their eyes wide open. When he spotted a light blue flag with a ring of golden stars his heart felt proud. Europe!

A sign said 'Taxis.' He moved towards the exit, his eyes sweeping around him like a hunter menaced by forest-devils, for he had been

warned of the dangers in foreign airports. Then, there before him were the great glass automatic doors, and he walked through to the outside. Fame and fortune were surely waiting for him here on this great sub-continent of golden stars, this land of opportunity for African youth, this dreamland of manifest destiny where the streets were paved with gold and the libraries full of books.

A taxi driver leapt out of a silver Mercedes and threw open the boot for the bag, and held open the passenger door for Sainy. Impressed by this courtesy, Sainy stepped in, sinking a full metre into the dark velvet plushness of the interior. The Mercedes slid easily out into the traffic, accelerating, and when Sainy was next able to look out of the smoked glass windows he found they were rushing towards the city of Paris. He recalled moments on the Banjul-Serekunda highway, walking on foot, when company directors and wealthy businessmen had driven past him. They were curiosities to him then, part of another world. Now he himself was inside one of these sumptuous symbols of status, and here he was speeding into the city just like the owner of a very big Lebanese supermarket. In the side pocket on his *Nike* bag, dumped in the boot of the taxi, slept a precious note given to him by his uncle for a certain Pa Janneh. He had memorised Janneh's address, along with the verbal instructions his uncle had given him on their way to the airport on the Coastal Road, and had further repeated it while checking in.

"Keep this note carefully. It contains my friend's address and telephone number. He's a very good friend of mine, and a good man too. He will surely take care of you. Extend my warmest greetings to Janneh. But watch out for his wife. As you know, she does not have a good reputation here. They say she has adopted the white man's way of life."

The driver had a big face with sticking-out ears, and a long, bony nose that hung like a hovering eagle over a moustache the size of a small rat. He was a gentle, androgynous looking man with a short body.

Going past towering blocks of flats, Sainy's eyes followed the buildings upwards, like a spectator at an air show. The driver had been monitoring him since their departure from the airport, but been silent until now. He watched Sainy bending his head to see these towering structures and, in a gentle voice, asked.

"*Ça va?*"

"*Ça va bien, merci,*" replied Sainy.

"You no speak *français?*" the driver asked.

"*Tu viens d'où?*"

"What? Do?"

"You no speak no French?"

"Sorry Sir, not very well."

"You no well?"

"I mean I can't speak French properly."

"Waya you come from?"

"I'm a Gambian."

"Waya Gambian is?"

"The name of the country is the Gambia, not Gambian."

"Yes me know."

"The Gambia is on the west coast of Africa, surrounded by Senegal except at the mouth of the river that flows into the Atlantic Ocean."

"Oh yes, me see dzat small country like a snake."

"Not like a snake; it is rather like a tongue. It's the tongue of Africa."

"Wat tongue is?" the driver asked.

"Your tongue is in your mouth; you can neither talk nor eat without it," said Sainy pushing out his tongue for the driver to see.

"Gambia is tongue! *Comment* - how?"

"That's just a simile, my friend!"

They kept talking like that, while Sainy's eyes continued their reconnaissance, closing and opening, blinking, rolling, and trying to figure out everything they drove past. After a moment of silence, the driver, with a superior manner, continued his inquisition, smiling every time he glanced at Sainy in the mirror. Upset by the driver's attitude, Sainy prayed for nature to keep the creature's mouth shut, but nature was not listening. The driver continued.

"Me is you fren?"

"Yes, you're my friend."

"How many people are dzeya in Gambia?"

"You say 'population'."

"How many population are dzeya?"

"No, not how many population? You should say, 'What is the population?'"

"Yes me know. Dze population people live in house?"

"This time not 'population people,' but the people..."

"*Ooh la la!*"

Sainy laughed. The driver pretended to be mortified but continued: "You haf televisiyon, road, bank and car?"

"Yes, yes, yes."

"You haf monkey in Gambie?"

"What monkey thing are you talking about?" Sainy asked a little crossly.

The driver laughed saying “No, no, pardon. Me joke only.”

Sainy did not reply.

“You marry many *femmes*?” The driver continued.

“What is *fam*?”

The driver took his hands off the steering wheel, folded all the fingers of each hand into fists with the tips of his thumbs peeping out, and put these fists on his chest. Sainy laughed, feeling easier now the driver had to resort to sign language, and temporarily forgetting he was in a car hurtling along the busy highway at 130 kilometres an hour with no hands on the wheel.

“Oh! I see wives. Some people have two, three, four and even five wives, but the maximum Islam allows is four.”

“Wat bout you fada?”

“My father has one wife, but my uncle has three.”

The driver looked suitably impressed, as though it was a proper number, but then burst out laughing.

“Oh African, why you uncle marry tree wives?”

“I don’t know,” Sainy said, irked.

“And you marry?”

“No I’m not. And you, you’re married?”

“You uncle wife fight sometime?” The driver ignored his question.

“No, they have never fought in my presence. Why do you ask me all these questions?”

“Because you me fren; you tok me is you fren.”

He reached into his shirt pocket and gave Sainy a visiting card giving his name as François Dumond, his address and telephone number.

“Call me, me fren, *d’accord*?”

“Okay,” Sainy said, deciding to live with the driver’s familiarity.

“You have gay people in Africa?” the driver asked.

Sainy did not know the word ‘gay,’ but he gave a guarded, “Oh yes,” and carefully slid the small card into his pocket.

The taxi pulled up before No. 7 Rue Myhra. Buoyant at his survival skills in getting so far, Sainy paid the driver and pulled himself out of the depths of the taxi.

“No forget, you telephone mi one day; good for you. *D’accord!*”

Sainy nodded with a cheerful smile. The driver winked, cast wistful eyes at him, waved and pulled away.

The street was full of coloured people and whites, though none of these whites were like the German and Scandinavian tourists Sainy used to see in Banjul and Bakau. He stood gawking at a scene on the other side of the street until he locked eyes with a man standing before him, selling bangles and chains, saying “*Camarade, l’or pure* –

Comrade, pure gold.” He tried to dodge the man, but he caught him by the wrist and held him, insisting that he should buy something – “*C’est bon pour toi* – it’s good for you.”

“I have no money,” pleaded Sainy.

“You got how much?” the man spoke a little English.

This was familiar territory to Sainy. He was well acquainted with the merchants at Banjul’s Albert market and their direct pressure salesmanship. Once in Dakar at Marché Sandaga, Wolof merchants cornered and beat him calling him *con gambien* – stupid Gambian, just because he had no money to buy their wares. Fearing something like that happening again, he slipped the man’s grasp and moved on.

Three people, one black, the other two both white, but one not as white as the other, lay on the pavement next to No. 7, with large bottles containing ruby liquid standing near them. The bottles stretched their long necks upwards like hooting swans calling. Sainy had the impression that they had a message for him, though it was one he did not yet understand. He stared at them for long seconds. Seeing a black man passing, he walked towards him and asked if he knew Pa Janneh. The man nodded eagerly, smiled a knowing smile, pointed to No. 7 and hurried on. Sainy entered No. 7. A swarm of children were playing and jumping around and screaming. Most were black, though some were shades of white like the third man of the group with bottles. The minute they noticed his presence they stopped and rushed towards him, demanding in one voice: “*Monsieur, vous n’avez pas un euro* – Sir, do you have one euro?” Sainy did not understand what they said. He shook his head and waited, watching the children, expecting intelligent questions to follow. But they simply returned to their yelling and wrestling. He followed them and tried again, asking in Mandinka if they knew Pa Janneh. One girl, an adolescent sitting a few metres away understood. She bellowed, “*C’est mon père, il est au café* – He is my father, he is at the café.”

“Where is your mother?” Sainy asked again in Mandinka.

“*Elle est partie à Barbès* - She’s gone to Barbès,” the girl replied, in the same loud voice.

Sainy decided to wait for Janneh. He went outside, stood on the pavement, then started to pace up and down. Before long he saw a black woman trudging towards him, struggling with a heavy bag that bore the name *Petit Prix*. She was short, wore flip-flops on her feet, and was dressed like a typical Gambian woman going to Serekunda market for ingredients for the day’s recipe. Only one thing about her looked out of place; her complexion. It was unnatural and spotty, with irregular patches of light and dark. As she walked past Sainy, she threw him a fleeting look that clearly appraised everything she needed

to know in one glance. His mind told him something, so he followed her. Hearing his footsteps behind her, she stopped and scowled at him.

African women in Paris were used to turning and barking at men, especially North and Sub-Saharan Africans.

“Why are you following me?” she yelled at the newcomer in broken French.

Sainy almost took to his heels. He had never expected such behaviour. An African woman hollering at an African man. “Is the order of things upside-down here?” he wondered.

“*Sallamaleku*,” he greeted.

“What do you want?” she shouted again in loud, broken French. It was obvious that she preferred to be greeted in French.

“I’ve just arrived from the Gambia; my uncle has directed me to Pa Janneh,” Sainy said in Mandinka, his voice almost trembling.

“Janneh has no house here. He lives his life in the café, *Café du Coin*.” And she continued on her way.

Sainy was flabbergasted. He stood watching the woman’s back receding. Then, a few steps further she hesitated, turned back slightly, and asked: “Are you a Mandinka?”

“Yes, Madame,” Sainy answered with a little more hope.

“What is your name?”

“Sainy Kanteh.”

“*Bien*. You have the same surname as my mother, so you are my maternal uncle,” she said and smiled.

Sainy also smiled gleefully and said ‘*Hun*.’

The woman invited her ‘uncle’ to enter the house. It was a two-room apartment. The furniture was old and battered. The sitting room was littered with crumpled papers. The only purchased item in the house appeared to be a cheap table. The walls were corner-to-corner peeling paintwork. In the kitchen a big metal bottle of butane gas sat on the floor beside the rust-speckled cooker. A rubber pipe connected them, its ends bound around with electrical tape and copper wire. The covers of the two sofas had unmended rips. There were no photographs of the man and woman, only school photos of children, most of whom resembled the woman, especially the four girls.

“This cannot be Europe,” Sainy told himself. “This is not France; this is not Paris, no no no! Even my house in the Gambia is far ahead of this one.”

In the 1970s, whilst at primary school, Sainy’s favourite quiz question had been: “What is the most beautiful city in the world?” The answer was always “Paris”...April in Paris, the River Seine, that unique, happy Parisian music, a place for lovers, Trocadero and the Eiffel Tower, the wonderful architecture, the great Haussman

boulevards, Place de la République, Place de la Bastille, Place de la Concorde... Yet here he was, in the 21st century, in Paris, the cultural epicentre, capital and metropolis of a great world empire, his dream come true. Yet, yet... something was very wrong. His own small house in the Gambia was cheap and simple, but it was princely compared to this slum he now stood in, in this country proud of its modernity and its architectural creativity.

“What has happened to French architecture?” he thought, confused, before moving some *Amina* magazines and sitting down cautiously on one of the sofas to await the arrival of his male host.

The woman did not offer him anything to eat or drink.

“No wonder my uncle warned me about this woman,” he thought.

She had a whole bagful of questions, all of them preconceived notions about poverty and misery in Africa. It was as if she were a white European.

Sainy was dumbfounded. Then he thought of the woman’s reputation in the Gambia.

And all the time her attention was directed to a soap opera on the TV called ‘*Les Feux de l’Amour*.’ About this she gave a running commentary, as if she were a professor of popular literature.

“Are you Pa Janneh’s wife?” Sainy dared to get in.

“He’ll come later; he’s gone to play *Cherecé*. That’s his food,” she said, her words expressing her disgust.

Sainy stayed seated, lost in his thoughts.

Two

Janneh sat at table in the *Café du Coin* sipping thick coffee, and absorbed in '*Tiercé Magazine*,' a paper that forecast the results of horse races. This was a daily routine for him. His house was only a stone's throw from the café where he had once won five thousand euros, and where, ever since, he came back every day hoping to win more.

He had been a tall, broad-shouldered man in his youth but now, although still lanky he was weak and unsteady and nearly fell with every step he took. From afar, when you saw him walking you were reminded of a wind-blown ship in wild seas. He had one of those big flat faces with a small nose. His large head seemed solid, like a cement block. His mind seemed to be sorting out all the world's madness whilst his big, brown eyes rolled in his head and captured every scene around him. The shoulder muscles he had had as a youth were stooped now with age and inaction, and gravity had given him what polite circles call a banker's belly. He hoped this would look good on him when his horses came in and he had the money to clothe it affluently, back in the Gambia. His long, though now-unsteady legs ended in long flat feet, always clad in slippers, so when people met him in winter they stared at him, startled. He always wore his traditional dress, his long white *boubou*. He was a pious Muslim, calling the name of God frequently and in a loud voice. He performed the five daily prayers regularly and on time, except when they coincided with his *Tiercé* gambling, when, out of respect he would defer them to quieter moments. He had faith in God, especially when it came to *Tiercé*, and was certain he would win again. He actually did win now and then, but not yet the thousands or millions he knew that one day just had to come. That day was just around the corner. Almost everyone in the Rue Myhra knew him. For the café workers he was a perfect customer.

At this very moment he was seated, waiting eagerly for the race to begin. When a race began, Janneh would talk to no one and would smoke cigarette upon cigarette. Everybody left him alone, up to the moment he saw the wrong bunch of horses take the lead and gallop vexatiously past the post. Today it was just the same. Out of the three horses he had bet on, only one galloped home in the first three. That did not matter much to him of course, this was a waiting game; it was only a matter of time. Tomorrow would be another day. He always looked forward to tomorrow. Not playing *Tiercé* was the worst thing that could happen to him. And horse racing was not easy to finance.

You have to have the cash to speculate, though, as he always said, considering the law of averages, it was more an investment than speculation. A critic might have suggested he found the game addictive. Janneh never saw it other than the job he did, and had to finance daily by hook or by crook. His greatest fear was missing a day, the very day when all the horses he would have backed might romp home 50 metres ahead of the competition.

Today he staggered home like a sleepwalker, entered the house and walked straight past Kaddy and Sainy sitting silently in the sitting room, hurrying directly to the bedroom to relax. Kaddy never gave her husband food, not even water, so he never said a word to her unless absolutely necessary. She rushed into the bedroom after him, standing before him, eyes wide and arms akimbo. He was flat on his back, staring at the ceiling, perhaps thinking of all the riches of this world, and how lovely those great stacks of grubby notes would look piled up before him on his kitchen table back in the Gambia. Sensing the woman's presence he watched her from the side of his eyes, but did not utter a word.

"Where have you been?" The woman already knew the answer to this question, but the conversation had to start somewhere.

"How dare you?" Janneh replied, in a cold yet formal tone, well aware of the danger of talking like this to his cousin-wife, for she had a devil behind her. The phrase '*assistante sociale*' tolled in his heart like a bell of doom.

His father had once told him, "A man, an African man, should never bow down before a woman, especially a woman to whose parents you have sent a dowry, a woman who sleeps behind you at night."

"Let it be, but I shall never be a hen-pecked husband," he thought.

The conversational formalities over, Kaddy was now well into her diatribal stride.

"I know where you've been: *Cherecé*. It will ruin me, because you have nothing and you keep stealing my money to throw after the horses. You think you'll be a millionaire but you are only making others rich and keeping us poor. I am going to see *Maariee* and you shall never set an eye on the children's allowance."

Marie François was a friend to almost all the women, and their husbands despised her. She was slightly taller than Kaddy and had blonde hair. The men called her *Setanemuso* – Devil woman. When she walked in the streets she waved and smiled at every Sub-Saharan or North African woman she saw. For Marie François, immigrant women needed her constant care and protection because their men were treacherous and inhuman. She had been married to one Philip

François, but their union only lasted three months. When Marie asked for divorce nothing was found against Philip except that he was a drunkard and even then, not addicted to alcohol. So a simple separation was pronounced and she was obliged to maintain her husband's name, François.

Janneh was fuming now, being scolded like an erring child, and his head began to turn.

"Leave me alone," he commanded. It made him sick at heart to think of his wife's impudence now, and the scorn and ferocity she had shown him ever since her friend Timbing had put her under the protection of the *Assistante Sociale*. Once Kaddy had even put him down in front of people, a shame that would have finished them both had it happened in Africa. But this was not Africa, and Janneh believed that this was a topsy-turvy culture where a clever minority made a handsome living making a big palaver over human rights. It sounded good, but to Janneh it destroyed traditional family and community values, and made the kids unmanageable, whilst the poor still got poorer and the rich richer. If he was ever President, he would certainly put all this right.

Kaddy no longer shared Janneh's viewpoint. This French *Liberté Egalité Fraternité* business promoted by the town halls had showed Kaddy and her female companions that they were the daughters by inheritance of the French Revolution. They were as good as the very highest in the land.

For Janneh it was otherwise. France broke the traditional bond of marriage that had ever existed in Africa. He felt he was a victim of a putsch, no more the supreme head of his marriage, not even in authority over his children. The slightest move he made to control his wife and discipline his children according to the norms he had been brought up with was forbidden. He knew that responsibility without authority was impossible. His responsibilities as a father had been taken away from him and given to others who were completely incapable of controlling children. Now it was all too late. For him, Kaddy's *Assistantes Sociales* were like Gabon vipers in a cassava patch.

Kaddy had now climbed the ladder and could kick Janneh out any time she wished. Conscious of that, poor Janneh submitted to almost every indignity and lack of respect this woman inflicted on him. Janneh had once heard the word 'Ballbreaker' used on a late night TV discussion show he had been too tired to turn off. He liked the phrase and decided it probably explained why Europeans had so few children. "All talk and no action," he thought to himself.

Kaddy lived her life separately now, went out and came back any time she wanted, and the courageous *Assistante sociale* kept an eye on the family, paying weekly visits to see if the man was behaving himself. Their seven children, who were fifteen months older than one another on average, loitered around in adventure playgrounds when there was no school, and often even on school days. The older ones did not sleep at home; Marie François looked after them. Warning letters kept flowing from head teachers like egrets arriving in West Africa at the start of December.

The trouble had all begun on that fateful day when Timbing, Kaddy's close friend, informed Kaddy that the *Assistante Sociale* had explained clearly to her that in France, in the name of *Liberté Egalité Fraternité* - the nationalistic propaganda engraved over the entrance of every town hall - each person was equal to every other. So an African woman from the village was now equal to the man who since the beginning of creation possessed her in the name of religion.

Women had been accustomed in Africa to accept that their husbands controlled their keys to Paradise. A woman who did not obey and submit herself to her husband would never set foot in heaven. For this reason the African woman toiled and starved for her husband. She would go to the rice field or the vegetable garden, fetch firewood, cook for the family and give the best part of the food to the man. But this same African woman now found the prospect of freedom away from Africa. One day the women told Marie François that the African man, according to their religion, controlled the women's keys to heaven and that any woman who did not submit herself to her husband would never have one. The French *Assistante Sociale* exploded with anger and indignation, calling the women fools. "So your husbands already know that they are going to Paradise!" she said, almost killing herself with laughter. She warned the women to be on the alert because men had always bamboozled their way in society, especially in the way they dominated women.

Janneh prayed for the Almighty to tame the woman.

"You have a visitor from the Gambia," she announced.

The name 'Gambia' made him jump from the bed as if he had just noticed the horses he backed crossing the finishing line.

"Who is he?" he asked, relieved that there was no more trouble in the atmosphere, at least for the present.

Janneh no longer bothered about who was with Kaddy. Even if he found her hugging a man, he could do nothing about it because of the French law of *Liberté Egalité Fraternité*. Women, especially immigrants, were protected by this three-word law. He no longer

worried about the situation. His horses were his life now, and what Kaddy did, and with whom, and when and where and how was her affair. Kaddy boasted of this, talking publicly and sarcastically amongst the women about her husband's sexual inability: "I'm not his wife, the café is his wife now," she would say and laugh. "He is an old, old rooster. His early morning crowing days are long gone. I have to scratch for my seed now in the run of younger cocks."

Janneh rushed out to meet his guest from the Gambia, a country he had been to almost every year since his arrival in Paris. Anything concerning the Gambia interested him enormously. When Sainy knew that the long-awaited eye-to-eye contact with Pa Janneh was about to happen, he stood up straight as a military officer being inspected by his superior. Janneh staggered out of his room and stretched out his right arm to the standing man. Sainy took his hand with a slight bow. The two men exchanged greetings staring at each other like a dog and a cat in common danger, working out how to escape.

Kaddy, just like Janneh, was a native of Dankunku. They were from the same extended family circle. Her mother and Janneh's father had shared the same womb for nine good months - they were twins. She too had the flat face and short hair that were frequent in her family, but she was short, which was uncommon in the family. She had been very black before using skin lightening creams. In her youth she had been a skeletal tomboy. In the months of April and May when the mango fruit ripened, she used to take her lunch from the top of the mango trees. But now in the morning it took her two good minutes to stand upright. When she slept their neighbour's dog barked at her snoring.

In the Gambia, the typical Gambian, especially a Mandinka woman, feels proud to honour guests and share whatever food and shelter they have. Culturally it is seen as a blessing and moral obligation to help a stranger. The popular saying was, "If you take care of a living-being, especially a human-stranger, then sooner or later God will honour you too, or the people after you, and vice-versa. Man's good and evil live with them, and also after them."

Sainy had already spent almost an hour in the house with Kaddy, being asked uncomfortable questions about poverty and misery in Africa, but she had not offered him anything to eat or drink.

After the two men had finished their traditional form of greeting and Sainy had introduced himself, Janneh dared to ask Kaddy to give the guest some food. Kaddy gave him the leftover rice stew she had prepared the preceding day. Hungry as a hunter, Sainy quickly wolfed down this cold food, and drank the tap water he was given. Janneh had warmed greatly to Sainy, seeing in him the ally he desperately needed

to keep Kaddy off his back. He assured Sainy that he would do all he could for him.

“If you are staying in Paris you have to go to the Police Station with my papers to request a residence permit,” Janneh said with fatherly affection.

Kaddy butted in, adding meanly, “You may stay in *Farance*, but you can also go to *Allemagne* where there are many Gambian youths.”

“But there are Gambian youths here in France as well,” said Janneh.

“In *Allemagne* boys get rich in no time. If you don’t have enough money for your fare, I can lend you some. But don’t forget to pay me back,” she said cunningly.

Sainy smelt a rat somewhere, but smiled back anyway, until he could figure out what was there between the lines.

Kaddy was already planning ahead, and she smiled to herself as she thought of how she was able to forge things nowadays. In her first years in France she had always behaved like a good housewife in the true African sense. She had not been used to going out and was even ashamed of people looking at her walking alone. Every morning she would kneel down before her husband and say “Good morning *Nkoto*.” Her friend Timbing had been her only companion apart from her husband. They spent all their spare time together in Kaddy’s bed-sitter talking about their girlhoods in their respective villages.

*

Three

On a Monday morning Yorro left for the temping agency. Normally it was only after he got there that he knew whether or not he had a week's contract waiting for him as a pneumatic drill operator in a construction company.

This morning prior to going out, he had mentioned a strange feeling. In addition, Yorro said he had been having recurrent nightmares. In these he and his wife were always dancing. Kumba had had a nightmare too; she saw the moon in eclipse and looking as if it were about to drop from the sky. In itself there seemed nothing wrong with this, because whenever winter arrived it was full of bizarre dreams which were simply considered seasonal, yet it was sometimes accompanied with overwhelming feelings of tragedy.

Kumba was from a village near semi-urban Basse, very far from Banjul in the Gambian context and beyond Dankunku. She had been more exposed to life, loose life as villagers called it, than most of the African women in Paris. Nightclubs and gatherings with boys drinking *ataya*, and playing *Ludo* had been her amusement in Basse. She talked proudly to her few friends about how the strongest and most handsome boys used to run after her and sometimes fought one another financially for her favour.

"In the first beauty contest ever organised in Basse, I won, and was crowned Miss Basse. Then I went on to the national beauty contest at the Sunwing Hotel in Cape Point and won second place. I was just cheated."

She was a Fula, very fair in complexion, and fine featured with long dark curly hair and a small long pointed nose. Soon after the beauty contest, five men in a row asked for her hand, among whom was a rich Sarahuleh from Gambissara, called Tummou.

"My parents were in favour of Tummou. For them he was the most promising contender. A friend of mine, however, told me that Tummou had three wives and that in spite of his wealth he did nothing for the wives and kept beating them if they asked for money, even to buy food for the family. How could I escape Tummou? Moreover I wanted a man from *toubabudou*. But children, especially girls, have no rights, not even the privilege of saying no to their parents' choice of their marriage. The only way was to have my parents go against Tummou's candidature, so I went to Pa Jawo and it worked. One day my father came from the marketplace with quite a different opinion about Tummou. Someone had told him how Tummou maltreated his three wives, and now my father did not want me to go into such a