

Ñaangoj: respeaking memory

Among the *sérères*, the ethnic Senegalese group I belong to, there is an at once simple and strange game called *Ñaangoj*. I am not sure that there is a proper translation of it in French, English, or German, but if I had to come up with what *Ñaangoj* means, it would involve two things which to all appearances have nothing to do with one another. On the one hand it refers to the footprints left by crabs on a beach; on the other, it conjures up a short length of rope that is given away.

Like many children in my village, I was introduced to this game (which, as you have already guessed, is obviously something more than a game) by my maternal grandmother, Mboyil, who is now dead, but an essential part of whose heritage, and the memory I still have of her, has to do with this practice. What is involved is a questionnaire or, more precisely, a dialogue in the form of questions and answers. Mboyil used to start things off. I will read the dialogue in the original language.

-*An tchi ka u Ñaangoj ?* / Who shall I give the *Ñaangoj* to ?, she said.

-*Miii!* / Me!, I replied.

-*Wo ané?* / Who are you ?

-*Mi Mbougar.* / Me, Mbougar.

-*Mbougar ané?* / Mbougar of who ?

-*Mbougar Sabo?* / Mbougar of Sabo.

-*Sabo ané?* / Sabo of who?

-*Sabo Mboyil.* / Sabo of Mboyil.

-*Mboyil ané?* / Mboyil of who ?

-*Mboyil Ndiass?* / Mboyil of Ndiass.

-*Ndiass ané?* / Ndiass of who?

-*Ndiass Tening.* / Ndiass of Tening.

-*Tening ané?* / Tening of who?

-*Tening Sabo.* / Tening of Sabo.

-*Sabo ané?* / Sabo of who?

-*Sabo Khaan.* / Sabo of Khaan

-*Khaan ané?* / Khaan of who?

-*Khaan Diaté?* / Khaan of Diaté ?

Etc.

I'll stop there so as not to bore you. In this dialogue which must be imagined as being very rhythmic and very jolly, very serious and very playful, Mboyil gets me to recite and repeat the names of the female lineage and descendants of my maternal branch. I am Mbougar, and I come from Sabo, who comes from Mboyil, who comes from Ndiass, who comes from Tening, who comes from another Sabo, who comes from Khaan, who comes from Diaté, and so on and so forth, until Ngolo, who is my most removed female forebear whom we have in our memory, and who allegedly lived in the 15th century.

There is no point in explaining that after my female lineage, my grandmother was sure that I also knew my female lineage on my father's side, which dates back to the 14th century. That was its function: a function at once symbolic, philosophical and educational. So every week I spent several hours of my childhood playing that game which, as you now know, is anything but a game—or else it is the most crucial game there is: a game that involves far-reaching existential questions. Sometimes it got on my nerves and I would refuse to answer, or, lacking concentration, I would muddle Khaan and Tening. My grandmother became irritated from time to time and, when I announced that I did not want to play, she would say that I would one day regret not having been more hard-working in those sessions. Today I know that those hours are not only part and parcel of the most enduring memories of my modest life, but that they also represent one of the things I am most proud of. Up until the fourteenth century on my father's side, and up until the fifteenth on my mother's, I know the names of the women I am the descendant of.

And yet I am not obsessed by my origins. My pride does not have to do just with the fact that the matrilineal lineages of my family are alive in me. My pride comes rather from the fact that my memories have not been erased by time, but above all that they have not been destroyed by an endeavour which has nonetheless ravaged, with extreme violence, whole swathes of memory and history about my continent, and throughout the world.

By playing *Ñaangoj* with me, Mboyil was not merely teaching me that my great-great-grandmother was called Ndiass, and that, in the middle of the fifteenth century, the good lady Ngolo already had a part of my blood. No: by playing with me, and making me review my genealogical tree through language, my

grandmother was telling me: there is a part of memory in words, and that particular part has not been destroyed, even if it has been damaged.

The most important thing for me, before re-writing memory and history, is to talk about them again. I know very well that there is an old Latin proverb which says that words fly away and writings remain. Yet I hail from a history that has held its ground just on words, stubborn but joyful words, a list of names of women who have experienced things of a violence that I cannot imagine, but who, despite that violence, invented and nurtured the *Ñaangoj*. This is a lesson for me: when history is denied, the best answer is perhaps invention; the invention of forms to keep it alive, or resurrect it. This principle of invention, which is invariably a principle of courage, is what moves me. The *Ñaangoj* is the proof that something is resisting, or has resisted. Something, in words, underpins the wounded memory. *Non solum scripta, sed etiam verba manent.*

I know what you are all wondering. The relation between the *Ñaangoj* and the image of the length of rope that is offered is evident. It is the metaphor of the place, of the baton that is handed down from generation to generation. Mboyil has handed the baton on to me, and my mother, Sabo, will perhaps hand it on one day, I hope, to my children, her grandchildren. But what does all this have to do with the crab's claw prints on the beach? I don't know exactly, myself, but I do have a hypothesis. Or rather, an image: one of crabs whose marks, on the shore, remain visible, even after a large wave has covered them.

But it is just a hypothesis.