

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 7
Number 1 *Forum Theme 1: Arts and Sciences, Transcending Boundaries & Forum Theme 2: A Third Way beyond the Old College Teacher-Scholar Model*

Article 12

3-2012

Translation into English: Poems by Marie-Léontine Tsibinda

Catherine MacGillivray
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas>

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you](#)

Copyright ©2011-2012 Catherine MacGillivray

Recommended Citation

MacGillivray, Catherine (2012) "Translation into English: Poems by Marie-Léontine Tsibinda," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol7/iss1/12>

This Essays, Studies, and Works is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.



Translation: Poems by Marie-Léontine Tsibinda

Part of the journal section “Essays, Studies, and Works”

French Poems by Marie-Léontine Tsibinda

Translated into English by Catherine MacGillivray

Translator’s Introduction

Marie Léontine Tsibinda was born in French Congo in the village of Girard. She later attended school in the capital of Brazzaville, where she went on to university and ultimately received a Master’s degree in English in 1983. In response to the burning down of her house in the context of Congo’s civil war in 1997, Tsibinda fled her homeland in 1999; she then spent time in Niger and Benin, eventually settling in Canada in 2001, where she continues to reside.

Tsibinda has said that she “discovered poetry in nature,” and that it is thus from nature that her inspiration comes. “For me, nature is the source of everything” (Conversations 14). Most of Tsibinda’s poetry is of this order, whether she is painting a picture of her village, her family, her country’s landscapes, its bordering sea, her people, their struggles, or her love for and commitment to all of the above and the human being at large.

Tsibinda published her first collection of poems, *Poèmes de la terre* (Poems of the earth) in 1980, and in 1981 she received Congo’s National Prize for Poetry; she was the first woman poet to be awarded this honor. At this time—and still to some extent today—Congolese literature did not boast many women writers. For this and for the work itself, Tsibinda is worthy of the attention accorded her by this publication.

The two poems presented here in a bilingual version, French and English, are both from Tsibinda’s 1987 collection *Demain un autre jour* (Tomorrow, Another Day) and reflect her ongoing concerns. I have chosen to translate these particular poems because of the way in which they both capture the difficulties of village life in sub-Saharan Africa, especially for those who live in *les bas quartiers*--an expression that appears in both poems. In *Dans mon village* (In My Village) Tsibinda creates images that resemble the linguistic version of an impressionistic landscape painting; *L’Aube des monstres* (Monsters’ Dawn) is in some ways reminiscent of a dramatic scene—and here we might recall that for many years Tsibinda was an actress in Sony Labou Tansi’s Rocado Zulu theatre troupe.

Tsibinda sees herself as participating in a *post-négritude* generation of writers she describes as “concerned with the problems of their homelands,” but also receptive to and interested in opening up to the world. It is her belief, and mine, that “tomorrow’s world will be constructed upon this encounter”-- of the inside with the outside (Conversations 17). In this age of rapid globalization coupled with the continued press of cultural imperialism, I am pleased to have this opportunity to offer the English-speaking world a glimpse into the landscape of French Congo’s premier woman poet, Marie-Léontine Tsibinda.

A Note on the Translation

As a translator, it is always with pleasure and relief that I participate in a bilingual publication of poetry. Ideally, each reader will take a moment--even if they are not a student of French--to ponder the originals, to try to glean a sense of the many rhythms, rhymes, and sound effects that have been lost to the process, as well as to read my English versions in search of a way into “meaning.”

Let me share just one example of what I mean by this poetics, which I call a poetics of loss. In *L’Aube des monstres* (Monsters’ Dawn), stanza three participates in French in a very complex and playful homonymic structure, one which was utterly resistant to the translation process as I undertook it. In French, *au voleur* and *haut voleur* are complete sound equivalents, though their meanings--as indicated by the English--vary greatly. Here Tsibinda is playing, as have many French-language poets before her, with the odd linguistic confluence in French which finds the verbs for “to fly” and “to steal” to be one and the same, *voler*. But she doesn’t stop here. In line 3, *vos leurrés* is also a homonym, this time of *voleur*. Alas, the only hint of such elaborate sound play that remains in English is the imperfect rhyme that can be heard in “high fli-ers/your lures.” Thus I exhort the English reader to fly back and forth between the two texts while reading, in an attempt to steal back a little of the richness of the French into their English-language experience.

I would like to thank, for a competitively awarded Professional Development Assignment, the Graduate College of the University of Northern Iowa for its support of my work on this project, which has resulted in a previous publication as well. (For those interested in reading more of my translations of Tsibinda’s poetry, please see the journal *Translation*.) I would also like to thank, as always, Anne Boyman for her keen eye and practiced ear; Professor Boyman has been my second reader for decades now, and I couldn’t do this work without her--though any errors are obviously mine. Finally, I would like to thank Jason Fly for his sense and sensibilities; they and he have helped sustain me time and time again, in work as well as in life.

Sources Cited

Conversations congolaises, eds. Alain Brézault and Gérard Clavreuil. L’Harmattan: Paris, 1989.

Poèmes de la terre, Marie-Léontine Tsibinda. Editions Littéraires Congolaises: Brazzaville, 1980.

Demain un autre jour, Marie-Léontine Tsibinda. Editions Silex: Paris, 1987.

Translation: Poems by Marie-Léontine Tsibinda into English by Catherine MacGillivray

Dans mon village

In My Village

Dans mon village

In my village

les châteaux écrasent les masures

castles crush shanties

Faraday fait pâlir

Faraday makes

la mèche-tempête

the storm's wick pale

l'eau des pluies envahit

rainwater floods

ma demeure

my dwelling-place

des jardins bien taillés

well-trimmed gardens

se moquent des fourrés

mock the unkempt

hirsutes où se tissent des serpents

woods where snakes weave

dans mon village

in my village

on distingue la haute ville

we distinguish high town

de la basse ville

from low town

les murs de ma case tombent en ruines

the walls of my hut fall in ruins

les poutres ne supportent

the beams no longer support

plus le toit

the roof

dans mon village

in my village

chaque frère devient un ennemi

each brother becomes an enemy

chaque rire une flèche

each laugh an arrow

chaque parole un brisant

each word a breaker

in my village

dans mon village
 règne la suspicion
 la communauté n'est plus
 qu'un mot
 l'argent commande l'argent
 la pourriture s'infiltré dans
 le sang de l'homme.

suspicion reigns
 community is just
 a word
 money commands money
 rottenness seeps into
 the blood of man.

L'Aube des monstres

L'aube à peine
 dissout ses maléfices
 quand soudain sonne
 la cloche de la mort

 des pas des cris des voix
 se font entendre
 l'aube
 balafnée de pluie
 s'étire triste

 au voleur! au voleur!
 hauts voleurs hauts voleurs
 vos leurres
 se sont-ils évanouis?

 des projectiles sifflent
 des bâtons s'abattent
 des voix halètent
 un homme est saigné
 sans pitié
 on se défoule

 --Monsieur le Commissaire
 un homme se meurt (tandis que le soleil se
 lève . . . Doit-on toujours mourir à cette heure?)

 --Que voulez-vous que je fasse?

Monsters' Dawn

Dawn has barely
 dissolved its evil spell
 when suddenly
 the death knell sounds

 footsteps cries voices
 are heard
 dawn
 slashed by rain
 stretches out, sad

 stop thief! stop thief!
 high fliers high fliers
 your lures
 have they vanished?

 Missiles whistling
 batons beating down
 voices panting
 a man is bled
 without pity
 we are letting off steam

 --Mr Police Inspector
 a man is dying (meanwhile the sun is
 rising . . . Must death always take place at this time?)

 --What do you want me to do about it?

--Coo . . . mment?

--Un voleur des bas quartiers n'est pas un homme.
Allez dormir en paix. Un voleur de moins ici, où est
le mal?

Les voitures sont en panne. Il n'y a pas d'essence . .

--Ambulancier, regardez . . .

--Il manque des médicaments à l'hôpital. Je ne me
déplace pas. C'est trop tard . . .

Les mouches commencent la veillée.

--Excuse me?

--A thief from the slums is not a man.
Go, sleep in peace. One less thief around here, where's the harm?

Our cars are out of commission. There's no gas . . .

--Paramedic, look . . .

--There's no medicine at the hospital. I'm not going out of
my way. It's too late . . .

The flies begin their vigil.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

