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The Incredible Story of Baoo the Foulani and the Big Fish

by Samia Amami

“Air pillow, water, wide, far, the high star. line, tomorrow, youngsters, adults, children, how many? A mother singing, embraced, coincidence, the blue carpet, strong movement, under, roaring. The mountains of water emerged, surrounding, vertigo. Grabbing the horse reins, saw, mountain out devouring people. time rushing, screaming, crying silence nobody. Hands only roots, if only I could swim like I can ride, the old man, disappear.

Pressure underneath, water, ocean, in eyes, ears, mouth, all, vertigo, big fish. Darkness, water, hot, scorching, mother's belly, mom, the trap, dark, the air, very dark, time lost a lot. He looks, ants devouring my skin, spitting out, big fish. Beach people eyes.”

I stopped translating, so Giacomo stopped the recording and looked at me wondering.

“I'm not sure”, I answered.

“This is a literal translation of the immigrant's words but I'm not sure I understand all of the vocabulary of his language. Does he actually mean that a fish swallowed him then spat him out on the shore or is it just a metaphor?



-That's what the translator who brought him in for investigation said as you can hear it in the recording. He confirmed to us that the immigrant speaks the Fulani language, but he couldn't make out the dialect. This is why I called you. You're the only real expert in Fulani and you master its different dialects which could allow you to locate the region from which he came."

That's true. I could have. But it was a dialect I had never heard before. The Fulani language contains multiple dialects and I'm fluent in most. Some of them share a lot of vocabulary but grammar and structure differ. This language is really strange, for example he says the "line of tomorrow", does he mean the horizon where the sun comes up? When he says "star" does he mean the moon or the sun? The accident of the boat that brought him in with the other immigrants and capsized, did that occur at night or in the daytime? And this big fish he mentions, is it really a fish or a boat in whose "belly" or "bottom" he spent some time? And this burning liquid he mentions, does he mean the stomach secretion of the fish or the oil from the boat engine which burned his skin, and what does he even mean by the mountains that emerged in the water?

I continued to expose all the hypotheses that could help translate the Fulani immigrant's words while Giacomo kept peering at the large piece of paper in front of him, spread out like a chess board, switching his gaze back and forth between the computer in front of him and the lines and empty squares on the paper, like he was desperately trying to benefit from my explanation of the linguistic intricacies of Fulani and Swahili, which seemed useless to him.

"Has he mentioned the country from which he came?", I asked, unprepared for his disproportionate reaction to the situation.

"Would you be here if he did? It's been three weeks since he was picked up between life and death on the Mondello beach. Everyone questioned him. The female immigrants waiting here to be deported talked to him, to no avail. He says that he comes from the land of the Great Spring, nobody knows where this land is. And he



keeps rambling about this big fish, the fish that swallowed him. He was kept under supervision in the hospital after he was caught at the beach. The doctor's report is quite clear and does not indicate any mental illness that could explain this strange story that he came up with. Nothing in his account makes sense, no country of origin, no country of crossing, no track record of his journey, no identities for those who were with him on the boat, not even a sign of the boat itself. Nothing that I could use to write this report.”

I listened to Giacomo as he poured his heart out, the words pushing out of his lips and his voice choking as if it were a personal matter. He didn't use to be like this. I'd known Giacomo for two years. I had met him for the first time in one of the camps in central Africa. I was invited to interpret for a diplomatic mediation meeting to ease the tension between two rivaling tribes. He was working with Doctors Without Borders. I used to watch him treat the wounded, comfort the women and the mothers, and feed the babies under the shelling of rifles and bombs, with a friendly smile that never left his freckled face, tanned by the African sun which he loved dearly. I remember when I saw him once at the end of an exhausting day of work playing with the children who kept climbing his shoulders and riding him laughing, as he spun them around imitating a neighing agitated horse, my heart overflowed with tenderness. I thought I had fallen in love with him. Youth. A lot of time has passed since our last meeting. We got acquainted with death, misery, and hell, then life took us our separate ways. When he called me two days ago, I had just ended my contract with the organization where I worked as a translator. So, I did not hesitate to come. “It's one-day job”, he told me. “You come to Mondello early in the morning and you get on a plane back to Paris by the end of the day “. I did not expect to find him this stressed. He must be used to such shenanigans. Immigrants hiding the truth, pretending they have amnesia, or fabricating events they heard in their countries or villages, so they do not get deported back to the hell they fled. A lot has changed since I started working with organizations as a translator for immigrants. The instructions have become very strict and this humanitarian system which the western world boasts as its pride and emblem of civilization has become a



heavy legacy which embarrasses the countries of the North. Politicians come up with such polished discourses, but the bottom line is the same: we do not want you. The instructions are clear: the largest possible number of immigrants must be returned to their countries of origin. Yes, it is quite pointless to ask further. “I understand you very well”, that's all I said, then added: “How can I help you, Giacomo? Because honestly, I can't see what I can do more than my previous colleague did.”

His face softened and his voice wasn't as harsh anymore, “There is no sign of a boat leaving the coasts of Libya or Tunisia. The coastal authorities have not received the Mayday signal from any boat for over four weeks. No bodies have washed ashore. There is no trace of the journey he is talking about, nor has any of the immigrants with him on the boat been identified. The journey he keeps going on about is a ghost. He could not have spent a week in the belly of the whale as he claims. It would have digested him bones included, and pushed him out as a sea fertilizer.” Giacomo laughed, repeating his last words, as he realized that, inadvertently, he was trapped in the immigrant's story.

Suddenly, a strong smell invaded the place.

Face down, I was watching the saliva bubbles coming out of my mouth and landing at the bottom of the toilet. Something in my body is trying to turn it inside out like a sock. I could hear the cleaning lady standing behind me holding a roll of toilet paper and waiting for me to finish my vomiting party, rambling in broken French.

“It's so weird. The center provides food, yet they insist on cooking on their own. They use the same ingredients, the same spices, but their food has a distinctive strong smell that turns your stomach. Even the neighbors are complaining.”

When the vomit storm receded in my belly and my digestive system resettled at last, I lifted my head and looked at her face. Slightly dark-skinned, with blond hair



spreading out like a field of ripe wheat after a strong wind storm, over dark roots of curly hair which looks like she belongs to the African continent.

She handed me the toilet paper and added: “Is it true that there is a wizard in here?”.

I wiped my mouth and my face, peered at her for a while then answered, “it is the smell from the concentrated detergent that you use.” I shut the door in her face and saw across from me silly writings and drawings dug into the wooden toilet door, a testament to all the detainees that went through there. I archived the writings by snapping a photo with my phone camera, while she continued to talk to the closed door about the sanitary protocol, the cats that disappear suddenly, and all the weird things that happen in the center. Her voice started getting further as she rambled on in Italian mixed with Tunisian swear words that she thought I could not understand. I laughed. I often find myself in similar situations. There are so many stories I heard from people who could never have guessed that behind my blonde hair, blue eyes, and delicate nose lied the most authentic Tunisian origins.

Giacomo's face was relieved when I told him about the solution I came up with in the restroom. “I'm going to try to decipher the symbols of the language spoken by the Fulani. It's not impossible but I need all the recordings of his questioning as well as a private session with him to observe the internal pattern of his dialect. This will lead us to the original version of his story in addition to precise information about him and his journey. I need to photocopy a great deal of sketches which will take six to eight hours of work. This means I have to spend an extra day here.”

Giacomo promised to provide everything that I needed and to add the extra hours to my remunerative cheque in addition to accommodation in a beautiful hotel overlooking the beach.

The noise of the children and the vacationers playing at the pool merged with the Fulani immigrant's voice which extended like an open field. The software I was



working on to decipher the strange language needed time but there I was, sitting in the bathroom looking at the pregnancy test. It was the third test since my periods stopped. I don't know what I was expecting by retaking it. Each time I hoped I wouldn't see this pink line announcing the dangerous swerve my life was about to take. I hadn't told anybody, yet, not even René my husband.

He is such a sweet man, and I am so lucky to have him. All through the years we've been married he's never asked me straightforwardly but lately he's been hinting at it more and more. He was delighted when I told him that I was putting an end to my international work, that I was settling in Paris to teach and write, and that I was actually considering having a baby that could make him a father and could make us a family.

He left a thumb as a reaction to my message telling him that I'm staying in Mondello another night. He's not happy about it. Usually, he leaves a heart on all my messages. I typed a line breaking the news him then deleted it. I'm going to surprise him when I get back or maybe not, maybe I'm just stalling as usual, I need time to think. Bringing a child to this world is a terrifying decision.

Why did I accept this room overlooking the pool? I closed the window and the children's noise disappeared.

The Fulani's voice invaded the room.

A voice flat as an open field. An accent that ended with some tension. A tone quite different from the usual rounded tone of Sub-Saharan Africans. He is from Eastern Africa, perhaps. Somalia? Ethiopia? Eritrea? There were no isolated groups speaking a specific version of Fulani in these countries as far as I knew.

There is a beautiful old house in front of the center gate. A huge steel door and no sign, only a weird drawing.



I hung up the sketches and prepared for the work session. All that could help me decipher the symbols of this smartass's language. He opened the door and here he is standing in front of me. A tall heavy-built body under ample summer clothes. He had bandages on his arms and white scars of deep burns under his dark black skin. A Typical Fulani face, a small head and delicate features which do not match a pair of bulging eyes that seemed to want to devour the world.

I greeted him and introduced myself. He just nodded.

Giacomo switched on the recorder and left us alone. I asked him to examine the pictures and tell me the names of the things that he was looking at. Boat: "bawdi", he answered me without thinking. Interesting, I took down the remark in a notebook and the word in the software and continued. Sun: "birdi?" "No! star-birdi" he insisted. Alright, star: "hala", water: "mayo" which means a spring in Fulani, massina: "liquid", mist: "jabird". This is a strange language, indeed. It shares the roots of the Fulani language and centres on an impressionist description of things, like a primitive isolated language, words with multiples significations dependent upon the corresponding gesture or tone of voice. Simple grammar and short sentences. Most of the words are sense-based, impressionist, non-abstract words. The biggest discovery of all, is that it is a completely neutral language, no gender for nouns, verbs, or pronouns. "ow" for both male and female, "om" for the plural.

I almost clapped at the discovery. I became more excited to decipher this rare language. I did not feel the time pass with the Fulani immigrant. I looked at the watch, almost five hours passed. I apologized. He did not care and remained ready for the next picture. His eyes have a peculiar sparkle heightened by the bulging, like he is feeding off the words he is uttering, like a little boy who is gleeful to share his game. I smiled gently and continued. He stopped when I reached the picture of a whale: "nagabu-godi". He pressed his lips when I told him, in his language, that we were taking a break before continuing.



I declined Giacomo's invitation to lunch gently, I can't keep anything down, and I did not feel like another puking party. I told him we could question him after the break. I sat in the kitchen watching him eat with the cleaning lady, while the final touches in the deportation of the only three immigrants left were under way. It was Alloco, which I really enjoy. Had it not been for the circus in my belly I would have eaten. I rejected the offer politely and I stuck to water and to the nutritional supplements which I could no longer go without.

I saw the eldest one, she was over sixty. She was making a plate for the Fulani. The youngest one received it with awe and reverence, and she reminded her to bless them and the food.

"The story has become widespread in the centre here and other centres in the island. Everyone is talking about the Fulani and the big fish. It explains the strange disappearance of some illegal trips in the middle of the sea. Some say it is a curse and that the sea is angry with Man, it unleashed big fish to feed off the fruits of the earth in ruthless hunting parties, they believe that's what explains the decline in the number of illegal migrations from the South of the Mediterranean."

I laughed with Giacomo as he told me the developments of the story on our way to the office, to resume work. He noticed how puzzled I was with the women's behaviour, and I did not try to hide my astonishment. Myth always serves the interests of the powerful. The weak transmit it, believe in it, and give it the necessary power to make it their truth. It conditions their lives, dictates their actions, and sets the boundaries that the powerful wish to draw.

"On the river bank, there is a small village, ten huts in addition to ours. A cattle of a hundred, cows, goats, three dogs, and a horse that I ride. It is called the Great Spring. The school is in the old man's hut. We teach cow veterinary medicine and calculus. I don't read White Man's language. Imbay does. He reads the newspapers and tells us everything. He said that the king promised-..."



“-So it is a monarchy?”, Giacomo asked.

“He is talking about the king of the Fulani people, it is an honorary tribal title. His mission is to resolve conflicts between the various Fulani groups and to mediate between his people and other governments.”, I explained to Giacomo.

“Ask him if the king lives in their village.”

“I don’t know” The Fulani answered, “It takes a two-week trip to meet him. My father wanted to see him with some people from the village but my grandmother forbade it. She told him that we don’t need a king to protect us.”

“What did the king promise you?”

“He wouldn’t attack Aliat the tenants of the Great Spring, Imbay said that Aliat were very angry, they wanted us to leave. They attacked the village before sunrise, they set fire to the huts and killed a lot of people, everyone I know.”

“-How did you survive?” I translated Giacomo’s question.

“I left in the dead of night but my parents refused to. My father started speaking the villagers’ language fluently, he spoke like them and believed their lies rather than his ancestors, that’s what my grandmother told me and she pushed me to leave.”

“Whose lies do you mean? The king’s?”, I commented .

“I don’t know the king, I know Imbay. He said they would not attack us. My father was right. Imbay died, as well as my father, mother, siblings, and grandmother.”

“How did you know that they were going to attack you?”

“I saw it in a dream. My forefathers asked me to tell everyone to leave. Ancestors do not lie.”

Giacomo mumbled and lifted his eyebrows resentfully. He did not believe the Fulani’s tale.

“What is the significance of dreaming about your forefathers?”, I asked

“I am ‘Pao’.”

“The chosen one”, I explained to Giacomo.

“Pao is the name we have in our records, what is your real name?”

“I have no right to say it. Our ancestors do not have names and when I die I will join them. That’s what my grandmother explained to me when I told her that my



forefathers visited me in a dream. They oiled my hair. That day I cooked and fed the entire village.”

“You said that you left on the night of the attack. How did you find out that everyone else died?”

“Death news have wings, they can find you wherever you are.”

“Where were you when you received the news of the attack and of your family’s death and from whom” Giacomo asked trying to trick him.

“A big town. I reached it after two days of walking.”

“The name?!”

He stopped and fixed his bulging eyes on me. I shook with awe for a minute. “I don’t know, it does not matter”, he answered briefly and went on describing his journey which lasted four years. It started with the Fulanis who crossed the desert with him, then the masked men who sold him in Libya where he was imprisoned and forced into labor. Then, how he managed to flee to Tunisia with three others. How he was helped with a job in an olive farm in the South of Tunisia until he put together the money for the trip. He continued describing the crossing, the incident, and the whale which ate him and in whose belly he spent some days until it spat him out on the shore.

Giacomo’s freckled face turned red with anger and he stopped the recording. “This is a joke”, he is said in a choked voice. “He comes from the village of the Great Spring, by the river which no one has ever heard of. He doesn’t read or write, he doesn’t know in which country it is, nor the neighboring countries where he took refuge, nor the names of the masked men, or the farm owner in the South of Tunisia, or the name of the boat owner who arranged his trip. All these paid hours you spent deciphering this strange language have been useless. “

I was infected with the rage and asked him to lower his voice, then rushed outside. I asked the cleaning lady for a cigarette. I should not smoke. I lit it. My head is about to burst. “The directions are clear Sarah”, Giacomo followed me saying. “The



refugee status will not be given to anyone whose story sounds fabricated, let alone this man who is claiming he is a prophet and that he can live inside a whale for days. What am I supposed to tell the government representative who is coming to finalize the procedure for shutting down the center? The directions are very straightforward. The government signed agreements with several African states to return immigrants. The overall number of migrants who will be transferred from this center to refugee centers must drop to zero or below. Zero or below!”

He continued to talk to me about directions, agreements, and stakes in a condescending tone as if I were one of his employees. Suddenly, I realized that, due to empathizing with an old friend, I was getting myself caught in a similar situation to those that made me hate my work with Humanitarian organizations to begin with. I used to try to remain neutral, to stick to translation and steer away from thinking about all these details, all these questions and words devoid of meaning. The hotel I am staying in, where the fee for one night could feed an African family for a year. The exorbitant pay for an hour’s work. Such large amounts of money being squandered on fighting poverty, hunger, terrorism, and wars, while evil is still king of the world. I vomited all the words I had repressed in his face. No. All the nausea was not pregnancy-induced. It was disgust. Disgust down to the tiniest cell in my body, with this world we constructed and which I helped making for a while.

“You are delusional if you think you can press me like this. I won’t, no matter how close we are. Even though I technically quit work, I am still a sworn interpreter and I will not help you invent information to bring back this wretched man to the hell he fled.”

“Sarah, who asked you to lie? On the contrary, you are the only one who can speak to him. All I am suggesting is to bend the questioning protocol a little and to put some pressure on him in order to reveal his lies and to get down to the real version of events.”



“Of course, the version that works for you and your bosses.”

“Sarah, you need to help me.” He grabbed my wrist with force and his face darkened all of a sudden. “Do not be fooled by the beaches and the light nice atmosphere here in Mondello. The crisis is exacerbating in here. The inhabitants are forming committees to defend their style of living. They are talking and condemning the conspiracy of big change. Everyone working with Humanitarian organizations and immigration and refugee institutions is considered an enemy of the people. We are accused of treason. We are stealing bread from the locals to feed strangers. Extremist groups are threatening migrants and promising them worse hell than what they left behind. I thought by asking to be transferred here that I would be far from pressure but the agitation followed me all the way here. I can hear the sirens of alarm warning against an imminent explosion. Sarah”- he pronounced my name in a soft and ambiguous voice, “I am scared for my life.”

I peered at his face for a while and struggled to contain my vomit. I took a deep breath and stomped my cigarette. I pulled my wrist out of his hand. “I am going to change my flight. You will get my report tomorrow morning before I leave and you don’t need to drop me at the hotel. “

I was surprised to find Pao the Fulani sitting calmly in his chair at the office. I was so angry that I forgot about him. I apologized and informed him that I had finished my work with him while gathering my things. He kept staring at me with his bulging eyes which moved anxiously, like he was trying to tell me something.

I waited for a bit. He did not say anything. I left.

I crossed the yard to the center gate. The cleaning lady was talking to the three female immigrants and sharing their food. I went down the road to the beach where the hotel was. I don’t know how I managed to get to my room, drowning in my rage. I slid into the warm bathroom water. I took a deep breath to clear my head. Suddenly, questions rose to my mind like the soap bubbles on the water surface.



Why does Pao insist on this whale story? His account lacks a lot of details to specify the dates, itineraries, country names and people he met. But overall it is a coherent story. Why does he insist on the whale thing, which takes from his credibility. Even if this did happen to him, which is obviously impossible, he could have overlooked this detail. If he is really lying and making up this whole thing, why doesn't he mention real names, places, and dates? Does he really not know them? Do names really mean nothing to him? Could he really be a prophet? My brain continued to boil with absurd questions that had no answers. The water became too hot, I jumped out, leaving a small puddle behind me.

I turned on the laptop and typed some key words. An attack on a Fulani village. The Great Spring. Struggle for water. Four years ago. 2015. Results are popping out in front of my eyes. A massacre in the north of Mali. Where exactly? Most of the articles do not mention the names of the villages. North of Mali, near the Niger river. Where? Maybe it is an African thing, names do not matter. Some sources in French. Same thing. Here it is! January 2015. The Yirgou massacre. About 200 Fulanis were killed by Kogleweogo militia. April 2015, here it is! April 2015, an attack on Arbinda in Soum, Burkina Faso. 160 people, mostly Fulani villagers, were killed by anonymous armed men. The attack happened at 5am, gunmen on motorcycles set the homes and storehouses on fire and shot the inhabitants. The events match Pao's account. Most massacres look the same, but why not? How old was he then? 16, 17? To have your entire family murdered after you warned them, to have your grandmother push you to flee, then to suffer for four years, it is quite a trauma. Is there any way he is really a prophet?

Giacomo was neither happy nor angry to read my report, with all the discoveries I spent the night fact-checking. "There is no established agreement with Burkina Faso for the return of immigrants", I said to him in a subtly triumphant tone.¹

¹ The dates mentioned are fictional. They are based on true events but need historical verification.



“I will finish filling in the form and then he will be moved with the women to the refugee center in-land. Now, he is some other employee’s business. Thank you so much Sarah” .

Then he invited me to have a drink with him while waiting for the plane.

“I would have loved to but I am pregnant.” I said it for the first time. He was very surprised when I told him I wanted to meet Pao the Fulani again. He did not understand my request and neither did I. Had I really lost the neutrality I spent years training for and sympathized with him, or was my curiosity still pricked by his provocative story?

“Younes or Jonas?” I threw the question at him so suddenly that he was confused, in the hope to find an answer or an involuntary expression that could solve this puzzle. He remained calm with the same friendly smile from when he saw me when he first walked into the office, where Giacomo left me to run some other errands.

“The whale story, where did you read it? The Bible or the Quran? Younes or Jonas?”

“I know neither!” , he answered me calmly. I explained they were two names for the same prophet, the former by the Muslims and the latter by the Christians and I told him that in both versions, Younes or Jonas was drowned by God who then sent the whale to save him and to teach him a lesson because he had left his family without permission.

“I don’t know your God. I saw people on the boat lifting their arms to the sky when we were surrounded by whales but he did not come. Perhaps he is dead.

-Are you familiar with Nietzsche?

-You keep mentioning weird names. In my tribe, we do not read books. My grandmother told me that we used to take to the road every time angry book people caught up with us. We don’t need a king, nor books. Our life is simple. Rain falls, it fills the spring which waters the plants. The cows eat it and we drink their milk and



thank the sky, and the bright star, and the trees. We fall in love, we get married, and we bring children into the world. They learn calculus, the names of things, and medicine. We used to choose an isolated spot every time we reached a new village. My grandmother would cook and invite everyone to eat. She used to shout: we're not here to fight your religion nor to build our edifices to compete with your churches and mosques, we are only crossing by. Our cows won't ruin your plantations. We won't sell them. We drink their milk and eat their meat and give thanks. We'll be your friends, we'll rejoice at your happiness and share your grief, then we will go our way. Grandmother would wait, only after people had eaten would she give a name to the place and build huts.

-Did they use to understand what she says?

-I don't know, it seemed like it. They were words we picked up as flowers amidst our journeying. We only take what we need. Too many words create sad thoughts and anger.

-We have figured out whence you came, maybe, but you have not told us where you are heading? Why did you cross through here?"

He pulled out a photo wrapped in plastic, the photo of an African man standing in what looks like a forest. Behind him there is a flowing spring.

"Khuman, the cousin of my friend who drowned. He sent it to him from a village here in the North. He says it is nobody's land. It has a flowing spring that is never scarce and very few people who are just like us, they live in wood huts, they share the land with livestock and strangers, they fight boredom with kindness. My grandmother visited me in a dream and bid me to go there. She asked me to be kind, to smile, and not to get angry, she promised me that others will follow. My grandmother does not lie."

I flipped the photo around, there was no number or address on it. I took a picture of it with my mobile. I Google lensed it and there were many suggestions. It could be Roya, a border zone between France and Italy. It could be in Switzerland. The old



continent has many such places. Large extended fields, mountains, and forests with springs and greenery. So many migrants hailing from wastelands would find their happiness in this place. I imagined the journey of the very first man from Africa, and here he is standing in front of me, after he crossed the paths of death fleeing poverty and suffering, retracing the path of his ancestors to the North. I imagined him in that place in the photo, I imagined his great-grandkids in a thousand years. Why are so many people desperately resisting this?

It is a mad and absurd idea. No one can resist the natural flow of evolution.

I peered at him with a very curious smile.

“It doesn’t matter that you don’t believe my story with the whale. All that matters is that you are kind.”

I don’t know why my eyes watered all of the sudden. Before I crossed the doorway rushing out, I was halted by his words: “it is going to be a daughter.”

I froze, I did not turn around. A while. I left.

“That is the story the way I witnessed it and experienced it. Perhaps I was too near-sighted to grasp the whole truth of it, perhaps the pregnancy hormones impacted my understanding and assessment of some things, but everything I have said is documented and archived in a report with vocal recordings. Even though I had stopped working, I was still a sworn translator and I was never an accomplice in what Pao the fulani -or Ziad as you’re calling him- did. I never helped him beguile immigration authorities as my old friend Giacomo keeps accusing me everytime the subject is brought up with friends and acquaintances we have in common. I discovered the truth like any other person.

Three years went by. I was home. René my husband was playing with our little daughter who was organizing a tea party with her favorite doll. He was implicated



in her little calm world. Yes, I did give birth to a girl and for a while, I really thought that perhaps I had met a prophet, until one day I turned the TV on to watch my favorite cultural show. They had invited me as guest before when my first book on linguistics came out. I could not believe my eyes and ears when I saw him. It was him, with his black skin and his bulging eyes that wanted to devour the world. He was responding with his usual smile which I knew so well to the presenter's introduction of him as Zied Shushan, the autodidactic Tunisian poet and writer. I was shouting "no no no" to my husband's surprise, listening to him speak in perfect French about how he reconstructed the story of his supposed ancestors, how they reached the south of Tunisia and how he imagined the primitive language they spoke at the village of the Great Spring on the banks of the Niger river, in a border zone between Mali and Burkina Faso. How he used his imagination to continue the itinerary of Pao, his protagonist, until he reached Roya in the Italian-French border, where he wrote his book after working in agriculture there.

I kept laughing hysterically surprising both my daughter and my husband and all I said was, "this man is a genius. He is a genius."

Pao overcame all borders. He understood the absurdity of the system and he got us implicated in his story, trying to fill in the gaps with dates and events. The Fulani did not mention how he crossed the sea. It does not matter. All we know is that he did not cross inside a whale, as he claimed, he crossed through language and words.