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Ken's Prehistory

Fodé Ndao had managed to shake loose the fruit he so much coveted. As he watched it come tumbling down from the top of the tree, encased in its mustard-colored velvet, the color of a lion cub's belly, the color of the savannah, young Fodé shouted with joy. The fruit, hovering in the air, fell in a spiral to the ground, which was strewn with roots. Cautiously, Fodé picked it up to make sure it had not burst in its fall. It was whole.

"Come, quickly," he said to his sister, "see, look how long it is, and with that velvety cover it should be nice and ripe. You shouldn't ever pick the baobab fruit before it has this deep color. The winds of the savanna and the sun have made it bloom and ripen. Come, we're going to have a real treat. I'm going to crack it open."

They went back into the courtyard of the family compound and found the ideal spot in an empty granary.

"Go get some water," said Fodé, "and if you can ask for some sugar from mother, we'll make a *ndiambdne*.*"

Fodé Ndao was stroking the fruit whose deceptive down exterior ended up scratching him.

He found a stone and crouched down on his heels, chest forward, bent over the fruit that continued to fascinate and excite him.

The mother was busy preparing the millet for the noon meal she was to take to the fields, to the father and the two older sons who had left for the day early in the morning.

It was the period in which the land was being worked for the next sowing of the millet and peanuts.

"Ma, give me some sugar," begged Codou, Fodé's sister.

The mother didn't hear a thing. Sitting on her goatskin mat, the calabash in the hollow between her strong thighs—thighs that had pulsed for so many reasons since the day that the father had come to ask for her hand in marriage—she held her head lowered over her water-drenched millet. While one hand steadied the calabash and the other did the kneading, with her legs uncovered, her chest naked, her breasts sagging like empty the nether had dozed off.

"Ma!" Codou put a hand on the mother's shoulder.

"Eh! What do you want?" With a start, the mother woke up. "Some sugar to put in the *ndiambdne*." Carelessly, Codou added, "Fodé took down the most beautiful fruit of the baobab tree."

The mother was exasperated.

"Ah, I've had just about enough of you. Come and help me here. Light the fire and

* A drink made by pressing the baobab fruit out in sugar water.

bring me the pot."

As she picked up her calabash again, the mother continued her monologue: "Oh God, what did I ever do to deserve such a no-good daughter! All she does is spend her time running around with the boys in the village, chasing birds and wild rats."

Codou wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to get away.

"Oh no! That's enough, you stay right here, you evil child. First go and call Fodé Ndao. I asked him to cut the wood for me. Another good-for-nothing; I'm going to tell his father to take him along to the fields. Who has ever seen anything like it: a man who stays home. Isn't he almost eight? Go, go find him and get back here right away, you, you don't do anything, you aren't good for anything, you don't know how to do anything at all."

And once again the mother started to knead the millet.

Suddenly she stopped, called back Codou, who was slowly heading for the granary, while with her feet she playfully worked the fine sand that had bathed the footsteps of this Gouye family for a whole generation.

"Quick, come back here, something is biting my back. Hurry up, you lazy thing."

Codou retraced her steps, came closer to the mother, bent over her.

"Below there, oh you're so silly, I said between... on the side...and there...."

"But mother, I don't see anything, there's nothing there," Codou managed to say.

"You have such a nasty attitude." The mother seemed at her wit's end.

She let go of the calabash and, taking the broom, she scratched her back.

Codou had already turned around and was running to the granary. She found Fodé also scratching himself everywhere. The velvet casing that covered the husk of the fruit was itching.

"Ah Codou, at last, what were you doing? Where's the sugar?" He was talking to his sister while he continued his scratching.

"Of course, if you're going to stroke that fruit you're going to get it all over yourself. Fodé, Ma said no. She says you should come and cut the wood."

Codou was talking to her brother as if she were talking to herself.

"Fine. We'll make the ndiambdne later," Fodé reluctantly consoled himself. "I'll steal some sugar from Ma, I know where she keeps it."

And the day passed with its little moments of pleasure, moments of dozing, moments of dreaming, of working, of contemplating space, until the evening fell.

The father and the brothers returned from the fields at the same time that the herd was brought back by Mbougne, the shepherd, who took it to graze all day in the brush.

With the dusk, exhaustion came swooping down. Darkness enveloped all instincts and dreams.

The moment. The hour of silence. Darkness. Dreams. The world going to sleep.

The mother was stretched out on the creaking mattress; the oldest son had fixed it up the week before with dried straw.

She was tired, the mother: the sun, the air that didn't move at all; the millet she had cut, dried, pounded, prepared, and given to her family to eat.

Every night, she was the last one to go to bed, after she had assured herself that everything was in its place and neat.

Fodé took advantage of this moment when the breeze was speaking, when the spirits were moving among themselves, to get up, and, discreet as the night, his accomplice, to dig into the calabash the mother used for storing the sugar.

He used both hands and couldn't replace the cover again.

"Oh, I'm wasting precious time, mother is bound to wake up," he thought. "I'll just

leave the calabash as is; tomorrow at dawn, at the time that mother, always up first, goes out to the courtyard to open up the chicken coop, to untie the goats, and to milk the cow for breakfast, I'll put the cover back on."

And Fodé went back to bed.

The *quinqueliba*,* prepared the night before, was simmering on the burning logs in the courtyard, as serene as the dawn that gave it its hue.

Sleep had conquered Fodé. His father shook him.

"Fodé, useless male creature, get up, you evil boy!"

Fodé stretched himself while the father went on: "Did you take the cover off the calabash? The room is full of *xun xunoor*;⁺ was it you who touched the sugar?"

"No, my father, I didn't do anything," Fodé replied.

As if in a monologue, the father started up again: "So who did take the cover off the calabash? It's a bit strange to think it might have uncovered itself."

"Maybe she, who is my mother, did," Fodé dared to utter, somewhat uncertainly.

At that very moment, the mother came into the room.

"Where's the sugar? Where did I put it? And where are all these *xun xunoor* coming from?"

She started to get angry.

"Fodé, it's You, you thieving, evil boy; give me back that sugar immediately or I'll do something terrible to you. Sugar is hard enough to come by and plenty expensive. You will not have any breakfast, that's your punishment."

After his mother said all that, Fodé felt ashamed.

He wanted to be forgiven, to give back the sugar he had hidden under the bed cover, but he thought of the *ndiambane* and decided against it.

The sun had risen, adorned as every day. Life in the village of Gouye began to stir and the start of a new day was announced by a concert of noises, of the breeze, of burgeoning.

Fodé took the sugar, went to retrieve the fruit from the granary, and, bounding like a colt, rushed off to enjoy himself.

He broke the fruit by tapping it on a stone; the husk split open like a mouth about to snap up the world and was showing its pits coated with pulp.

Fodé's mouth was watering. He went to get some water from the container that stood in front of the compound for passersby to use to quench their thirst or wash up if they felt dirty. He mixed the water, the sugar, and the pits inside the very husk of the fruit; as he tasted it, he almost swallowed his tongue. It was a wonderful *ndiambdne*, pale yellow, like a light sour cream in which the now bare pits were soaking. Fodé kept one of the pits in his mouth for his tongue to play with.

While she was eating her breakfast, Codou wondered where her brother had gone.

"In any case, serves him right, he won't have any breakfast: he'll get his," she said to herself while she ate her fresh couscous covered with the still tepid cow's milk. Yet it surprised her that her brother wasn't complaining, and then she suddenly remembered the *ndiambdne*. She rushed to finish her breakfast and ran off.

The mother reprimanded her, yelling at her to come back and wash the utensils and

* A plant whose leaves are used to make a tea of the same name.

⁺ Ants (in Wolof).

to find Fodé for her so he could cut the wood.

The father and older sons had left early, taking their breakfast with them.

Almost as if to herself, the mother went on:

"Evil children! Codou, call Fodé immediately or I'll do something terrible to you both; I've had enough, I'm tired, I'm worn out from these kids, one as bad as the other. Kess!" she said, as she threw the lid of the pot of *quinqueliba* at the roosters and chickens, who were trying to peck at the bits of millet in the sand or directly from its calabash.

"Thank God. Well, I'll go get some dried vegetables for the noon meal. I'll prepare some gnalangué,* there's still some dried fish left from what my mother sent me. Codou, Fodé, you evil children, come here, right away, right now."

She, the mother, didn't stop.

In the meantime, Codou had joined her brother. "Ma says for you to come, Fodé!"

He didn't even raise his head as he busily mixed his *ndiambdne*.

Codou went on: "Ah, so that's how you make your *ndiambdne*, in secret, so you won't have to give me any; just wait till I have something you ask me for, I'll refuse."

She seemed angry, but her voice had become gentler. "Come, Fodé, give me a little, just a taste."

Her brother remained indifferent to her presence.

Exasperated, she raised her voice: "And Ma says to come and cut the wood, Fodé. Fine, I'll tell her you refused."

Fodé had enough of hearing his sister talk. In a fury, he spat out the pit that was still in his mouth. "That's enough, you and your incessant talk."

It was just before the rainy season. The father and the older sons spent the days working the fields. The village of Gouye had taken on a diaphanous color.

The huts were yellow, the high grass yellow, the sand yellow, the animals yellow, the humans yellow. It was very dry and the sun crackled soundlessly-it was that hot. The village continued its life. The inhabitants continued theirs.

One day, toward the end of the afternoon, the mother went to fetch water from the well. Lost in thought, she walked the little path laid by years of footsteps: she wouldn't notice anything. It was always like this; though she was looking straight ahead, she wouldn't be looking at anything, she wouldn't see anything. "That calm, that serenity, reigns in every village, on every face. Is it resignation or inner peace?"

The sound of galloping surprised her well after she heard it; it had never before happened in the village that the sound of galloping was heard, for nobody had a horse. The strangeness of it all took her by surprise. She turned around, and her feet became tangled: she lost her balance, the jar of water slipped and spilled out over the ground. She had to steady herself in order not to fall as well. The water from the well, sweet as the baobab fruit, seemed to hang suspended for a moment, and then in its spillage flowed off like a small river.

Her hand in a fist over her mouth, the mother was speechless. Something was going to happen. She did not know what, but in the almost thirty years that she had been fetching water from the well, this was the first time that such a thing had happened to her. The jar, in a thousand pieces, seemed to be shedding tears of silver. The mother took her headdress off, drew her hands through her long-forgotten braids, invoked the ancestors. She prayed to the

* A dish typical of Saloum.

guardian spirit to preserve the family from all disaster.

And because of it, she had forgotten the galloping sound. Suddenly: "Greetings, woman, I offer you my respect and want to honor you with this head scarf from my country; I live in the land where the sun never passes. It takes the women there one year to make a scarf such as this one. I have come to look this region over; I would like to settle here, start a family; my mind is made up."

The mother was fascinated by this man, tense, sure of himself, determined; not for half a century had such a man come through. His horse was as tense as he was. Both of them were breathing heavily.

The mother quickly put her headdress back on, apologizing, for a married woman of her age ought not to bare her head. She reached out to the stranger and accepted the gift. The fabric was handmade, the print as well, all of it dyed in indigo. It smelled good, the contents of northern valises whose scents had traveled through more than one kingdom. She invited the man and his horse to come to her house and freshen up.

The jar's broken pieces watched them move off toward the compound. The spilled water had worked a seed loose which it hesitantly covered up again. It was the pit of the baobab fruit that Fodé had spit out when he went to answer the mother's call on the morning of the first day the gods conceived a new generation that was to convulse the times.

The rainy season had arrived without any warning, with a downpour that soaked the sun, the bodies, the earth, life. The whole village was bubbling with excitement. Ah, water, if you didn't exist, how pointless life would be! The rainy season was welcomed by the children and the birds dancing together.

That particular day much water had fallen. Puddles and waterholes had formed. Water ran in the small paths, taking with it all the dry season's waste that lay strewn around the village. The pit of the baobab fruit had not budged, for it had been rooted in the soil by the water the mother had spilled. One week later, as the rainy season began, the seed germinated: a tiny stalk with a delicate leaf could be seen. Steps of human beings and animal hooves miraculously spared it, and soon a frail young plant would rise and go to sleep with the sun.

Tirelessly, life continued in its course. Two years later, the seed had become a young baobab tree with a straight, high trunk that carried thick foliage. Again the dry season came, and everything began once more as always before. Fodé had grown up and was leaving for the fields with the father and older brothers. He no longer heard the mother yell at him. He had become a man in the year that the locust raged in the region and destroyed most of the harvest. The mother respected him now and he no longer made *ndiambdne*.

Codou had grown into a lovely, well-developed young girl with a powerful body. She resembled a sculpture, emerged from the Ndoucoumane landscape. A landscape of fire and gold. She did the cooking and took the mother's place in all the household tasks.

The entire village had taken on that form of existence in which beauty is intermingled with the everyday and the dream. In the evenings, at sunset, the elders made sacrifices to the shadows of the dark.

Seen from afar, the village, all of dried mud and straw rooftops, seemed to be offering itself to life like a virgin. Despite an inanimate appearance, it was crawling like a termite hill. Everyone was happy there, for everyone shared everything. Birth, life, and death. Sorrow and trouble, happiness and joy. In this village people were together as one. The old grew older and births were welcomed as if they brought immortality. The newborn was

always a reincarnation. But one afternoon tragedy made its entrance.

Codou was preparing millet fritters, which were eaten for breakfast and were brought to neighbors. The oil had been heating for some time; Codou was absorbed by her preparations. Lost in her young girl's dreams, she was thinking of the day that she would marry the shepherd's son whose tall stature and athletic carriage made her tremble every time she saw him.

The oil caught fire. And the wind, which blows in the early days of the dry season to ripen the harvest, surprised the flame and carried it to the straw rooftops. In one minute the entire village was ablaze, fanned by the wind that an evil spirit had sent to destroy its harmony.

The screams and the strident howling of the women mixed with the crackling of the woodwork. The men were in the fields. The women brought the old people and the children out; it was a tragic vision followed by desolation. The entire village presented a scene in which the specters of mud walls served as charred characters holding a tragic pose.

There were no deaths.

The trees lost their foliage and the fire continued its tranquil path, now across the savanna that lay waiting, as it carried with it the previous night's dreams and the illusions of the moment.

Once again, the baobab tree had been spared. The fire had taken leave just in front of it and the winds had turned their backs on it. Several families left what once was the village and settled farther away.

All that was left was the small cemetery and the faithful baobab tree.

The wind sang in the emptiness.

That same year, the tense man in search of a homeland returned with a small family. There was the eternal mother, the spring that never dries, the indispensable woman without whom life would not be. And three children. He was stunned as he faced the emptiness. He asked his little family to wait under the baobab tree in whose shade the mother had begun to undo the luggage to take out some provisions. The children were exhausted and famished. The man went to take a tour of the emptiness.

With their eyes the mother and children encompassed this unreal landscape of which the father had spoken so much, there in the North through which the sun never passed. Here, there was nothing but sun; it was everywhere. And the baobab tree, in whose shade reality replaced the dream and became dream.

The youngest of the children took refuge between the mother's warm thighs, holding on to himself very tightly. He was not afraid. He wanted to be reassured, be infused by his mother's presence. While trying to put one arm around the mother's neck, he had broken the amber necklace she had worn for the trip. The beads scattered like the heat that embalmed the fantastic universe that was the savanna, the land of the sun and of light.

The mother had gathered up the beads and, without a word, had tied them in a free end of her *pagne*.*

Here, humans did not speak. Only the sun spoke.

This place was not the place of everyday. It was the final stage. The mother did not notice that one of the beads had found shelter in the sand, under this baobab, a shelter that silently bade it welcome.

* The ankle-length cloth a woman wraps around her waist or makes into matching tunics or blouses. A third *pagne* might be used to tie an infant on her back. (Tr.)

The father returned from the emptiness. The decision he had made long ago still stood: "You, Astou, my wife, you, my children, we have arrived in the land of the sun and we shall stay here."

They began by finding lodging in the houses without roofs. The sky was the largest, the most beautiful roof. The sky of Ndoucoumane was reassuring. The nights caressed their bodies to lull them to sleep, the sun woke them with song, the wind brought them invigorating breath and freshness of life.

The children were the first to discover the secret corners in which the ancestors made their rounds, the first to adopt a lifestyle intimately linked to the sun. They had gone with the father to choose the spot where their future house was going to be built. It was in front of the baobab tree, where they had stopped on the day of their arrival. Where the mother had fed her children millet fritters. Where one amber bead had gotten lost in the secret folds of the sand.

"Here, in front of this baobab tree, the symbol of a previous life, here we'll build a house that will be the dwelling, we will give our bones to this land of Ndoucoumane, to the sun we will sacrifice the most treasured possession we have: our life. Come, let's get started. Let's establish the four stakes that will mark the boundaries of the compound and we'll make the infinity of the savanna and the brush our territory. We have arrived. Here we'll all be reborn."

And so the father spoke.

The only one left in the village of disaster was an ageless creature. Nobody knew from where he had come. All he had in the world was the sun, the baobab trees, and the infinite heat. It seemed that he had no knowledge of anything else. For him everything happened in the village and always he boasted about unimaginable discoveries. He knew the secrets of plants, of roots, of leaves. He even confirmed that he had discovered the plant that ensured immortality. "I shall never die," he often said. "He is mad," decided those who had left for farther distances.

The father and the children were busy mixing the mud for what was to be their home, when the man approached them. "Greetings, my people," he said, "I had already dreamed that you would come and settle here. I am the oldest, the wisest of all. I know everything. I possess all the secrets of this village; I had a family here more than five centuries ago; once I spent fifteen days and fifteen nights in the brush with the hyenas. There used to be enormous numbers of them. One morning I came back and nobody recognized me. But I recognized them all: the father, the mother, the hut where I used to sleep and the goat who always stayed inside the compound. I have always been alive, and believe me, I am immortal. After the fire, they left and I remained. In another thousand years, I'll still be here. One thing only is on my mind, and that is this young baobab tree: one morning it came out of the soil as if it had been planted by gods of another world. I am doing research and one day I will pierce its secret; this baobab is linked to an event that will shake an entire generation."

He continued speaking as if he were talking to the brush, as if he were talking to the sun.

"I hope the sun will warm you for a long time to come. If you are looking for immortality, I am always under the trees should you want to find me."

He turned around and went back the same way he had come, tracing his footsteps. He looked to erase them.

"Human beings can't do anything to me, but among the spirits there are some evil cousins who might play me dirty tricks," he used to say when someone asked him about it.

"If I have to go somewhere at night, I put rags around my feet." The father and the

children watched him as he walked off toward the light.

The father pulled himself together. "Well, let's go and tell mother that we have found our place in the land of the sun; let's try to work like men and build this compound quickly. We are here for eternity."

The father went off, followed by the children. He was lost in his own thoughts: Sometimes we have to ask how the world went on without grasping any answer; inescapably, every day of one's life, events follow one another. One could dream one's life, but one couldn't dream one's reality. The everyday is made up of nothing but isolated moments.

A village, a sun, a family.

How could a human being whose destiny escapes him drag a wife and children along with him in a perpetual motion that was really a flight? Religions promise the hereafter, dreams promise a better world, and the I, barely conscious of itself, assigns itself its role only to die tomorrow.

Formulas collide. Lost, human beings roam around inside thoughts, meditations. Notions introduce themselves, ideas are born, plans grow profuse, comparisons compare. Each one tries a new path in emptiness, but flight inspires creation, and to create is to fill the void, humankind's only true enemy.

The baobab tree was growing with baffling speed. The father, the mother, the children were not paying it any attention. Yet it was in its shade that they gathered when the sun forced them to do so. The father would dream there, the mother never.

Is that perhaps the secret of her serenity?

The family evolved and adapted to its surroundings. Days and nights followed one another. The family's home took on a human shape. One rainy season passed. A new family came to settle in the village. It, too, had come from the land through which the sun never passed. It had measured out its plot next to the first compound without being too close. The family used to be a closed circle. With time, a small path was traced by the footsteps of the men going from one compound to the other.

That same year, the mother brought a child into the world, a boy as solid as the sky which had watched his birth. He was the first of a new generation in the land of the sun. Human beings continued to be. There were births, deaths; the sun was always there and the baobab seemed to have stopped growing. It gave the best fruit of all. They made juice out of it to pour over the millet porridge; measles were treated by making the patient drink it and then putting some of its drops in the eyes; it helped against diarrhea, too. Its dried leaves served to prepare the powder that would bind the couscous, giving it a flavor of fresh milk; freshly ground and mixed together, they were the best remedy against fatigue. Its bark served to weave the famous hammocks of the land of the sun. The land of the baobab. Little by little, the village became populated. From every region families came to settle there. Children were born, grew up, sometimes were cut down by death. The elderly sank away slowly; the trees were there and sometimes, in the middle of the night, one could hear one of them tear its entrails out of the soil and, like a mountain caving in, lie down heavily on the ground that had supported it for so long.

The arrival of the Syrians and the Lebanese, about whose origins people wondered in the beginning of the century, turned the village into a small commercial center to which the neighboring villages flocked on market days. Factory-made shoes were introduced.

Lost in the far corners of Ndoucoumane, this village became familiar with the train, only because it passed through without making a stop. The women and children would stand in front of the compounds as the train came by; the mothers would hold up the plump little infant hands to wave at it. The fathers and the older children, bigger boys, would go to the

tracks to see better and would stay to watch the train's smoke as it soiled the horizon, leaving a smell that would haunt nostrils and dreams for a long time afterward.

The tracks were there before the village was; the immortal one (the "madman") contradicted that:

"These tracks found me here, they didn't exist when I was born."

The man from the land through which the sun never passed became very well integrated in Ndoucoumane, where he was respected and consulted. His faith in God, his honesty, his generosity had become his weapons. He made his living from commerce, the cattle that he owned, and his work on the land. A man of old. The young girl from the compound next door pleased him and he laid his claim on her. She belonged to the second family that had settled in the village after the fire. Her skin as pale as moonlight, limbs as slender as those of the gazelles of the area, her carriage that of a Mandinke princess, she had teeth that shimmered like the water when the sun is at its zenith.

She would fetch water at the well in the morning and the evening; more than once a day she would pass underneath the baobab tree without stopping. The man had noticed her and, what was most important, neither of them belonged to a caste. She became his second wife, bringing him her youth, her beauty, and her maidenhood.

The night she was supposed to move into her new home, the moon was full. "The whole village lay bathed in a light as soft as a child's caress. A crowd of women accompanied her. The light filtered through the leaves of the baobab; she wanted to stop for prayer when she felt something like a veil of somber sweetness brushing over her hands.

What else was she yearning for in life besides what was happening to her at this moment? But who could guess at what she was really thinking, dressed from head to toe, fully covered by a completely white *pagne* that fell down to her knees? This is how she was given to a man from whom nothing "but his bones" was required, for better or for worse.

As custom required, festivities were organized the day after her arrival. Dressed in her most beautiful clothes and adorned with the jewels given to her by her husband, she prepared and served her first dish, making it known that she possessed the gifts of a cook as fine as any of northern reputation; her charm and grace made more than one man wish for an additional marriage to someone similar.

The husband was happy and slept with her for two consecutive months. And so it went before the turns were established by which he would alternately spend as many nights with one wife as with the other. Her room looked East. The sun awakened her and put her to bed. She had her first child one year later. Now she had become a woman and she was sharing her life with the father's first wife. She walked around with her baby straddled on her back, under the baobab which covered the family compound more and more fully. To show where the house was, one had only to point to the giant baobab tree. What could the mother be thinking about under the baobab? Was she suffering? And what, also, was the baobab thinking about? For sometimes it would begin to laugh, sometimes to weep, and it would happen as well that it would fall asleep so that it could dream.

Suddenly a scream! A piercing scream. A cry from underneath the denuded baobab tree came to shatter the harmony of the deserted village. The child was pushing the amber bead into its ear, deeper and deeper.

The cry echoed in a heat of rhythm and dance.

translated from the French by Marjolijn de Jager
