The White Genesis

(1965)

by Ousmane Sembene

Liberated from capitalist control to educate the masses by Socialist Stories

He was one of the companions of my youth. Together we underwent the ordeal of initiation. He believed in the God of *Gain*, in happiness through *Money*. After the '39-'45 war, he enlisted in the French Expeditionary Corps.

He died penniless in Indochina, in June '54.

My old friend Boca Mbar
Sarr PATHÈ

LIFELESS

PATHÈ

Is it on the top of the hill
Is it between two paddy fields
Is it on the edge of the woods
Is it in the water that carried you off
Is it on the path

Nowhere the mound
Of your grave

Not even a heap of rubbish
A strip of ground
The remains of a body
A piece of stem

To plant
On your dead death
A grave a foot long
Without an epitaph
You lie there beneath this mound

Above the wind blows
The rain washes away the soil
Melancholy shapes wander about
The men and women of this country
Still struggle ...
... Not any more against France

It is America 'the light of the free world'
that bombards your grave twenty years after ...
A dead death for nothing

The cross has gone
The earth has gone
Where is your grave

It was a small life
An epithet in wood.

PATHÈ

Ah! ... old companion
Born in the same village
No wife to shed a tear
No fiancée no mother no child
Not even a grave

Poor mother Africa
Sterile you might have been a paradise
for your sons ...

Sometimes, into the most ordinary low caste family, a child is born who grows up and glorifies his name, the name of his father, of his mother, of his whole family, of his community, of his tribe; even more, by his work he ennobles MAN.

More often, in a so-called high caste family which glories in its past, a child comes into the world who, by his actions, sullies his entire heritage, does harm to the honest MAN he encounters and even robs the individual diambur-diambur of his dignity.

THE STORY I AM GOING TO TELL YOU TODAY IS AS OLD AS the world itself. The most primitive institutions, as well as the relatively more complex institutions of our own time, are inflexible in their condemnation of the crime which is its subject. In some countries, though, it is only a crime when the girl (or boy) is a minor. But, of course, there is still the moral aspect of the question.

Over the years, I have often discussed it with you, my fellow AFRICANS. Your reasoning has never convinced me. However, on one point you were agreed: I must not write this story. You argued that it would bring dishonour to US, THE BLACK RACE. Worse still, you insisted, the detractors of the NEGRO-AFRICAN CIVILIZATION would latch onto it and ... and ... and ... use it to cover us with shame.

To avoid appearing pedantic, I will not analyse your attitudes to this problem. But when will we stop acknowledging and approving our actions in terms of the other man's colour, instead of in terms of our HUMANITY? Racial solidarity certainly exists, but it is subjective and it has not prevented the reigning dynasties of modern black Africa from committing murder, detaining people without trial and gaoling others for political motives.

I also know, and so do you, that in the past, as well as in the present, there have been many anonymous heroic actions among us. But not everything we have done has been heroic. Sometimes, therefore, in order to understand a period fully, it is good to concentrate our minds on certain things, on certain deeds, and certain kinds of action. For they enable us to descend inside MAN and his failure, and to assess the extent of the damage.

The debility of AFRICAN MAN—which we call our AFRICANITY, our NEGRITUDE, and which, instead of fostering the subjection of nature by science, upholds oppression and engenders venality, nepotism, intrigue and all those weaknesses with which we try to conceal the base instincts of man (may at least one of us shout it out before he dies)—is the great defect of our time. The exaggerations of intellectual speculation are brought to bear upon our contemporary society, our link with the past and the future, and upon the sense of community of our fathers and our great-grandfathers. These intellectual prima-donnas know nothing (or pretend to know nothing) about our fathers' and our grandfathers' times, when the SAHHE (granary) was our pride. They know nothing about the needs of the men of those times and their passive, sometimes active, resistance to the occupier. They know nothing about the disintegration of community.

I cannot myself say how this story began. It is always pretentious—or so it seems to me—to think that one can unravel the origins of a drama of this kind.

I know that you exist, VEHI. Perhaps when you are old enough to go to school, you will find a place and later you will read these lines. More probably, like thousands of others of your generation, you will never read them. The present symptoms of our society do not permit me to predict a better life for you. When you reach the age of awareness, you will rebel, like thousands of others as anonymous as you, but, whether it is individual or collective, it will be a futile revolt because it will be badly directed.

Your mother, our contemporary, illiterate in French as well as Arabic, will have no chance to read these pages. She lives alone; it is a way of clothing herself in her drama.

As for you, VEHI-CIOSANE NGONE WAR THIANDUM, may you prepare the genesis of our new world. For out of the defects of an old, condemned world will be born the new world that has been so long awaited and for so long part of our dreams.

Ndakaru, Gamu 1965.

THE NIAYE IS IN THE SINGULAR IN WOLOF. THE COLONIALISTS wrote it in the plural. It is neither savannah, nor delta, nor steppe, neither bush nor forest. It is a very strange zone bordering the Atlantic Ocean in the west and stretching from Yoff to Ndar, and beyond. Villages and clusters of dwellings sprang up from it, as ephemeral as drops of water on the eyelashes. It begins at Pikine, the famous battleground recalled from time to time by the griots: a vast expanse without end, its soft hills clad, according to the season, with every variety of vegetation: short, bottle-green grass, growing in one season only, the navet, the rainy season; massive dwarf baobabs with their delicious fruit (the leaves of the baobab, known as lalo, are dried, pounded and strained, and used to season couscous, giving this dish its flavour and making it light to the palate); oases of coconut trees; tall palm trees growing at random, with long, clumsily plaited, waving leaves; rhun palms, gaunt and rough of aspect, defying the sky with their tall trunks and fan-shaped crests of leaves, measuring themselves, first against the dawn, then against the sunset; groves of mahogany trees dense with leaves, their branches falling to the ground like Fula huts and inhabited by cruel ants. Nere, kada and other trees whose names I do not know spread their branches, providing generous shade according to the season, and a resting place for the minute birds of the niaye when they are exhausted.

Pools of stagnant water, covered with the dark green leaves of water-lilies, are surrounded on their banks by a lacework of small palm trees whose sap oozes plentifully, giving off a delicious, intoxicating scent. Pools do not have the same kind of vegetation as lakes.

As he makes his way across the niaye, the stranger's gaze is held by the impression of a retreating horizon, or by the feeling that he has made no progress: uniformity ... clumps of cactus, prickly pears, vradj and sump merge with one another and break up the undulating, creamy white monotony of the sand. On the horizon, receding, obstinate, irregular, line upon line of dunes. Above, the sky, the continentally vast African sky, like liquid mercury, depending on the month.

By midday, overcome, beasts and insects seek cover. The whitish vapour, like a hot bath, begins to rise, creating the illusion of a moving sea. A veil of light blue indigo blends with the curving, broken line of the infinite.

The grass of the previous navet sinks, dead and broken, into the soft sand. The sumps bristle with thorns, like harrows. The dead leaves that have not been able to take root are all swept up by the wind and caught, fluttering, in the thorns. Except during the navet, a long whistling sound, on a single note, can be heard coming from all over the niaye. At dusk, this whistling becomes lugubrious. Our grandparents used to say the niaye was whimpering.

The torrid atmosphere immobilizes the entire animal world. The beetles and the big black and grey poisonous spiders bury themselves under their beds of dry leaves. Lizards, snakes and reptiles of every variety coil themselves up. There is no sound of life from the insects and birds, except when the occasional crow or sparrow-hawk, driven from its shelter by another stronger than itself, wheels above the niaye, wailing the wail of the weak.

All this is enclosed inside the immense, silent loneliness of the niaye: the enforced retreat of the middle of the day.

As the sun sinks, the hills, the palm trees, the kadas, sumps, baobabs, coconut trees, mahogany trees and rhun palms are all released from its oppressive tyranny. Their silhouettes lengthen, and they project their shadow onto the ground, turned to the colour of rancid butter. The animal life, freed from its confinement, returns to its rough existence, tracing a complex filigree on the sand. The niaye keeps pace with the setting sun, second by second unfolding the spectacle of its many shades. Far off, in the direction of the sunset, flimsy layers of clouds, ranging from bright saffron to the turquoise blue of a boubou just drawn from the dye, relay one another, for the delight of the eye. During the navet, when the young grass covers the ground in a uniform shade of garish green, the niaye and its sunsets are still one of those sights one returns to over and over again.

As the sun sets, the sharp distinction of objects and plants

and the humps of the dunes come together and merge into one.

At night, it is impossible to measure the niaye with the eye: it is a waterless depth. Above, an immense sky pierced by countless white tips. The inhabitants of the niaye, in admiration, say: 'The mountain is no higher than the sand dune. At most, it is only a mound made up of more grains of sand.' Others reply: 'Certainly, this is true. But, to be logical, an ant on top of the mountain is higher than the mountain.'

However far you 'descend' into our past, as far back as our grandfathers (not forgetting the three centuries of the slave-trade and one century of colonialism), there have never been any stone or brick houses in the niaye. Nothing that would make it possible for strangers to say: 'Here lived resourceful men and women who were concerned about their own time, but who also thought about the future and the passing of time.' No arched doorways, no stone houses surrounded by raised verandas, no gardens with flowers arranged in patterns according to their colours, no monuments to the glory of the first men, no sepulchres to give witness to the past.

Santhiu-Niaye, where the events of our story take place, was no different from other villages. It did not attract the thousands of Senegalese who, each year, made their way, if they were Muslims, to Tiwawan, Touba or Ndiassane, or, if they were Christians, to Popenkine. Its inhabitants were never visited by the Black Virgin, nor by a sheikh, and none of them ever had the good fortune to go to the Kaaba or to Rome.

Yet they were true believers, wearing away the skin of their foreheads and their knees in prayer: five times a day. There was neither school nor dispensary, and what would have been the point of a police-station? The authorities came once a year to collect the taxes, and one year was much like another.

Before our drama (if such it was) began, Santhiu-Niaye had seen its star shine and its pulse had beaten with the vitality of our fathers' and our grandfathers' day, when the sahhe was the symbol of provision for the future. Each family had its field in which it grew maize, millet, groundnuts, cassava and sweet

potatoes. In the shadow of the main hut, the sahhe, the pride of the family, attracted attention according to its size.

Now, in our time, year by year, like a natural disaster, the able-bodied men went to seek their fortune in the towns where, it seemed, life was easier. Navet after navet, the crops became poorer and poorer. The heads of families, their faces scorched by too much sun, their strength spent in vain, turned in on their instinct of self-preservation with an unconscious virulence: they had a foreboding of a future which even now filled them with terror. They sought comfort in the adda, the tradition, and in the hypothetical promise of one of the best places in paradise. Allah's paradise, like a nail fixed in the centre of their brain, the cornerstone of every activity of their daily existence, weakened and breached their faith in the future. Burying themselves in the old saying: 'Life is nothing', they had reached a state where they no longer felt desire. At the limits of their life here below nothing stood out, nothing which could rouse the covetousness of desire. Once the need to exist (and not to live) had been satisfied, the rest—and what was the rest, anyway?—was futile. But beyond the rest was human self-respect.

The impoverishment around them—that total impoverishment that blinds the spirit—made them incapable of sacrificing themselves for their children, or of thinking it possible they might do so. That burning desire for self-sacrifice, the gift of self for others, the refusal to give in, the rejection of the atavistic instinct, which is the first step towards the future, was for these people a betrayal of their faith, an act of defiance and a moral crime against the ancient established order.

And Santhiu-Niaye, emptied of its will to act, became depopulated, stagnated. Between the gaps in the collapsing fences, in the peinthiu, the village square, beneath the tree where the old men came to sit and watch the time pass, life seeped away, monotonously. The drums were no longer heard on moonlit nights. And worse still, at the turn of the night, when the great sleepy log covers with its head of ashes the embers that tomorrow morning will be used to relight the fire in the hearth, you no longer

heard the triumphant whistling of the young lover as he returned with happy tread from the hut of his beloved. The gaze of the young girls was cold. Their doe's eyes, usually alert for every gesture, every word, no longer looked into the eyes of the young men for whom their hearts beat. They composed no songs, or perhaps they had forgotten how to. They sang the songs their mothers had composed when they were young girls. These songs their mothers had sung long ago were full of life. They had composed them during their nocturnal tussles, or in the ardour of competition as they worked in the fields, reaping maize, millet and groundnuts. Now, these songs recalled the happy times that were past, intensifying their mothers' sadness and the unhappiness they felt in the absence of suitors for their daughters. The mothers: '*I salute you, women, here and everywhere. Deep as the sea! You are the earth. So deep, so wide is the sea, you are the sky above, the sea-bed beneath and the other bank.*' With aching and heavy heart, they listened to the songs they had composed long ago. Dominated by their men, fearful of today's realities and sick at heart, the mothers said nothing.

The season's cycle followed its course. The strange character of the niaye bound the people together, yet kept them apart.

Seen from the top of the sand dune, the huts of Santhiu-Niaye stood in rows according to a law of planning peculiar to the people of those parts: in rows according to family and rank. The houses lay like a young girl, shivering and frightened in her nakedness, her hands clasped between her thighs.

THE DOG LET OUT ITS HOWL AGAIN, FOLLOWED BY THE same yapping. Ngone War Thiandum woke with a start from her refreshing sleep. All the prejudices against this animal of hell and all the baleful tales told about it passed through her mind.

The hut was in the deepest darkness. In the sleeping village, only the howl of the dog was alive. Ngone War Thiandum listened intently for some distant sound. But she could hear nothing.

Neither yesterday, nor the day before, nor even the day before that, had she gone further than the door of the kitchen, even though these were the three days of her aiye, when it was her turn to be with her husband. She leant back against the bamboo partition. All at once her real obsession flooded into her mind. The strong, regular breathing of her husband filled the hut. Over the years—more than twenty-five—Ngone War Thiandum had become used to this breathing, to this body, to this arm that touched her now with its fingers. In the darkness of the hut, like water blackened by the ink of a squid, she could make out her husband's mouth, not too large, with strong teeth; his ears, loose like all the Ndiobene, the Diob family; his round head, with its near-white hair, which he shaved off once a month.

The mattress rustled. Was the shape coming to life? No ... The fingers withdrew from their haven of sleep. A foot, warm, asleep, anchored itself to her feet. Her heart missed a beat. The rushing of her blood barely kindled the half-memories that stumbled on the reefs of her past. She tried to forget this past, to forget this body, but she could not, even by doing violence to her memories. Just as clods of earth, like sponge, blend together, grain by grain, so her memories met and intermingled with one another. A lull would give her brief respite, and sleep would embrace her, only to be broken, suddenly, and plunge her once again into a state of agitation. She could do nothing to calm the surging of her breast. Her mind hovered between one crest and another of her past life and her present. Then she would take up the thread of a new, horrible existence, and the realization that all her past life, fed on fine precepts, had been nothing but lies. She had merely been the prisoner of a morally false order. 'If not, why this act, and how?' she asked herself.

The body gave out a loud rattle. From her foot there came an unpleasant sensation. Because of his foot on her shin, everything in her was sensitive at this point of contact. She was unable to detach her thoughts from that spot. The disgust her body felt for this limb deprived her of any kind of aggressive movement, and held it, like a canoe stranded on the mud of the Casamance.

waiting to rot.

Ngone War Thiandum had had enough of this persistent misery. The nervous curiosity that had driven her to find out, in dribs and drabs, the identity of the father of the illegitimate child her daughter was carrying, had suddenly left her. Again she listened for the signs that a new day was dawning. Struggling against the grip in which she was held by her inertia, she felt the desire to rebel for once, for just once in more than twenty years, and withdraw her foot. She gave in, morally defeated. She hated herself in her defeat and was filled with a deep contempt for her life. As she had made her way through life, the life of her family (the Thiandum-Thiandum, of whom she was, now, the only survivor), she had been careful to do so without departing from the course her predecessors had laid down for her and bequeathed her, embroidering it with their names and their blameless conduct. She had been united to the Ndiobene, a clan as noble as hers, and whose names were as legendary as those of her family. But now their guelewar, noble lineage had been tainted by an incestuous act, bringing dishonour greater than any insult on the Ndiobene and the Thiandum-Thiandum.

The words of the sage came, luminous, into her mind: 'Sometimes a child is born into the most ordinary low caste family who grows up and glorifies his name, the name of his father, of his mother, of his whole family, of his community, of his tribe. More often, in a so-called high caste family which glories in its past, a child comes into the world who, by his actions, sullies his entire heritage, and even robs the individual diambur-diambur of his dignity.' She repeated these words to herself, but still she hesitated to act.

The rest of the night was long, longer than the preceding nights. It was the last night of her aiye (according to the immutable law of polygamy, until sunrise everything there was hers, man and objects). She plucked up courage to withdraw her foot carefully, got out of bed, and closed the door behind her.

Outside, a few stars still shone, the last for that night.

'Yallah, have pity on me, a simple woman! Drive from me dark,

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her beads, alone.

Santhiu-Niaye was waking up. The thudding of pestles grew louder. Like an eye lazily opening its lashes, the sun gazed down on the niaye.

Ngone War Thiandum was far away, remote. None of the morning sounds around her woke the least glimmer of interest in her. The echo of the thudding pestles resounding through the village, the pots that had been forgotten the night before in the yard, the cracked calebashes waiting to be repaired, a log being salvaged from a burnt-out fire, twigs being collected to make brooms, the fear that the embers of a fire might be scorching the ground and the dead buried in it, all these daily activities, all of them elements of her life as a woman and a wife, left her indifferent.

Everyone noticed this detachment from all the things that bound her to others. Afraid that what she knew might be divulged, she hid her gaze. She lowered her eyes, and did not look directly at people or things. The unhappy feeling that she was an object of contempt made every part of her body cry out, even her lips which no longer inspired her with confidence. Was it not true that her lips could speak independently of her will? She was afraid of them, so kept her head down to hide them. Her dread of being betrayed or ostracized forced her in on herself. She was haunted by the anxiety born of the horror of being a laughing-stock, of being the village cesspit, she who sprang from a family that had been guelewars from father to son and had never known the least slur. To think that, behind her back, people would say:

'Don't you know?'

'No. Tell me.'

'It's simple. What everyone thought isn't true. It's not a stranger who got her daughter pregnant.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's as true as the day.'

'Who was it then?'

'Who? Do you really need to ask?'

'By my ancestors, I don't know.'

'Come closer. There! ... Just make sure no one's about. There!

... It was her husband, the father of her daughter, Guibril Guedj Diob.'

'Astafourlah! Astafourlah! Eiye! Eiye! What are you saying?'

'It's as true as the day.'

'Is it possible? Spend the day in peace! No need to tell me the details.'

Behind the mbagne-gathie, the bamboo screen that preserves one's privacy, she heard the voice of her third veudieu (co-wife). She was chiding the children. For a moment, her mind attached itself to the co-wife's words.

Ngone War Thiandum found it difficult to return to her state of communion with Yallah. She held her beads in her hand, her brain torn violently apart like the crater of an emptying volcano. She whimpered, like a frustrated lioness. When the storm within her died down and calm momentarily returned, her feeling of apathy would rise to the surface and the image of her daughter, Khar Madiagua Diob, would play like filigree on the reflections of her imagination. She saw her as a coquette, indulging in coquetry of the most elementary kind. She could hear the happy band of young girls squabbling about the children they would have and how they would run their homes. They would argue hotly about marriage and the advantages and disadvantages of being the first wife, saying that she aged much sooner than the second, third or fourth wife. Ngone War Thiandum, having lived through all the phases of marriage, was full of advice and pointed out the disadvantages of being second wife, thinking all the time of the man who would be her son-in-law. She wanted and prayed that her daughter, Khar Madiagua Diob, might have a hard-working, pious man for a husband, a man of good caste and spotless lineage.

Since the pregnancy of her daughter, these dreams had been scattered like pieces of straw caught up in a whirlwind, and lechery had reared its head like some insidious perfume. Agitated, she pressed the bead between her finger and thumb; her jaws shut tight, her teeth clenched, so violent was the suffering that wracked her. The desire to hurt someone, to make her husband and her

daughter—or, failing them, someone else—suffer, but not to kill them, nearly deprived her of her self-control. But she strangled the cry that rose from her belly, a cry she had suppressed so long; it tore itself from her throat, taking with it pieces of burning flesh. She struggled to keep a grip on herself, and her cry came out in a gasp, with a shudder of desperate supplication. It was the cathartic explosion of undirected thought. Her whole body was on fire.

She did not see Gnagna Guisse arrive, until her shadow fell on her. She lifted her ravaged face, her eyelids puffed by three sleepless nights. Her gaze took in Gnagna Guisse from head to foot. Gnagna Guisse looked at her and caught the dancing glimmer of fear on her face—that face she had known to be sober and without guile—and, at the corners of her mouth, the shadow of bitterness. Gnagna Guisse was the same age as she was, just past forty, and belonged to the griot caste: she was her gueweloi-diudu, her genealogical griot. An old friendship bound them in a rather special way, as friendship usually does among women in our part of the world. They were inseparable and always went to the well together. If one was late, the other preferred to wait. The same cake of henna served them both, the same calebash of antimony, which they used to brighten their lashes and eyebrows and their tattooed lower lip. The one never returned from a visit to the town without a gift for the other, unless she came back with nothing for herself either. They were not content with sharing the same tastes. They wanted to be alike in everything, in their dress and in the way they plaited their hair. After they were married, their roles as wife and mother, and the accidents of birth, obliged them to go their separate ways, but their youthful friendship never lost any of its warmth.

Ngone War Thiandum moved up, inviting her friend by this gesture to sit beside her on the tree-trunk. Ngone War Thiandum did not linger over the exchange of banal morning greetings. She replied briefly, using the formal phrases. She waited anxiously to hear what the griot would say. And, as she waited, she became impatient, and the painful emotion over which she had been

brooding for months swelled like the tide, overtook and overwhelmed her.

Gnagna Guisse, an expert, thanks to her experience as a griot, in gauging a woman's feelings, took in the situation at a glance. Watching her out of the corner of her eye, she saw how the sinews of her neck stood out and relaxed, in spasms. Aware of her role, she acted as if she knew nothing and, circumspectly, she said:

'Ngone, Ngone, my friend, everyone is worried about you. You avoid our company. Has someone done something to you?'

'No, no one has insulted me,' she answered, suppressing the reply that was on the tip of her tongue.

'What's wrong, then? For months you have been pining and brooding. I can understand the suffering you feel as a mother, and your disappointment, but what can you do now? No one can escape his destiny. If it is true, as it is written, that our every act is recorded before we are born, that we are only unfortunate actors in this life, then you ought to put your confidence in Yallah. Yallah sees everything, knows everything. He alone is judge. Only he is qualified to judge each of us.'

Ngone War Thiandum bowed her head. 'Does she know something?' she wondered. 'How has she managed to deduce my secret?' Aloud:

'If it is true that everything is decided by Yallah, why is there a moral law? Why exalt good and condemn evil? Do these principles have any purpose? In any case, I don't really know what you mean.'

Having managed to control her voice sufficiently to say this, Ngone War Thiandum raised her head. The smile she forced her face to shape was betrayed by the obvious rigidity of her features, and on her eyelids hung her weariness and her obstinacy. Gnagna Guisse returned the mother's gaze; her eyes were held prisoner by her look. In her turn, the griot withheld the harsh reply she had already gathered in her throat. She said:

'I am talking about Khar's condition. Do you think it is right that she should have to carry this cross at her age? No! It is also true that no mother likes it, nor would she like it. But the fact

is there.'

'And I must get on with it?' Ngone War Thiandum interrupted. After a pause: 'What are people saying in the village?'

'There is a little talk. Of course, tongues are wagging, and enjoying it, and people are still wondering who the father is. But it will pass and be forgotten. But you are eating your heart out about it.'

'Gnagna,' interrupted the mother, the sinews in her neck standing out more than ever. 'Gnagna, that isn't all they are saying. Stop deceiving me ...'

'I lie to you? Me?'

'No, of course not. That isn't what I meant.'

'What, then?'

Ngone War Thiandum was possessed by a mixture of despair and rage which, as she spoke, seemed to make her heart leap from her breast. 'I'm all on fire,' she said to herself. 'I'm all on fire.' She didn't want to be put off any longer. She went on:

'People observe, they comment and they gossip. Look at Tanor (her eldest son, who had fought in Indochina and North Africa), the children make fun of him because he is mad. In a way, it is better for him, now. He doesn't suffer. Morally, I mean. Yet he was the finest young man of his generation. You remember him, when he returned from his military service. It was you who welcomed him, spreading fine cloths beneath his feet.'

'I remember.'

'I expected to see a man. It was less than a man I welcomed home. I was proud when he went away, and anxious, too. He came back to me insane. One does not show courage by invading others, but by facing indignity in one's own country. A curse on war and rank! War deprives me of a son to wash away my dishonour, and my sense of rank wracks me.'

'Don't forget, I am your griot. Stop eating your heart out. Your husband will take care of things. Men don't take women into their confidence; they act, and present us with the accomplished fact.'

'That is true enough. This morning I finished my aiye.'

'I understand,' said Gnagna Guisse.

'You understand nothing. Nothing at all,' the mother exploded. There was a pause.

The muscles of her face were tense. Her forehead wrinkled as incomprehension and her inner struggle asserted their hold on her. At the same time, her tattooed lower lip curled at the corner. Her pupils, devoured by the thick rims of her eyelids, black as Djenne stone, were riveted on Gnagna Guisse's mouth. In her disappointment, Ngone War Thiandum's eyes flashed feverishly as she looked up, angrily, at the griot. There was no doubt. No doubt at all. Her friend, who had once been her confidant, did not understand her. The griot, by holding back, was playing a game with her. She no longer had any confidence in her. She repeated:

'You understand nothing. Nothing at all. Let me ask you, who do they accuse of being the father of the child that is to be born?'

'Who? ... There is no question at all about that. Everyone knows it is the navetanekat.'

Ngone War Thiandum buried her face in her hands and begged Yallah's pity. Choked by her suffering, she could find no words. A veil of obstinacy covered her eyes, glistening with disappointment.

'Gnagna, the truth. Only the truth. You know very well that what they say is not true. If they think it is, then they are feeding themselves on lies. The navetanekat is not the culprit. And don't say you never thought otherwise, because the navetanekat went to see your husband, Dethye Law. He came to see me, and swore he was not to blame.'

'Do you have greater faith in the words of a good-for-nothing than in those of your gueweloi-diudu?' replied Gnagna Guisse, sticking her chin out.

Together they had watched the years pass by. It was the affection that people have for friends of their own age, which is often stronger than ties of blood, that Gnagna Guisse was trying to revive, but instead she came up against the unyielding tone and look of the mother.

'I'm listening,' said Ngone War Thiandum, aggressively. Tiny white specks gleamed in her eyes.

'I don't understand what you mean.'

'You do know, Gnagna. You do know. Before Yallah, I think you do know.'

'I know nothing.'

'And you suspect no one? No one at all? *Oh, prudish friendship! Bright coat on the wounded body of frankness. Oh, eyes that know, mouth that is reluctant to hurt.*'

'No, I say.'

'It is a sin to lie. It is unfriendly to lie to me.'

Once again they faced one another. Each looked into the pool of the other's eyes, and saw herself reflected there. In her anxiety to hear the reply to her question, the mother's lip quivered, almost imperceptibly. Her breath came fast, in gasps. She went on: 'When you questioned Khar, she never said it was the navetanekat. Nor did she mention any name. Her brother Tanor beat her black and blue, and she said nothing. The navetanekat was driven from the village, and his field taken from him. It was a fine field. On his own he had got rid of the thorn bushes. It had been abandoned by everyone else because of the thorns. We profited from his work. All the Ndiobene did. Even I blamed him. I was glad to hear what had happened to him. And during this time, I shared my bed with my husband, Guibril Guedj Diob. For weeks, I saw him call Khar and speak with her. In my presence, they shared the common dish. Oh! they only talked about things you'd expect a father and daughter to talk about. For nine months I was deceived. By whom? With whom? Wife and mother, I lived with them. I did everything to find out who was the father of her child. I begged her on my knees to tell me, I wept, and promised her anything she wanted. In time, I would have forgotten, everyone would have forgotten. But how can anyone in Santhiu-Niaye forget that Guibril Guedj Diob, the father of Khar Madiagua Diob, has committed incest? He, the village chief, the noblest descendant of the most illustrious families of the niaye? Had he been a griot, a shoemaker, a jeweller, it would

have been understandable. Oh! forgive me, it's not you I meant. You are one of the noblest griots.'

Ngone War Thiandum stopped. The way she tried to soften and take the edge off the inflexions of her voice, the pauses between her words, all betrayed her anger.

Gnagna Guisse was quick to realize where the blame lay. She knew the pride of the Thiandum-Thiandum, their boundless pride, the absurd value they attached to their birth and which they inflicted on the whole community. Was it not one of her uncles who, after being struck in public by a toubab, by a European, had killed him and then meted out his own punishment? Their motto was: 'Rather die a thousand deaths in a thousand ways each more terrible than the other than endure an insult for a single day.' Since the most far-off times, this same clan had occupied the most coveted positions at village meetings. Gnagna Guisse herself was proud to be their genealogical griot. Guessing the fury of her guelewar's distress, she would gain her objective and get through to her with words of consolation.

Breathing heavily, Ngone War Thiandum began cursing men and life, and declared, finally, that on the judgment day she would have things to say.

'I ... .'

'You knew, didn't you?' Ngone War Thiandum tried to make her admit. She looked the griot straight in the eyes, with a hard, penetrating look, trying to read her most secret thoughts. She continued:

'You knew. How many others know? I know what is being said at the well. What shame for me and my family!'

From the other side of the bamboo partition, they could hear the voice of Guibril Guedj Diob, her husband. Ngone War Thiandum stopped talking. She lifted her head, and let her gaze wander in the distance. She was not trying to escape from her tragedy. It was now part of her, and she wanted no pity.

As they listened to Guibril Guedj Diob, they looked at one another.

'You must eat. I am going to prepare something for you.

You are my guelewar,' said Gnagna Guisse, getting up.

The mother immediately seized her wrist. 'You knew, didn't you?'

Gnagna Guisse nodded, moving away. Left alone, Ngone War Thiandum recalled all the aspects of the affair. Her growing doubts and her talks with her daughter all came back.

'Is it true that you are carrying a child?' she had asked Khar, going into her hut.

Khar Madiagua Diob had turned her eyes away. Her mother's inquisitorial look penetrated every pore of her body. She shook her head so that her mother could not see the rapid throbbing above her neck. The dark patch did not give her away.

'Tell me!'

'I am not pregnant, mother,' Khar had replied and, pretending she had some chores to do, she had fled.

Ngone War Thiandum had believed her daughter.

As the days and weeks passed, the persistent gossip about Khar had finally alarmed her. She began to spy on her daughter, watching the way she walked, the movements of her limbs, her face, her voice. In the end, she was convinced. There was no doubt! It was no use her putting on more cloths. Her hips broadened. Her belly took shape and her breasts filled out. Several times Khar Madiagua Diob had caught her mother watching her.

Then, one afternoon, as Khar Madiagua Diob was walking past, her mother suddenly put out her hand and undid the knot of the first cloth, then the second and the third, until all the cloths lay at the girl's feet. Khar Madiagua Diob had no time to pretend.

'Don't hold your belly in. If it's for my benefit, you're wasting your time. You are as full as a she-ass,' her mother had said.

Nevertheless, she went on feeling her daughter's belly with expert fingers.

'It's not possible! You don't have a husband. You really are pregnant,' she had expostulated.

Oh, maternal tenderness! Infinite goodness, how many victims have you had?

Mother and daughter looked at each other. Tears welled up

in her daughter's eyes. She fled, leaving the cloths behind.

Ngone War Thiandum had not known what to say. Her thoughts had sped confusedly in all directions. Her maternal ambition had collapsed, her dreams were destroyed, her hopes disappointed. Had she not dreamt of the day when she would lead her virgin daughter to the threshold of her husband's house? Had she not rejoiced in her anticipation of the day when she would hold up her daughter's immaculate cloth, when she would show the jewelry she had inherited from her own mother, and hand it over in public to Khar? These jewels were the pride of her lineage, the links in the chain that held it together. Had she not caressed the sweet sensation of being the mother who would endow her daughter better than any other, of celebrating a marriage that would always be remembered?

This agitated, painful monologue had taken place as the evidence of her daughter's pregnancy gained a hold on her nerves. Yet in spite of herself, Ngone War Thiandum had become reconciled to her daughter's condition. She now set about the second stage, which was to find out who was the author of this shameful deed. She had tried different approaches—concern, kindness, anger. They had only had the effect of making her failure more bitter and leaving her unhappy with her daughter's categorical refusal to say more than was displayed by the round protrusion of her belly. Worse, Khar Madiagua Diob would, at times, insolently stick out her belly.

Ngone War Thiandum unburdened herself to her husband.

'Guedj, do you know what is happening in your house?'

'I am listening.'

'Look around you.'

'For pity's sake!' Guibril Guedj Diob had implored her.

'Everyone says that your daughter, Khar Madiagua Diob, is pregnant.'

'Every week, gossip makes a girl of Santhiu-Niaye pregnant.'

Saying this, Guibril Guedj Diob had left her.

Her daughter's condition was becoming known. Suspicion fell on the navetanekat. Several times, Ngone War Thiandum went

to see the young man. He always gave the same reply:

'Mother Ngone, I swear it was not me.'

'Who was it then?'

'Only Khar can say.'

Ngone War Thiandum had no alternative but to discuss it again with her husband. She did so in accordance with the accepted etiquette: she waited for complete dark, when no indiscreet ear would be lying in wait.

'You know, Guedj, that Khar is now a woman. She has been since the month of barahlu. I have asked her, but in vain. She refuses to answer.'

'If you had watched over your daughter better, nothing would have happened. She'll have her child ... All right, I'll talk to her tomorrow, inchallah,' he replied, turning his back.

In the days that followed, Ngone War Thiandum found herself, as in the beginning, up against her daughter's obstinate silence. Khar Madiagua Diob's condition was food for gossip in Santhiu-Niaye. The gossip-mongers, who were always short of fodder during the navet, were delighted.

'She was seen with the navetanekat.'

'Why did she take water to him in the field?'

'Wasn't it she who washed his rags?'

'A well-born girl going with her father's servant!'

In the peinthieu, everyone discussed her case and judged it harshly.

The eldest Ndiobene, Tanor Ngone Diob, who was lucid at the time, was very angry. He discussed it with his mother.

The day's sun was growing old; the ndjiolor's rays were losing their strength. Beyond the horizon, the niaye embraced the sky. The vast expanse, with its patches of cultivated ground, seemed dull, lifeless, bleak and sad. The ash-coloured turtle-doves sang their weary notes.

Tanor Ngone Diob, in uniform—an old one bequeathed him by the kind offices of the French colonial army—took the path over the dunes, climbed them, descended them, taking care to avoid the fragile vradj bushes.

A mangy dog with long, torn ears covered in humming flies welcomed him with frightened yaps.

Atoumane, the navetanekat, warned of his presence, came to meet him.

'Peace only,' said Atoumane. (It was his day off, when he was free to work in his own field.)

'How much seed have you sown?'

The two men scanned the field, measuring with their eyes the area that had been cultivated. The navetanekat's heart beat with pride.

'Only what your father has loaned me.'

'I had something to ask you. Have you finished for today?'

Warned by his intuition, the navetanekat inwardly kept his distance. He knew that the eldest son of the ndiatigui (master) was not entirely sane.

'I was just leaving,' said the navetanekat. With a sharp whistle, Atoumane called the dog. Walking behind the ndiatigui's son, he saw him deliberately drag his boots over the groundnuts. He was tempted to say: 'Master, look where you are walking,' but he restrained himself, with a painful pull at his heart.

'Do you know why I am here?' asked Tanor Ngone Diob, a little further on.

'No, ndiatigui, no.'

'Is that true? You really don't know?'

'How can I know if you tell me nothing, ndiatigui? Perhaps there is talk in the village.'

'You take me for an idiot?' said Tanor in French.

The other looked at him open-eyed.

Tanor Ngone Diob was silent for a while. Over their heads a flock of birds flew in the direction of the sunset.

'Khar comes to see you?'

'Me? Once or twice, yes. She was going to the small field. Has something happened to her?'

'Ah!'

"Lahilah illalah!' exclaimed the navetanekat, without abandoning his reserve.

'You have slept with her?'

'Never!'

'You have made her pregnant, you bastard.'

'That's not true.'

Tanor Ngone Diob leapt at him. Atoumane jumped aside, and a chase began across the field. As he ran, Atoumane cried:

'It wasn't me! It wasn't me!'

The dog followed, barking.

Tanor Ngone Diob stopped, out of breath, shouting insults at the navetanekat. At the same time, he trampled his plants, muttering: 'It was like this in the paddy fields.' A bestial fury masked his face, and an unsatisfied gleam shone in his eyes.

Atoumane hurried off to find help to dislodge him from his field.

Accompanied by villagers, including Medoune Diob, Tanor Ngone Diob's uncle, he found Tanor had trampled most of his field.

'He's the one, the bastard. He's the one who seduced Khar,' Tanor shouted as the crowd approached.

Atoumane took to his heels once again, pursued this time by Tanor's uncle, Medoune Diob. The rest followed behind. All night they hunted him, and for several days and nights afterwards. He was never seen at Santhiu-Niaye again. All that was left of him was his mangy dog.

After this, Tanor Ngone Diob had beaten his sister Khar to make her talk. But Khar Madiagua Diob had kept silent.

'When the child is born, we'll see who it looks like,' people said, discouraged.

Others, with biting irony, retorted:

'Vah! When people live in the same place, there is a strong chance that the children will all be alike.'

Ngone War Thiandum was too obstinate to be satisfied with this. She pretended to accept it as the fruit of normal relations. With her daughter, she was cautious. In their conversation, they returned to a happy normality. Her lips said:

'Atte Yallah-la! It was the will of Yallah!"

But her instinctive desire to penetrate her daughter's secret was not far below the surface. Before, she had been afraid to go against the precepts she had been brought up to obey, so she dared not ask questions or appear suspicious. Now, with a healthy curiosity of mind, she was anxious to know and did not pay any attention to the warnings of others. Thinking was the function of the men, an iniquitous state of affairs that exasperated her. Deprived of all right to criticize or to analyse, she now revolted against an order that had been established before she was born. A sea of anger welled up and roared within her, waking and sharpening her awareness of her frustration and placing the accepted moral values in question by baring them to the light of day.

Insidiously, discreetly, she felt her way, asking indirect questions. Slowly she made progress, until, one day, without realizing it, Khar Madiagua Diob revealed the truth:

'It was my father.'

That night, and those that followed, Ngone War Thiandum did not close her eyes. She felt it was pointless to bully or beat her daughter. The responsibility for the deed had shifted and been placed on another level. 'How did it happen?' she asked herself. 'How was it that the noble blood that has flowed for centuries in the veins of Guibril Guedj Diob did not cry out? Why did his infamous deed not choke him? Had he forgotten his ancestors? How could he disgrace the honour of their names? And what will people say? It's not true! Yes, that's why, when I spoke to him about it, he jumped down my throat.' Endlessly, she returned to these thoughts. Had she not been docile, submissive? a good wife? Had she not carefully watched over her husband's conduct? These questions led to others. 'What would the champions of the moral law say now?' Had he had Khar's consent? She could neither believe nor accept that their relationship had occurred more than once. Where? Here? In the house? In the niaye? Stifled by her impotence, she blamed everyone: an attractive face, an unctuous voice, high birth, fine dress. All that had once seemed superior to her and of high moral value was merely gilt. People

clad themselves in morality the better to cheat and deceive their neighbour. A man whose piety was legendary only adopted the pose so as to be better able to accomplish some unmentionable act of lust.

'Run and fetch Gnagna Guisse,' the second wife shouted, from behind the partition, to a little girl.

Ngone War Thiandum looked between the slats. The door of of the hut in which her daughter was in labour was half open.

'Go quickly.'

'Mother, here she is,' said the little girl, about to rush off.

'Khar called out. I heard her,' the second wife told Gnagna Guisse as she arrived, balancing a calebash on her head.

'I am coming,' said the griot, going towards her guelewar's hut.

Ngone War Thiandum followed her.

THE SEASONS OF LOLI AND THORONE RELEASED THE MEN and women from their hard work in the fields. In Santhiu-Niaye, these were long, unvarying, dreary days. After the first prayer of the rising sun, some of the men would return home, others would go off into the niaye.

At yoryor, weary with inactivity and boredom, beads in hand, they returned to sit under the beintan tree, where the shoemaker-griot, Dethye Law, worked. These monotonous days of idleness encouraged conversation. The unfinished discussions of the previous navet or of earlier navets were resumed. These interminable sessions of talk enlivened the dead season. The *commandant de cercle's* visit had been announced, and was expected for the next day but one. At the entrance to the village, people were busy making a triumphal arch out of palms. This work had been left to the youngsters.

That yoryor, Baye Yamar was, as usual, the first to arrive under the tree. Dethye Law, sitting cross-legged, greeted him. They had already met at the fadyar (dawn) prayer. Baye Yamar, wearing the red chechia of a former Senegalese *tirailleur*, returned the shoe-

maker's greeting with two nods of the head, up and down, holding out his beads. 'I'm busy,' said his face, shaded by his thick eyebrows. Arranging his boubou, dyed a pale indigo blue, he sat on a root jutting from the ground.

The shoemaker-griot sang to himself.

The minutes passed.

'I've just been to the other side of the reed pool. I've brought back a miserable bundle of straw,' said Gornaru who, with two flips of his feet, shook off his samaras before sitting on the ground. After exchanging the morning civilities, he went on: 'I also went as far as the road, the one that is being built. The labourers told me that it is going right across the niaye.'

'Did you notice how heavy the dew was?' asked Dethye Law. His face resembled a grid, with deep incisions around his mouth opening out from his nose. The beintan tree's shadow was becoming darker.

'I even heard the call of the navet bird.'

'Me, too. I felt apprehensive when I heard it. I even asked my wife. She is usually the first to tell me about it. But everything seems topsy-turvy this year.'

'Ah, things aren't like they used to be. Yet the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. What has changed?'

Gornaru's voice was heavy. He had a bony face, with cheeks that stood out on stalks, and scaly skin, all shrivelled and rough. His eyes were red like niaye pimentos. Sitting with his legs crossed, his forearms resting on his knees, his hands hanging free, he played with the sand, sifting it from one hand to the other.

'They said the road would cross the niaye,' he repeated, as if he were telling them a secret they had not heard properly the first time. 'Keur-Malamine is going to be near the road. That's what they're saying. Perhaps that is why the toubab-commandant is coming.'

Dethye Law, his mouth full of water, spattered a piece of leather and worked it with his hands. His lower lip was still wet as he said, in his turn:

'I don't know why the toubab-commandant is coming. Appa-

rently cars stop now at Keur-Moussa. They even have two shops where you can buy anything. Before, they were fewer than we are. Other families have come from the niaye to live with them. We should think about it. Here, there is nothing.'

'Join up with them? No one here would want that. We must go our own way,' asserted Gornaru. Then, changing the subject: 'I walked across Massar's field. It is infested with hordes of ants. I don't think anyone has cast a spell on him. Anyway, why should they?'

'What are you trying to insinuate, Gornaru?' asked Baye Yamar, who had finished his beads and was rubbing his face with them. Carefully, he replaced them in his only pocket, on his chest, and felt around the stitching with his fingers. Then he said: 'As far as I know, no one has asked for that field this year again. There has been a legal wrangle going on over the boundary for two navets. It is about time it stopped.'

'Baye Yamar, you are giving my words a meaning I did not intend.'

'I heard, Gornaru.'

'You heard wrong, if I may say so, for which I ask you to forgive me, before Yallah and before Dethye Law.'

'I beg your pardon, then.'

'So be it! May Yallah pardon us all.'

'Amine! Amine!' repeated Baye Yamar.

'I didn't see you this fadyar,' Dethye said to Gornaru, changing the subject, for he knew only too well where this effusion of good feelings would end. When a conversation began in that tone, the silence which followed was solid and long, while each chewed over his discontent. He was on the lookout for this sort of thing, and always tried to keep conversations moving. When a conversation was in full swing, he kept quiet. Dethye Law was of low caste, being a griot by birth and a shoemaker by trade. Nature, independently of our judgement and considerations, establishes its own hierarchy. Dethye Law was the bilal of the mosque, possessor of one of the finest voices for calling people to prayer. The freedom he enjoyed to speak his mind made of this tart

diambur-diambur the most redoubtable of commentators. Conscious of his rank as a griot, he said what others dared not say, and everyone confided in him.

'All the same, I heard your node for the fadyar prayer. I was just leaving the village,' replied Gornaru, turning around.

On the other side of the peinthieu, someone rode by on a donkey. He wrinkled his brow and asked: 'Who's that on the donkey?'

'Have you already lost your sight? It's Amath. I know by the way he sits astride his donkey,' said Baye Yamar, with pride in his voice. 'And yet I am older than you.'

'It is true, then, that he is leaving?' asked Gornaru. He was eight years Baye Yamar's junior, in his fifties at least.

'So he says.'

'And who will look after his house, his donkeys and his fields?'

'He will do the same as all those who have left. Here's Badieye.'

Gornaru looked in the direction indicated and recognized his eternal draughts opponent. Pivoting on his buttocks, he gathered up a few sticks.

'Are you in peace, friends?' announced Badieye, with his boyish air of innocence. In his turn, he gathered up dry donkey droppings, or anything else lying around, as he talked:

'Dethye Law, have you seen Latyr go past? He is supposed to be coming back from town today.'

'I had forgotten him. It's two weeks now since he left.'

'So it is! He must be back for the toubab's visit. Unless he has found shoes for his feet in town. The old women in the town are well-preserved, they say. One of these days he will also leave never to return,' said Badieye, his hands full.

'Perhaps,' rejoined Dethye Law, sceptically.

'Eskeiye!' exclaimed Badieye, seating himself in front of Gornaru. 'So Santhiu-Niaye dies! And when is Amath leaving?'

'Who knows? Monday, they say,' replied Gornaru. 'He won't be here when the toubab-commandant arrives.'

'Next Monday? He doesn't want to pay his tax.'

'The cunning devil.'

'You wake in the morning, and there's an empty concession.

The empty sahhc collapses first, before the main hut. Then, gently, noiselessly, the roof of the main hut caves in. More silent than a grave, more open than a market place, alone and without witnesses, the main hut is consumed, night after night, in the silence of its abandonment. As if some heaven-knows-what was trying to put out the fire in some invisible hearth with equally invisible fingers. And the weeds come, growing first where feet seldom went, where only crawling babies ventured. But the part where the adults moved about keeps its marks for a long time. It is as if the grass, by refusing to grow there, hallows it. And the sand! It heaps up, no one knows how, invading the whole house. It begins its work with the hearth, once the centre and reflection of the family's security. The women and children used to glance at it furtively, silently expressing the peace in their hearts and the hope in their eyes. There, and nowhere else, is where the sand accumulates first. Then it reaches the bed, under the bed, and begins to pile up.'

Dethye Law spoke sadly, with the reserve and modesty of someone accustomed to long soliloquies and who, finding an opportunity to externalize his feelings, does so like an actor anxious for an audience. The others had listened, feeling, with each of the shoemaker-griot's words, their own anxiety at the growing number of desertions. They would have liked to speak, to express their feelings, the pain they felt in their hearts each time one of them went away, but they lacked the words. Yes! Long years of servitude break a man, deprive him of the aristocratic use of words. In other countries, the ability to embellish language is the preserve of the high-bred. But their eyes, which day after day read the disintegration of the community, were better able to speak for them. This silence, rich in unexpressed words, bound them together. They let the minutes pass, without speaking.

Gornaru broke the silence, as he drew squares in the sand for the game:

'The authorities won't do anything here, not for us. Except to suck us like tobacco. The toubab-commandant is only coming to collect the tax.'

Who said anything about the authorities?' retorted Baye Yamar, pursing his lips. A fire that was contemptuous of the authorities shone in his eyes, a feeling they all shared. 'My family and I will never leave Santhiu-Niaye,' he concluded, curtly. A look of defiance remained in his eyes.

The conversation flagged. The draughts began.

'Stick it in, up to the hilt,' cried Badieye.

'Draw it out, all covered with blood,' capped Gornaru.

'Men, I salute you,' Yaye Khuredia greeted them, relieving herself of her basket. Her worn skin made it impossible to tell her age. Beneath her faded cotton dress, her skin hung loose on her bones. Every morning, under the beintan tree, she sold different sorts of food. Fanatically superstitious, she recited incantations to ensure a good day.

'Be careful of the centre thorn of the prickly pear, Khuredia, it's the fruit of the devil,' Badieye teased her.

'Fruit of the devil? Perhaps. My family live on them. Yallah has made them grow in profusion and why?'

'For the poor! Tempting the poor is satan's job.'

'Don't make me say, at my age, what I don't want to say, Badieye, and what I never said when I was young.'

'When you were young! Ha! ha! I was already a man. Do you remember? Well, let's forget it. Did you meet Latyr on your way here?'

'On my way here? No. Perhaps he took another path?'

'I don't know.'

'One has to be careful of evil encounters.'

'What do you mean, Badieye? You ought to be ashamed, at your age.'

Seated behind her display, she listened to the rude comments of the draughts players, the yothekat. And, at each lewd remark, she looked the other way.

'Were you the first up this morning?' Dethye asked her.

'No. I had just turned the second bend in the path of the two palms when I saw Tanor Ngone Diob, by himself on the top of the hill, gesticulating wildly. I saw him again just now, with palm

leaves in his hands. He was coming this way.'

'Tanor Ngone Diob! ... *Diobe duide demone tol fate fa duibame* son of Guibril Guedj Diob and Ngone War Thiandum,' intoned Badieye, going on to declaim the whole genealogy of the former combatant of Indochina and North Africa, and concluding: 'I don't know what madness drives a blind man to amuse himself by jumping from one side of a well to the other.'

'Tanor Ngone Diob is an ex-serviceman. He fought in Indochina, Morocco and Algeria. He knows how to welcome the toubab-commandant. Tell, what is the fruit that never falls and is never ripe?'

The two yothe players burst out laughing.

'Astafourlah!' cried Yaye Khuredia.

The sun filled the square. The white sand was dazzling. They closed their eyes as little as possible in order to penetrate the haze rising from the ground.

O! près de ma b'onde qu'i' fait bon
Bo' bo' bo' bo' dormir.

With this refrain, Tanor Ngone Diob appeared at the other end of the square. Singing at the top of his voice, he came from where the toubab-commandant's triumphal arch was being erected. A crowd of children trotted in his wake. He wore the camouflage uniform of a parachutist, and on his dirty, frizzy hair sat the cap of a soldier of the French Expeditionary Corps. His boots were without laces, there were no socks on his feet. From his belt hung a parachutist's knife.

When he reached the elders, he clicked his heels together and gave a military salute.

'At ease, adjutant,' ordered Dethye.

Tanor Ngone Diob made an about-turn and addressed the invisible soldiers:

'Slo ... pe ar ... ms! Dis ...miss!'

He walked playfully up to the shoemaker.

'Have you slept well?'

'I was on guard duty. There were Vietcong everywhere,' replied the ex-soldier, gripping the handle of his knife. His eyes

rolled from left to right, then he stopped his mimicry and looked at the trader:

'I've seen you twice this morning. You're following me about.'

Trembling, she drew in her neck and tried to make herself small. A shiver of fear ran down her spine. Dethye Law looked at her, as if to say:

'He won't hurt you. Don't answer him.'

'Old cow! Dried up piece of fish! Rusty bit of iron! Empty well! She-devil! I see you! Ya! ya! ah! ah! ah!' he bellowed, baring his teeth menacingly.

Cowed, Yaye Khuredia got up to go. Tanor Ngone Diob, armed with a fistful of sand, ordered:

'Battery! Fire!'

His mad laughter stopped all talk. A crowd gathered at a distance, laughing.

'Go home,' Dethye called to them, trying to make them go away. 'Calm yourself, Tanor! It is hot.'

'Dul! Go to hell! Bite your rotten skin! Arse-skin! Donkey's arse! The donkey's dead! Dead! It'll fart no more!'

Laughter broke out on all sides.

Tanor Ngone Diob, happy to be the centre of attention, executed the steps of a tango, singing to himself:

Li plus b'o de touss lis tango que z'ai dansé·
C'é a lui que z'ai danzé dans ton bras.

He re-arranged his uniform, stretched his neck and bowed to an imaginary partner. He stood aside to let her pass, extending his right arm, bent at the elbow. He took his imaginary partner in his arms and turned, turned, accompanying himself with his song.

Then his mood changed. He stopped short, yelling:

'Comados! Z'armes!'

He stood six or seven kids in a line.

'For ... ward ... mar ... ch! Lef' right, lef' right.'

He followed behind. Further on, he took up his refrain, making the children repeat it after him:

O! prés de ma b'onde qu'i fait bo.

'Eskeiye Yallah! It's the day of the ravanes, the titular genies,'

said Yaye Khuredia, returning to her place. 'Such good stock! Eskeiye Yallah! Who could have foreseen this when he left for his military service? Life is nothing!'

'Life is nothing? Life is everything,' said Palla, approaching the yothekat. 'Say to a true believer: "I hope you will see paradise." Straight away, he will answer: "Amine!" Hope that he will die, and straight away he will run from you as he runs from death. Yet, no one will enter paradise alive.' He added: 'Tanor is preparing to welcome the commandant. To think he has such good blood in his veins! And now ...'

'And now?' Dethye queried.

Yaye Khuredia took up the cudgel:

'Why do you defend that family, Dethye Law? Do you think, griot as you are, that your son will marry one of their daughters?'

'And do you think I would give my son my consent if he expressed the desire to do so?'

'Why, then ...?'

'Woman, your age has taught you nothing.'

'It beats me,' said Palla, crouching with his head between his hands. 'I never understood, anyway. I don't dare believe what people are saying.'

'Eh, Palla, go somewhere else. Don't sit here shouting in our ears,' Badieye said to him, scratching his calves. His nails left whitish lines on his skin where he had scratched it.

'You two always have something to shout about,' retorted Palla.

'We shout, but it is only between ourselves.'

'What are people saying?' asked Baye Yamar. 'What are people saying, Palla?'

'I don't know,' Palla replied.

'Why bother trying to show the sun to him who refuses to see it at midday?' added Yaye Khuredia, chasing the flies that were settling on her wares.

'If you have to see in order to believe,' rapped out Dethye Law.

'I can't understand, Dethye, why you take sides with the Ndiobene,' said Palla, leaving the yothekat. 'As soon as they are mentioned, you are like pimento.' When he was at a safe distance,

he turned his gravelly face towards Dethye:

'It's your stupidity, all of you, that compels me to answer you. Every one of you knows what is going on. But you are only satisfied when, like birds of prey, your beaks are rummaging in someone else's guts.'

'Everything that is possible is matter for commentary.'

'Except, Palla, when ...'

'Dethye Law, spare me your vulgarities,' interrupted Palla. He took out an old clay pipe and filled it. He had flat feet, his toes were all split by jiggers.

'Or what you don't want to hear.'

There was a pause.

The sun poured out its flow of mercury.

The 'lef' right, lef' right' approached.

'Section, halt,' ordered Tanor Ngone Diob. The children stopped. Tanor Ngone Diob fished some sweets from his pocket and distributed them among the scrambling children. His face covered in perspiration, the ex-soldier lay down on the ground, facing the shoemaker.

'You're sweating,' said Dethye Law

'It's all for the commandant! Soldiers must sing on inspection day.'

The young man smiled, but Dethye Law's face remained stern.

'I want a gree-gree,' said Tanor Ngone Diob, breaking the silence.

'A gree-gree? What for?'

Tanor Ngone Diob elbowed himself nearer. His fingers touched one of the pots standing in front of the craftsman. A silent smile spread to the corners of his eyes.

Dethye Law repeated his question.

Curious, old Yaye Khuredia came nearer. She jumped. Tanor Ngone Diob had her by the ankle, and she fell full length onto the ground. She screamed. Before the men could come to her aid, the ex-soldier was covering her with sand, insulting her all the while. A fiendish laugh came into his eyes. Covered in sand, Yaye Khuredia had lost her head-scarf. She shouted insults

at him.

'How low you have fallen,' she screamed.

'Macou! Silence!' yelled Tanor Ngone Diob, his knife unsheathed and held in combat position.

'Sit up! You know he is harmless.'

'He, harmless? Don't exaggerate, Dethye Law. You are waiting for him to hurt someone before you will agree like everybody else that he is ...'

'Palla, I did not say he was not mad. I said he was harmless.'

'What about the time when he attacked the imam?'

'The imam? That's another story.'

'Story for story, he is mad. I say so again. And I swear before Yallah that the day he touches any of my family will be a day to be seen.'

'That day, you will know! Have you seen a clod of earth strike a stone?'

'Is that what you think? It's true, your wife is their griot. They are all depraved. A father who ...'

'That's enough,' intervened Baye Yamar firmly. He had stood up to give himself more authority. His chechia made him seem taller than he was. 'You would think none of you were fathers of families. These days, it seems we can't discuss things like friends. Some subjects one is wise not to mention, even in anger.'

'The whole of Santhiu-Niaye, and even people outside, know that Khar Madiagua Diob is pregnant by ...'

'Enough!'

'They call themselves guelewars!' muttered Palla, sitting down again.

Tanor Ngone Diob re-sheathed his knife.

O! près de ma b'onde qu'i fait bo.

Singing his refrain, he took himself off.

They were, in fact, good men, who got on together without standing on ceremony. Mostly they controlled their irritation and caste prejudices, but sometimes they came to the surface and overflowed.

In silence, they watched Tanor Ngone Diob disappear with his

song.

Carrying his dove-coloured shot silk sunshade, Guibril Guedj Diob appeared, accompanied by his younger brother, Medoune Diob. Tanor Ngone Diob's bestial cry could be heard in the distance.

'Eskeiye Yallah! Poor people.'

'Which people?' asked Gornaru.

'All the Ndiobene,' said Palla.

'I greet you all,' said Medoune Diob, sitting down next to Baye Yamar. 'Has the imam passed by?'

'I haven't seen him yet.'

'I think I saw him at the entrance to the village.'

'Thank you,' he replied, getting up. He was sure they had just been discussing the Ndiobene. He moved off in the direction of the entrance to the village.

The sun rose higher. Its hind-quarters low, its ears drooping, the dog came and lay down next to the trader, resting its jaws on the ground. A swarm of flies collected on its head.

Only the comments of the yothe players under the beintan tree continued to fly.

FOR AS LONG AS SANTHIU-NIAYE CONTINUES TO RISE FROM the nights of time, its name will be associated with the Ndiobene. Like his fellow villagers, the head of the Ndiobene, Guibril Guedj Diob, went regularly to the mosque, the small enclosure in the middle of the peinthieu. When the pregnancy of his daughter, Khar Madiagua Diob, became common knowledge, a discussion was initiated by his younger brother, Medoune Diob. In all the annals of the elders' experience, such a delicate situation had never haunted people's minds more. Having completed the formulas of politeness, Medoune Diob repeated:

'My brother is responsible for his daughter's condition.'

'Ought he to die? Or should he be expelled from our village?'

asked Massar. His head was flat on top, elongated behind, and his eyes were running with pus: everything about him demonstrated the effects of too much intermarriage. Without waiting for a reply, he went on:

'According to Koranic law, Guibril Guedj Diob deserves to die. This is what the scriptures say. But have the penalties demanded by the scriptures for infringement of the law ever been applied here?'

'Massar, speak for yourself,' retorted Medoune Diob.

'I am asking the imam,' said Massar, turning towards him.

The imam, with the stern face of the mystic, was saying his beads. Assembled there were the most enlightened minds of Santhiu-Niaye: five men.

'And what does our adda say?'

Baye Yamar looked at each of them in turn, and went on:

'The adda has always been the first rule in the lives of our fathers. If that rule is broken, it deserves either death or expulsion from the community.'

'If we are to preserve the adda and give the example,' said Medoune Diob, 'if we are to vindicate the honour of our community, the couple ought to be punished. The Koran is clear about that. And we are all Muslims here. The punishment must be carried out in public, in front of everyone, or the guilty party must be thrown into a well and the opening blocked with stones.'

'Every crime must have its penalty. That is quite true. Have we ever punished or expelled anyone for infringing the adda, or for failing to respect someone else's property?'

Medoune Diob felt a gnawing at his heart as he listened to Dethye Law. For months they had been clashing with one another. Now, he controlled an impulse to hurl in his face: 'There is no one of your nawle, of your social rank here.' When it had been discussed who should attend the meeting, he had been opposed to Dethye Law's presence.

'The case is clear. Yallah knows I love my brother. Not only because he is my brother, and like everyone else, a believer, but our inescapable duty to consider the honour of the community

guides me, and ought to guide you as well. Guibril Guedj Diob's infamous behaviour brings shame on the whole of Santhiu-Niaye. Wherever we go, even our children, we will be pointed at. Even those who are not of our nawle will despise us.'

'That is true,' capped Amath.

'May I leave?' asked Dethye Law, placing his ancient fez on his head.

'Why?'

'Because, Baye Yamar, I have not come here to be insulted.'

'Who has said anything to insult you?'

'I know the meanings of words. I know I was born a griot, but I'll never be an accomplice, not even morally.'

'Dethye Law, don't leave with your heart on fire. A discussion has never been held without you. You are our griot, after all.'

'I ask the assembly's pardon. I know my place in our community. However, one thing is certain. When it is a question of speaking the truth, or of seeking it, there is no nawle. It is a known fact that many of my caste have been murdered in the cause of truth. It is true that Guibril Guedj Diob deserves to die. It was the rule of our fathers and of our grandfathers, in the days when the essence of nobility depended on the way one lived, not on self-display. We can call to mind the names of many who put an end to their lives for acts less than the one we are discussing today. They were guelewar, men whose praises were sung by my father and his father, not to give pleasure, but to impress on their hearers the meaning of duty and dignity. Nowadays, people do not conduct themselves in this way. But truth belongs to all times, and will do so even after we are dead.'

Dethye Law paused. He lowered his face, and his body swayed gently. Then he went on, in an even voice:

'I wonder,' said Kotje-Barma at a similar meeting, 'what one ought to think of old men who marry girls the same age as their daughters?'

There was a heavy silence for some seconds. Only the regular clicking of the imam's beads could be heard. He uncrossed his legs, and began in the Arabic tone of voice he affected:

'I do not share Kotje-Barma's reservations. Are we to believe that an old man who marries a girl the same age as his daughter is committing incest?'

'A girl the same age as your daughter, a girl who has played in your home with your daughter and whom, yesterday, you called "my child," a girl whose parents said to her: "Go and tell your father such and such", a girl you baptized, in marrying that girl you are marrying your daughter.' Dethye Law looked defiantly at the imam, furrowing the coal-black skin of his brow.

The imam held the centre bead of his rosary between two fingers and lowered his eyelids, his lips moving imperceptibly. Then, opening his eyes, he said:

'To all appearances, and looked at from a distance in this way, such behaviour is morally abnormal. But I hasten to add that no sariya or rysala supports this. There have been plenty of holy men who have had wives the same age as their daughters.'

His eyes lit up with the satisfaction that sometimes comes to dull minds reduced too long to a state of inferiority. With a studied, trenchant calm, the imam returned to his beads.

'That is true. More than a few great men have had as second, third, or fourth wife the daughter of one of their disciples. This was agreed from the outset between the two men, between the father of the girl and the future son-in-law. And the daughter, being submissive, obeyed. The conduct of a holy man is not open to discussion. Between the absolution of a marriage and sin of the flesh, there is the whole niaye. I said just now—no, I asked, whether Guibril Guedj Diob ought to die or be banished from our community. What is it we want to preserve? The purity of our body's blood? The purity of our moral blood? And, placing myself—Yallah is my witness—on the strict level of the teaching of the sariya, I ask you this: Have we at any time punished anyone, man or woman, because he has violated the holy scriptures here, among us?'

Massar waited for someone to reply.

The rivalry evident in the learning of Massar and the imam went back three years. On the death of the previous imam, the two men,

in an intense, silent struggle, had each claimed the honour. They would receive no material benefit from it, but both knew that whoever held the office would have considerable influence in the community.

'Among us, then,' Massar went on, wiping the pus from his eyes, 'the scriptures are a dead letter. For, never in this village, nor in the whole of Senegal, where mosques nevertheless proliferate, not once have the penalties laid down by the holy scriptures been carried out. Go and see the authorities! We respect them and we cherish them; that seems to be all. That leaves us with the adda, the heritage of our fathers.'

'So we leave Guibril Guedj Diob alone, then? demanded Medoune Diob. 'Our children will never to able to look one another in the eyes again.'

'Yallah has given me a voice to call his faithful. I thank him! Alhamdoulillah! I admit here and now that my knowledge of Arab literature is very limited. I shed tears every night because of it. On the other hand, I console myself—far be from me the sin of pride—saying: 'Yallah sees into our hearts and understands all the languages of the spirit.' I speak therefore for the adda, since I am the only griot here. You remember the tale of our childhood. Like Inekeiv, I cannot read. I do not know who we fear the most. Men? Yallah? A few months ago, several of us believed that the navetanekat, Atoumane, had committed the crime. Convinced by Medoune Diob and Guibril Guedj Diob, you wanted to wipe away the affront with blood, driving the navetanekat from the village. The Ndiobene had all profited from his labour and sweat. Did they call us together, as we are today, to ask us our advice? Yet the navetanekat swore he wasn't to blame. It made no difference. He even sought the intervention of the imam who is here now. What did he advise him to do?'

Dethye Law paused to draw breath. His gaze met the imam's. They looked at each other for a while. Dethye Law went on:

'What did the imam say to the navetanekat when he placed his confidence in him as spiritual leader, as Yallah's representative and the representative of us all? Nothing ... Yes, he said to him:

'My son, have faith in Yallah.' The navetanekat's hope turned to bitter disappointment. We know how he struggled in that field we had abandoned because of the thorn bushes. Enough said about that ... Taking care not to be seen, he came to me. I kept him in my house for two days. I went to see Medoune Diob myself. But he was more unyielding than his elder brother Guibril Guedj Diob. Their son, Tanor Ngone Diob, in his moments of lucidity, went off to trample the field. Only Khar Madiagua Diob refused to accuse the navetanekat. Nobody wanted to believe her either. Now we can understand her. Can a daughter declare publicly: "The child I am carrying is my father's"? And you remember the night the village hunted the man? If I refuse to agree to punish Guibril Guedj Diob, it is not because I approve of incest, here or anywhere else; there is another reason. Our inability to recognize the truth does not come from our minds, but rather from the fact that we accord too much consideration to birth and wealth and also, sometimes, because we lack the courage to speak out. Between man and Yallah, I choose Yallah. Between Yallah and the Truth, I am for the Truth. Medoune Diob has something else at the back of his mind.'

'That is not true,' interrupted Medoune, vehemently.

Everyone began talking at once.

'Shout, and the truth hides itself. Remain silent, and the truth becomes hard and turns to stone,' Massar pronounced, sententiously.

'Let him finish! We have the time. If it isn't during this loli, it will be during the next,' said Baye Yamar, restoring order.

'I repeat, Medoune Diob is more concerned about the succession of the Ndiobene than about punishment. The fact that a person is of low caste has never been a hindrance to speaking the truth,' Dethye Law concluded.

'I leave you, Dethye Law. Yallah will judge us. I see this affair has been brought down to the level of the Ndiobene. I ask you to forgive me, as Yallah forgives those who offend him.'

With these words, Medoune Diob rose and left.

'I had not thought of all that,' added Baye Yamar, also leaving,

accompanied by the imam.

The others, too, left.

And, for some weeks, without conniving together, all those who frequented the mosque tacitly agreed to exclude Guibril Guedj Diob. During the prayer, no one would sit next to him. When Guibril Guedj Diob placed his slippers at the entrance, the others would remove theirs. One day, at the tacousan prayer, they all walked out of the mosque, leaving him alone.

He was no longer invited to the discussions.

Of his own accord, he stopped coming to prayers, or to sit under the beintan tree. Carrying his sunshade, he went off on his own.

The niaye was white hot, empty. The sand shimmered on the dunes. On the horizon, a cloud of moving waves.

In the village, everyone was resting, overcome by the intense, torrid midday heat. The fowls stood on one leg up against the palisades, their beaks open.

Only Dethye Law was working. He was watching for the sun to begin declining, to sing the node for the tisbar prayer. Everything was like on a postcard, still and lifeless.

The dog shook its head lazily. The swarm of flies rose up, then returned to rest on its torn ears. Sleepily, it closed its eyes, indifferent to the flies. A couple of donkeys, their front legs tied together, hobbled to the shade.

Dethye Law stood up and walked out of the strip of shade. He inspected the edge of the shade with a dubious air, screwing his eyes to measure the curve of the sun. Then, placing the fingers of his right hand together, he bent them in half. They projected their shadow onto his palm: it was time for the node, the call to prayer.

AT THE CALL TO PRAYER, NGONE WAR THIANDUM HAD gone into the niaye. She had returned unseen. Back in the Ndiobene

concession, she sat down under the nebedaye, on the look-out for Gnagna Guisse's arrival, while she listened for sounds from Khar Madiagua's hut. She had mastered her anger. The child would be born that evening, Gnagna Guisse had said. Mentally, she counted the months: bara-helu, kor, korite, digui-tabaski, tabaski, tam-haret, digui-gamu, gamu, raki-gamu—nine months. A feeling of satisfaction, subtle as the scent of Segwen incense, came over her. No woman on her mother's side had ever had an abnormal constitution. She wondered what her husband's reaction would be. Would he be able to live with his child? In the same house as the daughter—mother of his child? In the same village? In the same country? Live with them? With his other wives? And herself, mother and grandmother, how would she carry out her conjugal duties? There were no answers to any of these questions. Even when she was dead, she thought to herself, she would not enjoy the peace of death; she would keep rising from her grave. Would not people say as her daughter went by:

'That's Khar Madiagua Diob, Ngone War Thiandum's daughter. She had her first child by her father.'

Like termites eating away the inside of wood, a similar devastation had taken place in her. Ngone War Thiandum did not see the chicken scratching and pecking as it came nearer her foot. She gave a wild, fierce cry, raising her hand to her face in fear, her mouth open. The terrified chicken ran off, flapping its wings.

She suddenly shut her mouth; a fly had almost flown into it. Calm again, she heard Guibril Guedj Diob's voice. He was scolding a little boy. Unable to resist, she looked between the slats of the bamboo palisade. Guibril Guedj Diob's shadow fell dark at her feet. She could only see part of him. A voice she knew, whose every nuance she could interpret, its joys, its sorrows, its near successes, its complete failures, its sincere communion, the acts of piety hurriedly performed ...

Gnagna Guisse caught her unawares. She started, turning away from the screen. She looked into the griot's eyes. A hostile silence lay between them.

'I am the victim, you are the outsider,' said the look in the

mother's eyes.

Hurt as she was by this unspoken reproof, Gnagna Guisse suppressed her thoughts. As she had done earlier that morning, she gave way. Immediately, they fell into lively conversation, in order to avoid the real subject. They recalled happily the family cycles of the past, of their youth. They had been privileged, their's had been an enviable time. In those days, the people of Santhiu-Niaye had been gay. There was a tinge of nostalgia in both their voices. Although of different rank, they were two women from the same world. They carefully avoided mentioning its defects and vices. Deliberately steering clear of them, they extolled its virtues. But even so, the urge to embellish by exaggeration could not exclude from their minds the violence that had been done to the moral law.

Talking about the season that was finishing and the season that was approaching, Gnagna Guisse explored the lie of the land again. Ngone War Thiandum spoke with her lips only. Her inner aridity had transformed her gestures into those of a statue. Her fingers kept time with her words, as she tapped the beads of her rosary, which she had wound round her wrist. The griot was wondering, too, whether she had done right. The words of the sage ran through her mind: 'Any truth that divides and brings discord among the members of the same family is false. The falsehood that weaves, unites and cements people together is truth.' Gnagna Guisse contented herself with this justification of her silence. She was relieved to see that, in spite of the incest and the effects of her sleepless nights, the mother's heart was emptying itself of its gall. But the pride of the Thiandum-Thiandum and its passive violence were still gathered at the corners of her mouth.

'Tonight, inchallah, a stranger will be in our midst,' said Gnagna Guisse, watching for the effect of her words.

'She has said nothing?'

'Nothing.'

'I want you to give her my jewelry. I inherited it from my mother, and she from her mother. I want the jewelry to be for the

child, to make him a man. I want it to be a boy.'

She paused and, in her imagination, she saw the boy grown to manhood, clad in the dignity of a man. With him would begin another life, onto which would be grafted the unhappy lot of all men, renewing and fulfilling it.

'This jewelry is for the child, to help him become a man,' said Ngone War Thiandum. 'I want it to be a boy,' she repeated to herself. 'Perhaps—it's certain (after a moment's reflection)—the child won't have a family name. Let her call him Vehi-Ciosane Ngone Thiandum. I am the sole bearer of the name Thiandum. I bequeath it to him.'

Gnagna Guisse listened, but voiced no opinion ... The jewelry was usually displayed on a girl's wedding day; it was also the stamp of a well-off guelewar family. It was then worn by the daughter at important ceremonies. She in turn handed it down to her descendants. Ngone War Thiandum's gesture was a departure from custom: the jewelry was passing into different hands and acquiring a new function. It was an unselfish gesture that recalled the glorious past of the Thiandum-Thiandum whose gueweloi-diudu Gnagna Guisse was. She was tempted to sing out her praises, but restrained herself from an untimely display.

The muezzin, Dethye Law, called the third node of the day: the tacousan prayer.

They rose together and entered Ngone War Thiandum's hut.

AFTER THE TACOUSAN PRAYER, BADIEYE AND GORNARU had hurried back to their game of yothe. There were several onlookers, and the game was a close one.

'In you go!' grunted Gornaru, as he placed a 'nail', commenting: 'It is like when you have a boil on your backside, sitting is uncomfortable, whether you bend over or lodge it in a hollow before you sit down'.

'An unsuitable position for a suitor visiting his future in-laws,' capped Semu, taking his place.

Palla and Massar arrived from the mosque. Massar's hair was wet. Then came the others, in a group with the imam.

Between tacousan and timis, the cordiality and friendliness of the talk was mingled with personal and family tensions. The discussion would follow a line, broken from time to time by long silences; then it would start up again, often getting hopelessly involved.

'What do you say?'

'I say that yothe is a game of satan,' said the imam, turning to face Baye Yamar. He was resting on his elbows and watching the children in the distance as they dragged a recalcitrant donkey. 'You have barely finished saying your beads and you are back at your game.'

'It passes the time.'

'That's exactly what the trouble is! That time should be dedicated to Yallah. Moreover, your language is coarse.'

'That is only for the malaika. For those who have no desires, no family, no sex. I need no protector to stand between Yallah and us—myself, I mean. What I do, I do openly.'

'What others do in secret, Yallah will judge.'

'Leave him to judge me then.'

Saying this, Badieye stretched his neck, concentrated for a moment, and then, aloud:

'When you make love to a woman, either she loves you or is calculating the value of your harvest.'

Amath, who was one of his supporters, seized Badieye's wrist and added:

'True! When you have an old woman in cold weather, you warm her with your body or with firewood.'

'Those two activities are not everlasting occupations. In both of them, you lose your skin,' capped Badieye, digging his stick sharply into the ground.

There was a noisy outcry.

'You will never dare return to that hut,' said Gornaru, and, in his turn, he commented: 'Eating flesh, mounting flesh, and putting flesh inside flesh.'

And, with a sudden move, he whipped out two sticks and placed his donkey dropping.

'Astafourlah! Astafourlah!' repeated Massar, seizing Palla's forearm. Palla straightened himself, stretching his back. Massar declaimed the law in Arabic and Wolof: 'Holy Writ alone contains the truth.'

The yothekat turned to face the attack of the preachers, the imam and Massar.

'Each of us, like everyone else, will be alone in his grave. There he will answer only for his acts and his words,' declared Gornaru and, pulling Badieye, he said: 'Don't listen to them.'

Badieye, voluble, returned blow for blow.

'And Amath's departure?'

'Inchallah, I shall leave,' began Amath, not very pleased to see his departure raised again. 'I don't want to be here when the toubab-commandant arrives. I am leaving with my family. My children are grown up and ready to marry. It is Yallah's will that I only have daughters. I can't keep paying their tax.'

'If I understand you, no one here is worthy of your daughters, no one is worthy to marry them?' queried Baye Yamar.

'Me?' shouted Amath, nettled, his hand on his chest. 'Me? Who said so? If either of my daughters wants to marry one of you, we'll celebrate the union tonight. That's not why I am leaving. I am leaving because of the tax. I haven't paid it for nearly two years now.'

'Choose one of us. That's how it was done before. Since when is the initiative left to one's daughters?'

'I have always said that my daughters would decide for themselves, Baye Yamar.'

'So, then, it's your daughters who don't want us?'

'I know nothing about that. It is something I have never discussed with them.'

'Perhaps your daughters think we are too old?'

Amath preferred to keep quiet on this subject.

'Where are you going?'

Palla had finished. Massar's bald, bumpy, chocolate-coloured

head stood out further than ever on his neck.

'I have relatives at Thiès. We think we'll eventually go to Ndakaru (Dakar), where I'll find work, inchallah.'

'Ndakaru! There is nothing at Ndakaru except too many people and beggars from all over.'

'You'll be an outsider there. The people in the towns have neither faith nor honour. It's as it is among the animals of the niaye. The strongest eats the weakest. There, the enterprising live off the careless. No one has time to concern himself seriously with Yallah. Old men like us are no longer the leaders. They only mark time.'

The imam spoke with authority.

'I have heard worse than that,' added Palla. 'It's not like it is here.'

'True, it is not like it is here. We have been waiting two weeks for Latyr. Some people need candles, some need soap, some need sugar, and a hundred and one other things. He ...'

'Dethye Law, do you think that in the towns these things are free for the taking?'

'No, Baye Yamar, I don't. Seeing them helps one to hope, it feeds and strengthens the will. For it is our hope in paradise that sustains us.'

'You'd do better to chew your skins,' interrupted the imam, who had been waiting a long time for the opportunity to humiliate the shoemaker.

'Diam! Peace! There is nothing, no more peace, then. Am I condemned never to open my mouth again?'

'We know what you are driving at with your sarcastic innuendos, Dethye Law.'

'Alhamdoulillah! ... Such wit!'

'Dethye Law, you have work to do. Get on with it. We were talking to Amath.'

'Palla, you know I have to leave Santhiu-Niaye. I don't want to seem to be running away, or to leave behind me the impression I am running away. Because of the tax, yes.'

'You are abandoning your family graves, that is what you are

doing. Have any of those who have left ever been back, just once? No. You were born here. The niaye is peopled with the bones of your family. You are going into exile because you have allowed your children to gain an ascendancy over you. As for the tax; we will all give what we have.'

As he spoke, Palla squatted down, sharpening his knife on the heel of his samara. He spoke with a strong throaty accent.

'Your daughters are right. I agree with them. On a vast, bare stretch of land planted only with stumps, one doesn't wait for the middle of the day. One needs shade to shelter when the road is long,' was Dethye Law's opinion.

'Amath, don't listen to Dethye Law. If our village is like it is, it is the will of Yallah. All else is pride,' rejoined the imam.

'Let us leave Yallah where he is. We'll talk about him when it is his time.'

'Astafourlah! You blaspheme, Dethye Law,' said Baye Yamar, who had come to succeed Massar. His hair was wet, too. Seated at Palla's feet, he went on: 'All this is the result of spiritual sloth. It is idleness that leads to words like these.'

'I think the opposite myself. Yallah doesn't like narrow minds. They're like water that doesn't flow. Everyone knows that if water doesn't flow, it becomes stagnant. It becomes poisonous. In spite of its apparent cleanness, it eats away the earth that holds it. Hence the sterility of the earth and of the human spirit.'

The descendant of old aristocratic stock, with a sound religious upbringing, Baye Yamar had nothing of the shoemaker's critical spirit. The contempt with which this man of inferior caste filled him during the discussion sessions confirmed him in his fear that the adda was dying. Contemptuously, he said: 'Truly, your language is worthy only of your griot's rank.'

'The refusal to see or hear the truth when one is not able to grasp it for oneself or to make it one's own is a sign that one is less than a griot,' Dethye Law objected strongly, with no trace of mildness in his words.

Palla, the hairdresser, let go of Baye Yamar's head in his annoyance.

'Dethye Law, can't you take your shoemaker's language elsewhere? Leave Baye Yamar alone.'

'The inferiority of his reflections attaches me to him.'

Someone gave a hungry man's laugh, like the bursting of a calebash at midday. It was Biram, displaying his rotten teeth. Looking up, his attention was caught by Amath's elbow: it resembled a hunk of bread. For a moment, he gazed at it.

The noise from the yothe players drowned all conversation. Badieye leant to one side, unstuck his left buttock and gently broke wind. Then, glancing sheepishly, discreetly at each in turn, he finally said:

'Alhamdoulillah!'

'A bone in the house, who's it for?' inquired Gornaru.

'For the head of the concession,' someone replied.

'No, for the youngest wife,' said someone else.

The conversation split into groups. Amath had gone to sit in front of the shoemaker, and asked him for some thongs.

'Take some, but don't lose my awl. I would have to go all the way to Thiès for another.'

'What do you take me for?'

'For someone who is leaving.'

'That's true.'

Amath got up and went over to join the imam's group.

Massar was talking:

'Dethye Law can tell us. His wife is there. But he won't.'

'I won't be here for the baptism,' said Amath.

'Decidedly, you push your cruelty so far as to tickle a corpse,' said the imam.

'It will have to have a name, all the same,' said Massar.

'If it's a boy, will you be its godfather?' asked the imam.

'I think children of that kind generally have a dead godfather.'

'A discreet way of getting out of it.'

'Would you accept, if it is a boy?'

Loud cries came from the yothekat. Gornaru had just won.

Badieye was saying:

'I must go and wash.'

The sun, in the last stages of its decline, had embraced the whole niaye, bathing the horizon in a saffron-coloured water. The shady areas were spreading.

Dethye Law rose to his feet, stretched with a feeling of sensual pleasure, then went off in the direction of the mosque. He looked towards the setting sun, half-closed his hand again, then, facing east, he cupped his hands on each side of his mouth and in a rising voice sang out the call to prayer.

Immediately, all was quiet. The cry spiralled upwards.

AFTER SUNRISE, GNAGNA GUISSE HURRIED FROM CONCESsion to concession, the bearer of a message. In each, the formal greetings were pronounced as if in secret. In a voice of consternation, she whispered with the master of the house; their faces, the colour of wrinkled, crumpled tobacco leaves, were aghast. And, when she left, people commented:

'Well, she has found peace of mind. This world was not a place for her.'

With these two sentences, unanimity was restored.

People set off along the paths leading to the Ndiobene concession. The old women, wearing their ceremonial head-cloths, walked in procession between the palisades, whispering together.

'With such a weight on her heart, her blood turned sour. Thank Yallah for calling her to him,' said one of them piously.

'Khar Madiagua Diob was delivered like an animal last night,' revealed another, with an air of assurance, proud to be the first to tell the news.

'What did you say?' asked a woman, leaving the person she was talking to.

'As the sun hangs over us, I tell you.'

'It is the night giving birth to the sun.'

'What did she have?'

'No one knows. She is at Dethye Law's house. People are saying it is a monster.'

'She could only have a monster. Yallah has lost patience with our times. And now she has killed her mother. She would have done better to have died in labour.'

'Rather, Guibril Guedj Diob should have died.'

'I can't imagine how a man like him could have acted the way he did.'

'His ancestors must want to leave their graves.'

'Where is our world going?'

The old women stood in a line on one side of the Ndiobene concession, gossiping.

'And Khar?'

'She is at Dethye Law's house. No one will go and look for her there. As you know, when you cross the threshold of that house, no one has any right over you,' said Yaye Khuredia, who was suitably dressed for the occasion.

'And Guibril Guedj Diob?'

'He has gone to the cemetery.'

'That's the least he could do! In his place, I wouldn't have gone. Or else I wouldn't come back from the cemetery. When you are a guelewar, you don't outlive such an act,' said the third woman, facing the entrance of the hut.

'What dishonour! I am sure Ngone War Thiandum took her own life.'

'Rather die a thousand deaths in a thousand ways each more terrible than the other than endure an insult for a single day. That is their motto, the motto of the Thiandum-Thiandum. She has not failed the tradition.'

'That is what everyone is saying. She could not overcome her shame. She was a real Thiandum. The last of her line. Her blood has spoken,' said Yaye Khuredia, speaking again. 'Guibril Guedj Diob's crime will never be forgotten. A shame!'

'A shame? ... a depraved act, yes.'

'It's moral murder. Khar Madiagua Diob has killed her mother. No one here will marry her. Even if there were only old men left. Can you see my daughter as her co-wife? Never!'

'It's Guibril Guedj Diob's fault. Khar Madiagua Diob has

done nothing.'

'How do you mean, she has done nothing?' asked Yaye Khuredia, straightening her flat chest as she turned towards the woman who had spoken. 'How do you mean, she has done nothing? How often did she sleep with her father? It was in the niaye that they performed their shameless acts, under the eyes of Yallah and his malaika.'

'May Yallah forgive us such behaviour,' objected a woman. 'Perhaps her father forced her?'

'Forced her? Rubbish! How can you force a young girl? She could have shouted. I maintain she consented. Like a satan, she tempted her father.'

'She must not live here any longer. We must make life impossible for her.'

An old woman of Yaye Khuredia's generation made her entry. She excused herself profusely for being late. Yaye Khuredia invited her to join them. Quickly she put her in the picture, and continued:

'If Khar Madiagua Diob stays, she could be a bad example for our daughters. All the young men are in the village. And the fathers risk being tempted away from Yallah's path.'

'When I was very young, I heard of a case of incest. The man was buried alive. I heard of it from my mother. But I never thought I'd live to see it myself. Indeed, to whom must I extend my condolences?' concluded the latest arrival, wedged between Yaye Khuredia and the other woman.

'To whom? Guibril Guedj Diob? Khar Madiagua Diob? Perhaps to the second veudieu? I can see her over there, with her affected air. She must be rejoicing now.'

'And Tanor Ngone Diob?'

'The madman!'

Yaye Khuredia frowned, and looked towards the men, who were returning from the cemetery.

The men had returned from the burial. Gnagna Guisse, the Thiandum family griot, welcomed them. The men stood apart, silent, their eyes lowered. They did not talk. A restrained hos-

tility hung over the gloomy atmosphere. After a while, they withdrew, leaving a void in the Ndiobene concession.

Then it was the women's turn. The Ndiobene did not have a lively funeral wake as is the custom among us during that season.

At midday, the shining top of Guibril Guedj Diob's sunshade could be seen above the palisades, returning from the cemetery.

Neither that morning, nor after the tisbar prayer was there any talk, no game of yothe.

In his hut, Guibril Guedj Diob sat on a sheepskin, reading the Koran. Since the ban had been placed on him, he had lived alone like this. Even that morning, among his equals, there had been no exchange of courtesies.

Under the beintan tree, Dethye Law saw Medoune Diob in the company of his nephew, Tanor Ngone Diob. Then the ex-soldier entered the Ndiobene concession alone. A little later, his uncle went off in the direction of the niaye, carefully looking around him. He felt the eyes of the shoemaker on his back, and turned to look at him before continuing on his way.

Tanor Ngone Diob had slipped into the hut, and stood watching his father. In his eyes shone the narrow gleam of madness. His arms hung down by his sides. His thumb, guided by some obscure instinct, mechanically stroked the handle of his knife.

'How are you, son?' began Guibril Guedj Diob, by way of greeting.

A ray of light fell from the roof onto the back of his hand. His slender index finger held back the page. The amethyst beads of his rosary glittered. Tanor did not reply.

Guibril Guedj Diob closed the Book and made a quarter turn, pivoting round on his buttocks. The light made a white stripe on the back of his neck.

'Mother is dead,' said Tanor, in a tone which was neither interrogatory nor affirmative.

'Yes, son. Yallah has called her to his side.'

'What did she die of?'

Guibril Guedj Diob bowed his head reflectively, raising his forehead. His face was buried in the shadow.

'Yallah alone knows, son.'

'Perhaps she was sick?'

'That may be so, son. You may be right,' said his father.

His voice trembled. The ray of light had moved to the top of his head. His frizzy white hair glittered here and there. He went on, his voice thick with humility:

'That is so, son. That is so. You may be right. Sit down.'

He pointed with his hand to a place next to him.

'No!' thundered Tanor.

They fell silent. Time hung heavily.

'Mother is dead,' reiterated Tanor.

'Yes, son. Yallah has called her to his side.'

'What did she die of?'

'Yallah alone knows, son.'

'I have looked for Khar and cannot find her.'

'She must be in the house, son.'

'No, she is not in the house...'

'Perhaps you did not look properly.'

Once again, there was a silence. This time, in a voice of supplication, it was Guibril Guedj Diob who broke it.

'Stay in the house. You know the toubab-commandant is coming and I have to welcome him. No one but I can and ought to welcome him. One day you will take my place as chief. You have been to war. Since your return, we haven't spoken as father and son. I have things to confide to you.'

He waited in vain for a reply. Instead, like the first drops of rain on a zinc roof before a feverish storm, a mad laugh rose and filled the hut. Frightened, Guibril Guedj Diob invoked Yallah to himself.

'Where is Khar?' Tanor asked, after his burst of laughter.

'I repeat, in the house, son. Look carefully. Indeed, I want her myself. Go and fetch her for me.'

'No! She is not in the house. You are lying.'

Guibril Guedj Diob's arm twitched. His head moved. The sun's silvery rays fell on his shoulders.

Tanor Ngone Diob barked out again:

'Get up.'

'Why, son?'

Tanor Ngone Diob scratched his unkempt hair. His forage cap fell off. He asked again:

'Where is Khar?'

'In the house, son.'

'Khar has a child?'

'Yes.'

'A boy or a girl?'

'Son, I do not know. I heard a baby crying during the night.'

'It's not true,' yelled Tanor, drawing his knife.

'What isn't true, son?'

'Khar does not have a child. She is not married. I want to know where my mother is.'

The father had never doubted his son was mad. But he kept calm.

'I want to see my mother.'

'She is in the house, son.'

'Is that true?'

'Yes. It is true, son.'

'She isn't in her hut.'

'She can't be far. Perhaps she is with Khar, son.'

'Don't call me son. I am not your son.'

As he said this, Tanor advanced two paces towards his father. He went on:

'She doesn't love me.'

'Yes, she does love you. Khar also loves you. I think I heard their voices.'

Tanor listened. An innocent smile flitted across his face.

'I heard nothing,' he said.

'I did.'

'You want to chase me away?'

'No, son.'

'I am not your son,' snarled Tanor. 'Mother is dead. She said nothing to me. You are lying.'

This last rejoinder hurt the father's pride.

'I can hear her voice,' Tanor said.

'You can hear her voice? What did I say?'

'You are chasing me away?'

Suddenly, Tanor Ngone Diob began talking to himself. First, in French:

'Yes, Captain. No, Captain. The Vietcong are near the rice field. Your orders, Captain.' Then, in Wolof: 'Why do you want to go in there? Let them die. You won't get paid for it. Nor will your family. Take cover. Saw nothing! Understood, eh!'

Guibril Guedj Diob listened to his son. The son of whom he had been so proud. He had himself enlisted him for military service when the recruiting agents had come. After eight years' service, this son had returned to him from the paddy fields of Indochina and the jebels of North Africa, after spells in all the army mental homes.

The tacousan node sounded.

'Your mother is calling you, son.'

'You are sending me away.'

'No. It is true what I say. Come, it is time to pray. We will do it together, as before.'

'No. I don't pray.'

The tip of the knife came nearer. Guibril Guedj Diob raised his arm. Tanor, trained in hand to hand combat, flung him on the ground and, several times, the blade rose and fell.

IT IS SAID THAT THE BREEZE WHICH FROM TIME TO TIME caresses peoples' faces with its cool breath is the work of the women of Ouroulaïni, who live in Yallah's paradise, waiting to welcome the elect. So be it! The women of Ouroulaïni were at work, and a great many of them.

In the middle of the peinthieu, Tanor Ngone Diob performed his military manoeuvres, advancing, retreating, halting, all accompanied by a great deal of grimacing. He stood to attention, his hand at his temple, whistling the hymn to the dead.

'Ta a a tati tata a tati.'

The children surrounded him, imitating him. The dog watched them, lying on its side, covered with flies.

A man came out of the Ndiobene concession and headed almost at a run for the mosque. Removing his shoes at the entrance, he crossed the rows of faithful and spoke in the imam's ear. The latter, motionless, lips apart, blinked as if he had been struck dumb. Turning, he addressed the assembly:

'We are informed of the death of Guibril Guedj Diób. He has been killed by his son, Tanor Ngone Diob.'

All eyes turned to look at the middle of the peinthieu. Hurriedly, everyone left the mosque to meet at the Ndiobene concession, amid the weeping of the veudieu.

There were comments on all sides.

'I always said that Tanor Ngone Diob would kill one day. I even predicted it.'

'That is what he brought back for us from his wars.'

'All he did was learn to kill.'

'It's disturbing, all this,' said Semu.

'What is?' asked Palla.

'A mother who commits suicide, a son who kills his father, an incestuous daughter. Now there can be no doubt about Tanor Ngone Diob's madness.'

'It is the end of our village. Thank Yallah I am leaving soon,' said Amath.

'I am seriously thinking of leaving Santhiu-Niaye,' said Badieye.

'You, too?' asked Semu, lowering his voice.

'There is nothing more to be done at Santhiu-Niaye. Here come the women of Ouroulaïni. May Yallah let us enjoy their cool air.'

'Amine! Amine!' chorused the others.

The tree's shadow was lengthening towards the east. Three men, returning from the Ndiobene concession, seized Tanor Ngone Diob. They tied him to a large dead branch in the middle of the concession for all to see. Tanor Ngone Diob, immobilized though he was, continued to soliloquise about his wartime memories.

Dethye Law, assisted by Baye Yamar, prepared Guibril Guedj Diob's body for burial. Wrapped in a white shroud, like some inanimate object, it was carried away after the prayer for the dead by four of his peers, sticking out above the tops of the palisades. In front, Medoune Diob, carrying his elder brother's closed sunshade; next, the imam and Baye Yamar; and, following behind, the funeral cortège, chanting the hymn of the dead.

'Allah! Allah!'

'This is the first time in eight years that I have seen Guibril Guedj Diob without his sunshade,' said Palla to Badieye.

'Me, too. It was a present from Tanor Ngone Diob.'

'Medoune Diob has inherited it.'

'He will take everything. And he is now the village chief. Tomorrow he will welcome the toubab-commandant and the ten per cent tax.'

'You have understood, eh! We mustn't say anything about this affair to the toubab-commandant when he arrives. That is why he is being buried so quickly,' said Palla, and he intoned:

'Allah! Allah!'

The next day the toubab-commandant arrived, accompanied by his interpreter and two *gardes-cercle*. They were welcomed under the triumphal arch of palm fronds by Medoune Diob, the imam and Baye Yamar. Dethye Law had sent a message to say he was ill. Medoune Diob, richly dressed, carried the sunshade.

The toubab-commandant, the interpreter and the elders isolated themselves at the Ndiobene concession for discussions.

Questioned by the toubab-commandant, Medoune Diob replied:

'Guibril Guedj Diob is dead.'

The toubab-commandant replied:

'He was a good chief. And his son, Tanor?'

'He has gone to the town, like all the young men.'

A shadow of sorrow spread over the toubab-commandant's face. As he left, in front of everyone, he thanked the elders and praised the new chief they had chosen. Satisfied with his visit,

the toubab-commandant then took his departure; the tax would be paid within three months.

Medoune Diob, as chief, had given his word.

TWO DAYS HAD PASSED. THEY WERE GATHERED, AS USUAL, under the tree: the imam, crosslegged, holding his beads and looking wise; Baye Yamar, more important than ever in his *tirailleur's* cap; Biram, with his boneless face. Medoune Diob lay on the couch, his arms crossed over the head-rest. In an affable, paternal tone of voice consonant with his position, he joined from time to time in the conversation.

A little to one side, the eternal game of yothe. Badieye and Gornaru, taciturn, indulged in their favourite pastime.

'Dethye Law, I hear you are leaving us today,' said Palla, watching the yothekat.

'Inchallah, Palla, I am leaving,' replied the griot-shoemaker, packing his things.

'May we know where you are going?'

Dethye Law straightened himself. He looked intently at the imam. The imam returned the craftsman's contemptuous gaze. Having decided, perhaps, that that was all the spiritual leader merited, Dethye Law bent over his packing.

Medoune Diob repeated the question:

'You haven't told us where you are going.'

Part of Medoune Diob's face showed above the head-rest.

'I am going where, I hope, the truth will be the concern of honest minds and not a privilege of birth,' rejoined Dethye Law.

'True, one must be a griot to possess that freedom.'

'Freedom of thought has never been a gift, nor an inheritance. It has always been bought for a heavy price in blood. The ruler who opposes it will find himself undone, sooner or later.'

'And is that freedom denied here?'

'No. In truth, no. It is early yet. But the basis of our community has been undermined. If it is not said now, it will be one day. You

are not our chief. You are your brother's murderer, and our community has lost its foundation.'

'Take care what you are saying, Dethye Law,' interrupted Medoune Diob, abruptly getting up.

His eyes went from one elder to the next. Dethye Law continued:

'What have I said? People will not be able to say any more that truth is the weakness of Santhiu-Niaye.'

'My ancestors have always ruled Santhiu-Niaye, and yours have always served them.'

'That is indeed true. But that was in the past. I have inherited from my ancestors a concern for the truth which I shall preserve until the end.'

'Are you trying to say you are of noble blood?'

'Yes. The blood of truth is always noble, whatever its origin.'

'Yallah be praised that he is leaving. It is satan speaking in his mouth. Our village will be healthier without him,' said the imam.

'If a man loses the courage to proclaim the truth, he may as well die. I beg you, don't allow him to speak at our gatherings. He is not worthy of his role. He knows that Medoune Diob is the instigator of his elder brother's murder.'

Nervously, the imam tightened his fingers on his bead. Medoune Diob had sat down again.

His possessions packed, Dethye Law carried them on his head towards his house. He was joined by Palla, Badieye and Gornaru. After a few paces, they stopped. No one spoke. Gornaru broke the silence:

'Without you, the place will be empty. You have never approved when others have left. Why are you leaving now? Do you think you have been hurt more than we have? Your node is part of Santhiu-Niaye.'

'I leave reluctantly, Gornaru. Like anyone else, I am afraid of the unknown. I have a great respect for my role. Griot is not a synonym for servitude. You are high-born, but there are some things one must not accept, even if it places one's own life and the lives of one's family in danger.'

'Thank you for your advice,' said Badieye. 'I can see what you are getting at. You have always said out loud what others think to themselves, or merely murmur. But you are running away. If you cannot proclaim the truth where you were born, where you are one with the people around you, where will you be able to do so? Elsewhere? Elsewhere you will be a stranger. He who lets a small truth pass without proclaiming it will not stand up for the truth that places his life in danger.'

'You do not have to be a griot to proclaim the truth. There will always be someone who will be willing to do it. I ... I am afraid.'

'The moral courage to proclaim the truth was, yesterday, the privilege of the griot.'

'You talk about before ...'

'May Yallah keep you, Dethye Law!' said Badieye, going away.

'Amine! May Yallah help you, too.'

'Will you sing the node for us this tisbar?' asked Palla.

'Never again. That man over there is my imam no more. I prefer to pray outside the village.'

Saying this, Dethye Law continued on his way and went into his concession.

When Dethye Law came out again, preceded by his wife, Gnagna Guisse, and his children, it was after the ndjiolor. In the peinthieu, only the couch remained. The dog was chasing the flies. They crossed the square in single file and approached the entrance of the village in the direction of the setting sun, beneath its shower of mercury.

Once outside the village, Dethye Law told his wife to wait for him under the palm trees, while he climbed the sand dune. From there he could see the rooftops. He measured the time: it was time to call the faithful to prayer. He cupped his hands and sang his node.

The wind was blowing towards Santhiu-Niaye, so everyone heard the node. In ones and twos they converged on the peinthieu. Badieye, Palla, Gornaru and Semu, deep in conversation, arrived in front of the mosque. The imam, bent forward, was sitting in his

place. Medoune Diob left his sunshade at the entrance, with his slippers.

Gornaru looked inquiringly about him, hesitant. Then, suddenly, Palla, who was standing on his own to one side, raised his hand to the level of his temple and began the prayer:

'Allahou ackbar!'

In silence, the others went and stood behind him. Dumbfounded, the imam straightened himself and looked at them, then looked behind himself, where he saw only Medoune Diob and Baye Yamar. Seeing Massar join the others, the imam bowed his head.

Medoune Diob, too, had seen. His gaze went from the imam to the others. He did not know what to do. When the others had finished the prayer, they shook hands with greater insistance than their faith required. Then the imam went out, without having prayed, leaving Medoune Diob alone.

Outside, they saw Dethye Law with his family. That evening, at the assembly, when they claimed he had run away, the griot replied:

'No, I didn't. I wanted to find out if there were still any men of worth in Senegal. For I know that if only once a man refuses to give witness to the truth in his own country, he may not travel. For the stranger has only his country for moral garb.'

It was also decided at this meeting that, now that Medoune Diob had been excluded, Khar Madiagua Diob must be driven from the village.

Early in the morning, Gnagna Guisse and Khar Madiagua Diob went out of Santhiu-Niaye. They left their footprints on the dew-covered ground as they followed the path that climbed, descended and wound around the sand dunes. They did not speak. Gnagna Guisse walked in front. Khar Madiagua Diob, a bundle on her head and the baby in her arms, followed behind.

The sun rose above the rim of the horizon. The clump of palm trees projected its tangled foliage over the glassy surface of the lake.

'We have arrived. Here we must part. You go straight on.

When you reach the seashore, go to the left. You won't meet anyone from Santhiu-Niaye.'

Khar Madiagua Diob nodded agreement.

'What sort of life will you have now? Only Yallah knows. Wherever you go now, no one will know and no one must know. Avoid talking about certain things. You know what you are leaving behind you. Before you, what will happen and what must happen isn't clear. Only Yallah knows. But your life will be what you make of it. Remember, wherever you go you will be among people. If you are a real descendant of the Thiandum-Thiandum, you will not be able to live chewing all the time over your resentment. You would poison your life and the lives of the people around you. Don't forget: a man only has himself as his remedy.'

After a pause, Gnagna Guisse went on:

'You are an orphan now. Therefore, an adult, and a mother. If, as you have told me, you are your father's victim, it still remains that you are a mother. This box I give to you now contains all the gold of the Thiandum. Your mother inherited it from her mother on her wedding day. She had built all her hopes on it. She had expected to be able to pass it on to you just as she received it on the day of her marriage. Yallah did not want it to be. You do not inherit the gold. It is for your daughter, Vehi-Ciosane Ngone Thiandum. May Yallah protect you.'

'I accept his protection.'

'Go! May Yallah watch over both of you.'

Gnagna Guisse stayed where she was until Khar Madiagua Diob was out of sight, murmuring:

'May Yallah ensure that, although that child is not of noble birth, it may acquire nobility and nobility of conduct. Out of them, the future will be born.'

The griot recalled the recent events. She would never have believed such a tale, or the rapidity with which it had all occurred, if she had had it from someone else. In the middle of the night, when the girl had given birth to her child, she had gone to her guelewar's hut. She found Ngone War Thiandum inert, the spider and the piece of poisonous root from the niaye in her hand. She

approached her holding the petrol lamp, which was still alight. Her guelewar's mouth was open, flecked with a greenish foam. She wiped her lips, disposed of the spider and the root, before informing the Ndiobene and the elders of Santhiu-Niaye of her discovery.

Holding her baby, Khar Madiagua Diob walked on. The dunes followed one another; some were high, some were low. The sun had long since risen from the waters of the dawn and had deprived the last crests of their shade. Now it stood high in the sky. All morning, Khar Madiagua Diob had struggled against the morbid idea that had come into her head, trying to convince herself of its wrongfulness.

Finally, she let herself fall onto the ground under a sump tree, after clearing away the thorns lying about. She was obsessed with the thought of abandoning Vehi-Ciosane Ngone Thiandum. She sat with her legs folded, like at a family meal, breathing heavily. Her blood ran cold through her body. Tears spilled over her eyelids. Through the veil of tears, the vastness of the niaye opened out before her. Fear? Hysteria? Anger? She was agitated, and her whole body trembled. Biting her lip, she raised her narrow forehead, obstinately, towards the gaps in the thin leaves. With a forced, yet maternal gesture, she drew the child onto her lap and changed it.

She waited under the sump tree for the sun to lose its strength. Feeling rested, she set off again, chewing all the time over her anger. She spent the night among some trees, sleeping fitfully. Myriads of stars shone in the sky.

The next day, she set off again with the baby in her arms. The thought of abandoning Vehi-Ciosane took hold of her. As she walked, the smell of seaweed became more persistent and hung tenaciously about her. A haze stretched across the horizon. From the top of the fourth dune, she saw the dark green expanse, which shimmered in the middle like a piece of corrugated iron. She descended the slope. She went to the water's edge. She walked barefoot along the beach, enjoying the pleasantly warm feeling of

the water. Laughing, frilly waves came tumbling towards her. The water covered her ankles now. Khar Madiagua Diob looked about her. Not a soul in sight. She stopped, hesitating. Fear? Remorse? Cowardice? Selfishness? She bit her lip, undecided. The child in her arms was crying. She let it cry. Its cries spread out across the sea. Like the bells at dawn, they reverberated through her head.

She returned to the shore, fed the baby, and set off towards the left. From behind, the sun beat down on both of them. It was easier walking on the sand of the beach. She forced herself to walk faster. She had begun to tremble again. After four hours, her legs were overcome with weariness. Tenaciously, she pressed on. Long past the place where she had turned, she saw a black speck. Alert, she increased her pace and hurried towards the speck, hoping it would be people. At a distance of two hundred yards, she made out two men loading a lorry with sand. Coming up to them, she greeted them. They returned her greeting.

'Woman, where do you come from?' she heard herself being asked by a third man. He was holding something—she could not make out what it was—in his hand.

'Who? Me?'

'Yes, you, woman,' said the man, a little younger than the other two, his canvas shirt hanging outside his European trousers.

'From over there,' she replied, pointing to the niaye.

The two workmen, who had stopped what they were doing, looked at her in surprise.

'Where are you going,' the third man asked again.

'I want to go to Ndakaru.'

'Ndakaru?' repeated the man, astonished.

She did not reply. She held her bundle on her head. The man's curiosity made her wary.

'We aren't going to Ndakaru,' said the man, hoisting himself up onto the side of the lorry and busying himself inside. He went on: 'Ndakaru is far. I can put you down at the crossroads. There you will find another lorry to take you to Ndakaru. How much have you got?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing? You can't get to Ndakaru with nothing.'

With this, the driver lost interest in her.

She stood where she was, glancing sideways at him.

With a regular rhythm, the spadefuls of sand fell into the lorry. Soon, the strong masculine voice of one of the two men let out a *Djinah O*.

'Come round this side. It is getting hot,' the driver said to her.

She obeyed, and settled herself down in the shade of the lorry. The falling of the sand woke the baby, and it began to cry. She placed it on her lap and from the opening of her blouse took out a breast. The crying stopped.

'It's a fresh new baby,' said the driver, stating a fact.

'Yes.'

'You are going to Ndakaru to look for work?'

'Yes.'

'It's a bit late in the season. I've heard it's hard for mothers to find work as maids.'

'I have relatives there.'

Without realizing what she was doing, her knee kept time with her song as she rocked Vehi-Ciosane. Like waves of pleasure splashing her face, marked by her labour and the fatigue of walking, thin streams of light crossed her eyes.

'Finished, boss,' announced one of the men.

'Let's go, then. Abdou, you go behind. You, get in here with me.'

'Right, boss,' said Abdou.

In the cabin, the driver asked her:

'A girl or a boy?'

'A girl.'

'Pity. What name?'

'Vehi-Ciosane Ngone Thiandum.'

'I have never heard such a name: Vehi-Ciosane ... Which Thiandum was her father?'

Khar Madiagua, gently, held her baby tight, pulled her bundle under her feet, and looked in front of her. The man watched her,

sideways, then started the engine without getting an answer.

With the immensity of the niaye on one side and the immensity of the sea on the other, the lorry drove off, leaving behind it the double track made by its wheels, which the sea came to lick. This story had no other ending: it was a page in their life. A new one starts, which depends on them.

And if, one day, you should happen to go into the niaye and to the village of Santhiu-Niaye, don't ask them any questions. Of me, perhaps they will say: he came once.
The one visit was enough.

Ndakaru, Gamu 1965