

The Shadow of Imana

Travels in the Heart of Rwanda

VÉRONIQUE TADJO

Translated by Véronique Wakerley



Long Grove, Illinois

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The First Journey

It had long been my dream to go to Rwanda. No, 'dream' is not the right word. I had long felt a need to exorcise Rwanda. To go to that place where those images we had seen on television had been filmed, images that had flashed across the world and had left an indelible horror in every heart. I did not want Rwanda to remain forever a nightmare, a primal fear.

I was starting from a particular premise: what had happened there concerned us all. It was not just one nation lost in the dark heart of Africa that was affected. To forget Rwanda after the sound and the fury was like being blind in one eye, voiceless, handicapped. It was to walk in darkness, feeling your way with outstretched arms to avoid colliding with the future.

Of course, I did not consciously think this. I just wanted to go to Rwanda because I needed to.

Occasionally, someone will reveal a secret to you that you have not asked to know. Then you are crushed under a burden of knowledge too heavy to bear. I could no longer keep Rwanda buried inside me. I needed to lance the abscess, lay bare the wound and bandage it. I am not a doctor, but I could still try to administer first aid to myself.

As I had been invited to South Africa for a conference a few days before my trip to Rwanda, I told myself that it was a good jumping-off point. Post-apartheid South Africa might perhaps be able to offer some answers to my questions, especially in relation to the problem of reconciliation on a national scale. Furthermore, my first contact with this country would lead to

other trips, I was sure. South Africa forms part of our collective memory.

Nevertheless, I did not expect to have my first encounter with Rwanda while I was in South Africa.

me upside-down, that gave me birth. What we have to understand is the absolute necessity of difference. The necessity of difference.'

He falls silent. He seems embarrassed. He seems to be already regretting having emerged from his thoughts. But he continues in the same tone, as if he were talking to himself: 'I know the truth of this, I am a witness to it: France ruined everything. She did not keep her promises, she betrayed this country.'

He says that he tried to tell people, to warn against skidding off the path, but no one listened to him. No one wanted to hear what he had to say.



He is a man living on his dreams, on the past of this first encounter – of this revelation, this impossible love for a land which is now rejecting him. He feels torn, pulled apart by opposing forces which won't let him just be a human being.

He can no longer shake off his pessimism, or the despair taking root in his heart.

He looks lost, disorientated like a bad sailor on a boat pitching on the waves. He is seasick, and you can hear it in his voice that lacks conviction and you can see it in his face with its lines, etched too deep, too soon. You can even see it in the way he pushes back locks of hair, in an effort to tidy it, of course, but also to run his hand over his forehead in a kind of gesture of supplication.

THE WRITER

'Genocide is Evil incarnate. Its reality exceeds any fiction. How can one write without mentioning the genocide that took place?

Emotion can help us to understand what the genocide actually was. Silence is the worst thing of all. We must destroy indifference. We must understand the real meaning of the genocide, the accumulation of violence over the years.

'Is Africa's orality a handicap to the collective memory? We must write to give information some permanence. The writer pushes people to listen to his voice, in an attempt to exorcise the buried memories. He can put balm on the wound, speak of everything that may bring a little hope.

'The seed is buried in the earth. It dies so that it may be reborn.

'Dogs fed on the bodies. They were rabid. Birds fed on the eyes of the corpses.

'The fruits of peace must be gathered from the tree of suffering.

'Reconciliation?

'We must acknowledge the existence of Evil. We must exorcise it through justice, through an attempt at a true justice.

'As long as this attempt is not made, fear will remain. It is there. It has not gone away. All crime that goes unpunished will engender other crimes. The Hutus are afraid of the Tutsis because they are in power. The Tutsis are afraid of the Hutus because they can seize that power. Fear has remained in these hills.'

CONSOLATE'S STORY

Consolate has a face of astonishing sweetness. Her skin gives off reflections of copper and ivory and her graceful body sways to the rhythm of her steps.

The rain suits her as it falls in the garden and waters the flowers, dissolves time.

On behalf of these men who had abandoned themselves to the orgy of slaughter, and who had become enveloped in absolute Evil, he was making gestures that might give them back a little bit of humanity.

Close your eyes? Close them to what?

Night. Walk to the bed, a poor resting place of rumpled sheets covered by a thin blanket. Immense solitude, so deep that sleep becomes a desire to fall into the abyss, to abandon oneself completely.

Arrows pierce his flesh here and there and cause him pain. Evil in its pure state, in its most extreme form, haunts his dreams. To sleep. Behind what eyelids? To dream. What nightmares?

THE JOURNALIST

In the initial days of the genocide, the members of the Hutu interim government launched a campaign of disinformation. No one realised this at the time because they appealed for international humanitarian aid, and demanded an immediate ceasefire. In this way, they succeeded in convincing the greater part of public opinion that the massacres were the result of an explosion of tribal violence as unforeseeable as it was uncontrollable.

Many of us fell into the trap. Their manners were so courteous, their language so polished and their clothes so elegant that we could not believe that they were determined to exterminate the Tutsis as well as those they considered opponents. It passed all understanding.

And then, on 7 April, all the attention was focused on the assassination of the Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, and of the ten Belgian soldiers responsible for her protection. The

evacuation of foreign nationals, and the withdrawal of the MIN-UAR – the peace-keeping force of the United Nations – that resulted from this event became a matter of international priority.

Few journalists visited the rural areas, as they were difficult to reach, and dangerous. At the end of the war, most of the great mass graves were found in these areas.

While the genocide was going on, in South Africa Nelson Mandela was being elected to the highest office. The world preferred to turn its gaze on him to celebrate this historic moment, which marked the real end of apartheid.

The world powers knew that massacres were being carried out in Rwanda, but they were slow to react and to admit that what was going on was genocide.

A military intervention force of modest proportions could have stopped the extremists and quickly put an end to their plans. Instead, the United Nations balked at playing their part. In the end, it was France who became involved on the ground. But what role did France play? Through Operation Turquoise, the French soldiers saved lives, that is certainly true, but they also made it possible for a large number of murderers to escape using the safe humanitarian zone as a protected passage.

Consequently, it can be said that France and Belgium continued until the very end to support a genocidal regime because, as far as they were concerned, only the Hutu ethnic majority could guarantee democracy in Rwanda. But the massacres were without a shadow of doubt the result of the political manoeuvrings of the elite, who, in order to retain power, created a climate of hatred and division by urging the ethnic majority against the minority.



We must all bear the responsibility for this humanitarian failure.

And still today, the conflicts continue. Sporadic but regular incursions on the part of the Hutu rebels. Attacks on and counter-attacks by the government in power.

What does the future hold? Who can swear that this won't begin all over again if hearts are filled with hatred once more? We have to dismantle the cycle of violence. We must continue to condemn every form of massacre. Every day, death weaves its fatal web.

MIGINA SUBURB, NEAR THE AMAHORO STADIUM IN KIGALI

Nelly

The tiny house has been turned into a little café-bar. The walls are painted a loud blue. An artist has drawn a fat man holding a woman by the waist in front of bottles of beer. Behind, a huge yellow condom seems to be watching over them.

Nelly is sitting in the shade of the terrace. She is wearing a hat that conceals half her face, and a long floral dress. Her body is too slender, almost skinny.

As soon as she sees us, she gets up and calls to us. She is speaking incoherently, she is gesticulating. On her face, you see large patches like a skin disease. She has smeared it with a whitish cream which gives her a pale complexion. She knows that that is all we see. She can read it in our eyes.

We sit down and start drinking the beers and Fantas she has served us. But she does not stay with us. She watches us from a distance, in silence.

Suddenly, she cries: 'Come and see my family!' and she motions us to come inside the house.

THE SECOND RETURN

I have not recovered from Rwanda. Rwanda cannot be exorcised. Danger is ever-present, lurking in the memory, crouching in the bush in neighbouring countries. Violence is still there, on every side.

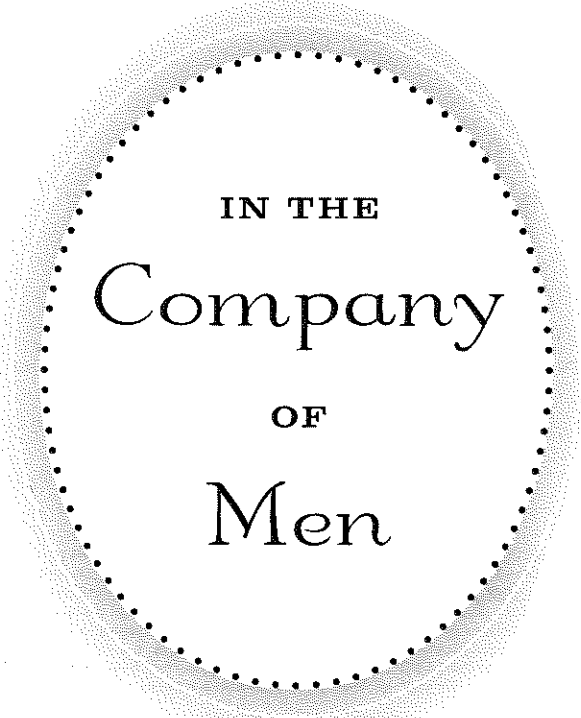
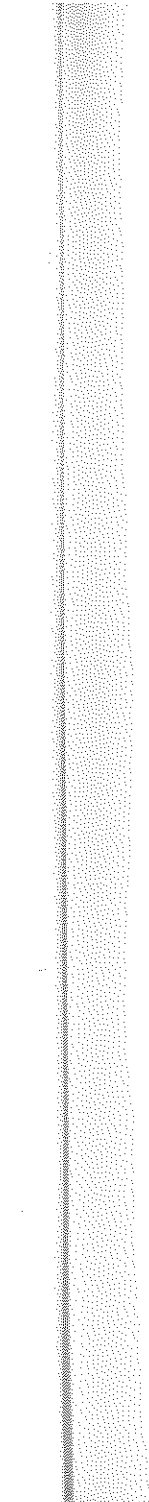
Death and cruelty.

Death is natural. It is the other side of life and we should not be afraid of it. And if you want to come closer to Rwanda, you must put it aside. Besides, death is not stronger than life, for life always regains the upper hand in the end.

It is human violence that has made death cruel, hideous. An eternal monster in the memory of time.

We need to understand, to analyse the mechanisms of hatred, the words that create division, the deeds that put the seal on treason, the actions that unleash terror.

We need to understand. Our humanity is in peril.



IN THE
Company
OF
Men

VÉRONIQUE TADJO

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brought love and fertility. Hunters acquired them as safeguards against the dangers of the forest. "Beyond the visible world, there is a hidden, subterranean parallel universe where our life force takes the form of scattered energies," the wizard declared. He alone knew how to control those energies and ensure that they would be beneficial for the village.

But if circumstances demanded it, he also had the power to invoke the destructive forces of nature, which made life difficult and unpredictable.

That is what life was like with the people of my village. I listened to them, they listened to the rustling of my leaves. Each in his place but all together . . .

I am Baobab, who keeps the memory of centuries gone by, whether bruised or blessed by the gods.

I have loved human beings, and I love them still. But, with the passing of time, I have lost my illusions. My leaves are tarnished, my bark has lost its shine. When gold was discovered in our region, my village changed from one day to the next. It became warped, disfigured, because raw gold was up for grabs. Everything was ransacked so people could get their hands on the wretched metal as fast as possible. All they could think of was splashing, milling about in the river to churn up gold deposits that would make

them rich overnight. At the time, one ounce of gold was worth almost two thousand dollars. Impossible to resist! To excavate large basins in which to sift through the pebbles, they set to work cutting down every single tree in sight. Now there was mud everywhere, nothing but mud; and in their minds, madness. The women even stopped making pottery and joined in, recruiting their own children to help. On their delicate little heads they were carrying buckets full of soil. The mercury discharged into the rivers to make gold particles easier to spot killed the fish, the small shellfish, the plankton and dark-green algae. So the water became acid. Toxic. Life became poisonous. Prostitution. Bars. Arms trafficking. Drugs.

The villagers turned into driver ants, formidable predators determined to annihilate everything in their path. The past had to be wiped out as well. From one day to the next, they abandoned their fields, their legends, their customs, their beliefs. The trees that crashed to the ground took climbing animals and crawling animals with them. I was deeply saddened by this, for I knew that our equilibrium had been lost, and that many animals were being forced to flee deep into the forest for safety. It was incomprehensible to me how things could have deteriorated so much so rapidly, so abruptly. I would have liked to put a stop to all this lunacy, but I was powerless. After generations of

mutual respect, the village had turned its back on me for good.

It didn't take long before people started to fall ill. At first they thought it was malaria. They complained of fevers, shivering, stomach pains. They suffered from body aches and extreme fatigue. So they went in search of neem leaves, leaves from the Tree of a Thousand Virtues, the generous tree that cures malaria and repels mosquitoes. A proud and resilient tree that doesn't ask for much, a tree that adapts to even the poorest kind of soil, sandy or full of rocks or almost completely barren. But then the people remembered how, in their mad rage, they had cut down hundreds of neem trees. So they had no choice but to forge a path leading them ever deeper into the forest. Weak and exhausted, they marched on, until finally they found the beneficent tree. They stripped off most of its leaves and fruit, packed them into bags, and carried them home. As soon as they got back, the women prepared herbal infusions that the patients were given to drink several times a day. They crushed the neem seeds to extract the oil, which they rubbed on the patients' skin. A handful of the sick recovered their health within a few days. But for the others, the majority, the fever never came down. Their strength was gone. They started spitting blood, then vomiting blood, then excreting blood; blood broke through all the barriers of their flesh.

Until the very last moment, some miners refused to let go of their coveted gold nuggets, clutching them in the palms of their hands. The worksite became a battlefield, a scene of sheer devastation. The gold had sown death and disaster. I watched helplessly as the disease spread like wildfire. Nothing, it seemed, would be able to stop it.

Where are true human riches to be found? In the riches of the heart, or in the riches of wealth? My village was rich, its riches were beautiful. But when the villagers wished to possess wealth, the village disappeared.

For a long time, I was a tree in despair. I missed the children's tinkling laughter, the rough hands of the old men stroking my trunk, the beauty of the women who used to fall asleep in my shade, the men whose bodies were sculpted by labor on the land. I wanted to become a tree without roots so that I could leave this arid place and migrate to happier surroundings. My life had become useless, trickling away slowly, reduced to nothing but memories.

What was destined to happen happened against my will and out of my reach.

All of a sudden, an Ebola epidemic broke out and spread through the region, becoming the most devastating outbreak ever recorded in the history of the virus. And for the first time ever, the virus even traveled all the way to the capital.

It takes between five and twenty-one days for the fever to appear in its acute and life-threatening form. First there are stabbing pains in the temples, intensely aching muscles, and a blinding headache, followed by vomiting and diarrhea, skin eruptions, a sore throat that burns like fire. In the end, the last spark of life is snuffed out as the patient gradually bleeds to death.

Simply touching another person is enough for someone to become infected. This plague is worse than war. A mother, a father, a son can become a mortal enemy. Pity is a death sentence.

I saw the devastation the epidemic wreaked upon this country, while the rest of the world did its best to stay away. Africa became the cradle of untold suffering, the place where the future of all mankind was at stake. Should the virus jump on a bus, a train, an airplane, it threatened human extinction. It could cross borders, travel on boats. It might hide in the tears of a child, in a lover's kiss, or in a mother's embrace. It reduced human beings to nothing but flesh and viscosity. The very pavement was strewn with anonymous, ravaged corpses, the bodies of men and women who simply collapsed, as though violently struck down, on one of the capital's crowded streets. How can one ever forget that raging fury, spreading at unimaginable speed and wiping out everything in its path?


But I saw courage too. There were men, women, and young people caught up in this human tragedy,

determined to fight for their own survival and that of others. I myself saw people who did not think twice about offering help. I saw people arriving from all over the world, volunteers working for free to combat the disease.

In spite of the chaos, dawn continued to break, and sunset still heralded the onset of night. I saw the morning come, quivering with impatience. Once bitterness and sorrow had passed, kindness returned. Gradually, I started listening again to what humans had to say. I listened to all of them. My branches spread out and took on tremendous magnitude.

Nothing that makes human beings what they are escaped me. I want to tell their stories, to lend a voice to all those who managed to rise above fear: ordinary men and women doing extraordinary things. No matter where they are, I want to honor their bravery. The life of humans is a story we haven't yet finished telling, a story of shipwrecked sailors washed up on an island in the middle of a sea.

I am Baobab, the first tree, the everlasting tree, the totem tree. My roots reach deep into the belly of the earth. My crown pierces the sky. I seek the light that brightens the universe, illuminates darkness, and soothes hearts.



Deep
Inside the
Forest

XIV

*The chilling voice of Ebola rings out
in the early morning.*

All right, all well and good, but it's not me humans ought to fear the most. They should rather be scared of themselves!

I'm a virus thousands of years old. I belong to the large family of the Filoviridae. People have known about me for only forty years or so. Nevertheless, I've been around for a very long time in this extraordinary forest, referred to as "primeval," where everything has remained pristine since the beginning of time.

I have five brothers: Ebola Zaire, the most virulent among us; Ebola Sudan, which follows hard on its heels; Ebola Ivory Coast, so discreet that humans became acquainted with it only in 1994, thanks to a single patient, who incidentally didn't

die, but recovered; Ebola Bundibugyo, which lives in Uganda; and, finally, Ebola Reston, which has settled in Asia, where it has yet to show its full potential.

I don't like to travel. I prefer to stay put right here, deep in the primordial jungle, which is where I'm happiest. Except when someone comes and disturbs me. Except when someone comes and disturbs my host. Because when I'm abruptly awakened from my sleep, I move from one animal to the next. I often choose great apes—gorillas or chimpanzees—but also the antelopes humans are so fond of. The animals in the jungle all know each other. They have their habitual meeting places, for example around watering holes, or under fruit trees colonized by bats. It's no secret what happens next. A man violates nature by pulling the trigger and killing an animal. He cuts up the carcass. Blood on his hands. Fresh blood on his hands. Red blood on his hands. He lays the animal across his shoulders and takes it to the village. He doesn't know that I've already entered his body. Or that very shortly I'll be in his family. In his entire community. I move quietly and slowly in the beginning, but soon comes the grand finale, the fire, the flames.

It's not me that has changed. It's humankind, which has changed direction. The lives men lead today are no longer the lives the Old Ones led.

They've become more demanding, greedier, more predatory. Their appetites are limitless.

I know nothing about their beliefs. I'm not governed by any law. I'm here purely for the sake of existing. I am me, period. An organism that needs to reproduce itself. No compromise. No negotiation. I'm alive, and I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to stay that way. My only needs are to feed and to defend myself. A pile of flesh will do. Any kind of receptacle, animal or human, it's all the same to me. I'm neither good nor bad. Such judgments are useless. I'm like a plant that grows, like a spider that devours its prey.

What humans don't seem to understand is that I have no predilection for them. They die too fast, too awfully. They're not useful to my goals. If our paths happen to cross, why not, but if they don't, I won't seek them out. It's they who come to me.

We, the viruses, have succeeded in conquering the planet. We're in the sea, we're in the air. We're everywhere. We reinvent ourselves by mutating and multiplying with increasing speed. Man can't figure us out. The antibiotics he's so proud of have absolutely no effect on us. We can cross borders and continents at will. To our credit, we kill germs and bacteria by the thousands. And yet no one would dream of thanking us for our assistance, so what's the point?

Given the choice, I would clip humanity's wings to prevent them from flying. Then they'd have to crawl in the dust, and they'd get a better understanding of life. No one can defeat me. No one can wipe me out. If I withdraw, it's just a strategic retreat. As soon as a new opportunity presents itself, I'll be back. The greatest scientists on earth have tried, but so far, they still haven't managed to crack my genetic code. I'm an equation they can't solve. When I enter a body, I go through the blood vessels in order to invade the vital organs: liver, spleen, pancreas, lungs, kidneys, thyroid gland, skin, brain. A few days is all I need to overcome the pathetic little obstacles I encounter along the way!

Humans lament their fate, but they're no better than I am. They have no lessons to teach to anyone. They should instead take a hard look at the evil they have inflicted and continue to inflict on themselves, deliberately, ever since they first walked the earth.

They are destructive by nature, much more so than I am. And yet, although they are perfectly aware of that fact, they refuse to acknowledge it. They prefer to delude themselves, to believe themselves superior to the other creatures in this world. Rulers, tyrants of this planet, that's what they are, and their power is absolute. Their arrogance has made them forget every limit. Worse, they slaughter one another without mercy, and they come up with crueler ways

of tormenting and killing every single day. They always find new reasons for starting wars.

Do you know what my favorite song is, Baobab? It's Zao's "Ancien combattant"—"War Veteran." Better than any lecture, it illustrates what's so grotesque about Man and his incurable, pathological destructiveness. The musician uses the absurd to show that he's understood everything. I can recite the words for you—I know them well:

*Cadence count, one, two
War veteran Mundasukiri
Cadence count, one, two
War veteran Mundasukiri*

*The world wars
Aren't pretty, they're not nice
The world wars
Aren't pretty, they're not nice
When the world war comes
Everyone's cadavered
When the world war comes
Everyone's cadavered
When the bullet's whistling, no
time left to choose
If you don't dance the changui
fast, my dear, oh! you're
Cadavered*

*Whacked with a club
All of a sudden, wham, cadavered*

*Your wife cadavered
Your mother cadavered
Your grandfather cadavered
Your kids cadavered
The kings cadavered
The queens cadavered
The emperors cadavered
All the presidents cadavered
The ministers cadavered
The bodyguards cadavered
The bikers cadavered
The soldiers cadavered
The civilians cadavered
The cops cadavered
The gendarmes cadavered
The workers cadavered
The jobless cadavered
Your sweetheart cadavered
Your first mistress cadavered
Your second mistress cadavered
Beer cadavered
Whiskey cadavered
Red wine cadavered
Palm wine cadavered
Music lovers cadavered*

Everybody cadavered
Me myself cadavered

Cadence count, a-one, a-two
War veteran Mundasukiri
Cadence count, a-one, a-two
*War veteran Mundasukiri**

It's time for people to realize something: they aren't good, they've never been good. Never, at any time! Let them get that straight, once and for all. They're imperfect and incomplete. They're mortal. Everything rots. Everything disintegrates. Everything merges with the ground. Sometimes, their God sprinkles a handful of hopes onto the world and then goes back to His bed in the glowing darkness. The reddish wound of the firmament, the tumultuous waters, the scorching wind, the devouring floods—their God watches all that from afar. He makes them suffer within Him. Without Him.

You don't believe me, Baobab? You shake the crest of your foliage?

You surely know that horror follows barbarism with them. Even when they declare themselves to be righters of wrongs, warriors in a good cause,

* Zao (Congolese author, singer, and composer), "Ancien combattant," 1984.