
Léonora Miano

Crimson Dawns

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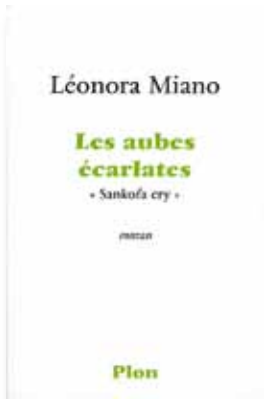
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BIOGRAPHY Léonora Miano was born in Douala, Cameroon, in 1973, and has lived in France since 1991. To date she has published three novels, which were hailed and acclaimed by critics and the general public. She also published five short stories in spring 2008 in éditions Flammarion’s “Étonnants classiques” series, under the title *Afropean Soul et autres nouvelles* [Afropean soul and other stories]. In early April 2009, *Soulfood équatoriale* [Equatorial soulfood] appeared in the “Exquis d’écrivains” series of NiL Éditions, which asks authors of fiction to write unreservedly texts inspired by the pleasures of the table. In this short collection, Léonora Miano depicts a journey in an Africa more peaceable and personal than the country depicted in her novels.

PUBLICATIONS From Plon: *Tels des astres éteints* [Like dead stars], 2008; *Contours du jour qui vient* [The shape of the coming day], 2006, winner of the prix Goncourt des Lycéens (repr. Pocket, 2008); *L’Intérieur de la nuit*, 2005, winner of the prix révélation des Lauriers verts de la Forêt des Livres 2005 and the prix Louis-Guilloux 2006 (repr. Pocket, 2006), translated into English as *Dark Heart of the Night*, forthcoming at University of Nebraska Press.



Epa was recruited by Isilo, the warlord who dreams of restoring the grandeur of a whole region of equatorial Africa. Taken deep into an isolated area to be trained in combat, Epa discovers that he is surrounded by mysterious presences: on several occasions, he glimpses shadowy figures in chains, demanding reparation for past crimes. Across the continent, the spirits of the disappeared from the slave trade exude bitterness and madness, waiting for justice to be done ...

Having managed to escape, Epa encounters Ayané, an enigmatic and attentive girl who helps

him recover his taste for life. How to give the continent the chance to experience luminous dawns? Epa, to exorcise the past of an Africa that persists in causing suffering to itself, will have to find his former companions in misfortune and return them to their families.

After *L'Intérieur de la nuit* and *Contours du jour qui vient*, *Les Aubes écarlates* completes the trilogy that Léonora Miano has devoted to the soul of the African continent.

The gathering was silent. Epupa understood that her appearance left them speechless. Even for her it was not so simple taking on this new role. Everything was unfolding as if she had to share her body with another. To stand mute in a place hidden from her own being, while observing the actions of this one wearing her face, using her voice. No one understood a word of what she was saying, beginning with the person she said she was looking for. Eso turned toward the young man who had brought her to that place. He did not breathe a word, but his eyes were eloquent. If this were a joke, it did not amuse him, the guilty party would be punished. Watching her anew, he seemed to be looking for something to say, but not a word came. Something about her left him defenseless. The woman fixed her gaze on Eso, whom she had never seen before and who did not know her. She questioned him, however, as if they were intimates:

What are you doing here when Esaka is searching for you? Of Ibon's children, you're the only one who did not step over your mother's grave. Like each of us, you must make your return to the origin.

Eso howled plaintively and leapt at the young woman, hands outstretched. Aïda, Ayané, and Dr Sontané spontaneously intervened, throwing themselves as one between the young man and the woman. They all tumbled to the earth, with the exception of Epupa, who contemplated the disorder briefly before ordering Ebumbu to bring her a chair. This was no way to welcome strangers.

Eso was on the ground, crushed under the weight of Epupa's defenders. Ebumbu did not know what to do without orders from his chief. Since the latter remained silent, Ebumbu moved toward the back of the room, found a chair, and brought it to the newcomer. She sat down in it and resumed her speech, which no one—apart from Eso and herself—understood as yet. This time, she addressed the gathering. Nonchalantly pointing her finger at Eso, she presented him to them:

This is Eso. Son of Esaka and his third wife, Ibon. He was born in Eku, even though he does not seem to remember it, even if it seems to him that no one remembers. One day, when he was twelve years old, Eso disappeared. He had gone off to the big city to work, to bring back enough to help his family. That day, contrary to habit, Eso was alone. On the road between Eku and Sombé, he had quarreled with his best friend, Ewudu. So they separated when they came to the city, making no promise to meet up again, as they always did, at the same place where they had parted, and before nightfall.

Epupa explained that, on that fateful day, Ewudu, not so angry as to abandon his friend, had waited. In vain. While working as a porter in the busy market of Kalati, Eso had been kidnapped. Everyone knew the rest. Epupa had not come to explain how Eso had become who he was. The events of the present, she said, interested her only insofar as they arose from ancient breaches left agape in the surface of the Continent. Now the populations spent their existence trying as they might to step around or over these pits. Clearly, on ground riddled with so many graves, symbolic and real, the practice was arduous, inhuman. Was it not time to know exactly what it was about? The world sometimes pretended to ponder the fate of the Continental peoples. It was on television, in the opulent homes of the local bourgeois, who, in the latter part of an evening, would be watching broadcasts produced on APC. From time to time, Continentals who had left behind the furor of the original land were invited to diagnose the malady, to propose a remedy. They would speak a great deal, without having anything to say. At the end of the program, the problem remained unsolved. That was understandable: away from the Continent, the question could not be asked as it ought to be. It arose from depths inaccessible to outsiders, whatever goodwill they might have. They could talk only of economics, politics, law. In reality, they evoked only the consequences of something impossible for them to comprehend.

The Continental malady was spiritual. It was in that realm that the drama continued to take shape, engendering the repercussions known to the manifest world. The fault did not reside only in the traffic of human beings, which Continentals were not the only ones to have practiced. The Continental sin lay in forgetting: those who were deported in the triangular trade who had

not populated or fertilized the Americas had perished in the waves. Words in Continental languages were on their lips at the time. As they were going under, they invoked the name of the god as in their native country. They called out to the clan, the tribe. To this day, their bones had not disintegrated. Something of them remained, screaming still, which everyone claimed not to hear. They demanded memory, a worthy place of burial that would allow them not to be, as they still were, suspended between this world and the next. This cargo whose hull had never reached any shore was asking for the right finally to die. The right to be wrested from silence, which was not death, but the refusal of deliverance. So long as peace was not granted them, these spirits would deny it to the Continent. Their sorrow would seep into the existence of the people, who would no longer know their own would no longer recognize them. Because the people had lost track of their own blood, they had poisoned their own existence, had cast it into the lava flows, immersing it in torrents of mud. That was everyday life now in the bitter heart of the Continent: blood had become water. Like water, it stagnated, grew fetid, made the atmosphere reek.

Epupa fell silent for a moment. Everyone felt the weight of her authority. With a light hand, she smoothed a wrinkle in the red fabric of her dress and again fixed her blazing eyes on Eso's. She said to him:

You think your family did not look for you Since you've been traveling the length and breadth of our country's heart, on many occasions you've had the opportunity to return to Eku. When you went there to kidnap your brothers, you did not utter your name. You did not try to find out if your parents were still alive. Those who were searching for you could not find you because your heart had rejected them. You are not the only one at fault, but we shall see about that later

Eso did not stir. His eyes were filled with fear of this woman, who knew things about him that he had forgotten. He shared the beliefs of the peoples of that equatorial zone of the Continent and knew that, as the saying goes, Epupa had not *come alone*. Sitting across from them all, she let them hear the voices of the spirits, the disappeared. She saw beyond the visible, traveled through time. The young man lowered his eyes. Even Isilo had not had that power. If he crossed that woman, the reprisals that would follow were unimaginable. Epupa continued, reminding him that he had been a close associate of Isilo's for a long time. He had men under his command, the freedom to come and go. It was not as if his parents' village were on the moon. He had never thought of stopping off there.

Now these were the facts. Ewudu, returning to Eku alone, had along the way lamented the fate of his brother, persuaded that evil had befallen him. As soon

as he arrived in the village, he went to Ibon's hut and told her everything. Esaka was away, as the men of the village often were. He would not return for several months. His wives, Ibon being the third, had no way to get in touch with him. Eso's mother listened to the child who had come to inform her. Then she withdrew into her hut, asking not to be disturbed. She performed her ablutions, put on a clean *pagne*, knelt to implore Nyambey to give her the strength to face the situation. Next she went out, walking around the hut to the family's holy altar. There she called upon the ancestors to watch over her son, bring him back to her. Finally, she went to see Eyoum, the village chief, asking that the council of elders be convened. Eyoum, who was also the healer and chosen intercessor with the invisible world for the inhabitants of Eku, of course acceded to her request. A special meeting was held in the middle of the night, during which inquiries were made of the forefathers.

Replies from the hereafter were not auspicious. Darkness had seized hold of the child, Eso. Negative forces hovering over Mboasu and the bordering regions, having assumed the shape of evil-doing men, had removed the youngster from the sight of his loved ones. They had also closed his eyes, his ears, through practices that the little boy would never remember having undergone. For years, his heart would be inaccessible to the cries of his loved ones. He would be driven to a life of fraud and violence, until the day he reappeared. He would first be seen roaming the Sombé market, at the very place of his disappearance. They would need at all costs to recognize him right away. Call him by his name, make sure he would answer. Afterward, it would be too late. The child would have to return to the village in the company of one of his parents. If he set foot there without having been previously recognized by them, he would not stay. Hearing Eyoum pronounce the oracle from the invisible world at this special assembly of elders, Ibon threw herself onto the ground. Ripping her *cloth*, rolling around in the dust, she bemoaned the unjust fate that had taken her last-born from her. The women of her own age wept with her, approving her decision to go to the Sombé market and wait there for Eso to pass, to remind him of his name and where he belonged.

Eyoum opposed it. The situation was certainly grave, extraordinary, but it could not justify the violation of all the clan's customs: it was out of the question for women to go to the big city. Their footsteps should not take them farther than the spring from which they drew water or the fields they cultivated to feed their families. If even one of them defied these rules, he himself would take on the task of punishing her. The women of Eku, Ibon along with the others, bowed their heads. They all knew Eyoum and his way of trafficking in the occult, more often to assert his domination over the clan than to serve it as

it was his duty to do. Ibon had other children and knew she could not expose them to Eyoum's fury simply to find Eso. She would have to wait for the return of her husband, Esaka, who was working somewhere north of Mboasu. Of the world, the women of Eku knew only the confines of their people's lands. They were not allowed to venture beyond them, contenting themselves to imagine what they would never see, with the words of their sons and husbands.

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