

The Guinean Novelist, Camara Laye

Happy Days When We Were Young

Helen Fallon

Camara Laye was born in the small West African state of Guinea in 1928. This predominantly Islamic country was a French colony, and French was the language Laye wrote in. His work was subsequently translated into English.

In 1947, when he was nineteen, Laye went to study in Paris. At the end of a one-year Mechanics course he wanted to continue his studies and pursue a degree in Engineering. However, his Government in Guinea did not support his request.

After his funding ceased, Laye had to cope with poverty and hunger. In *A Dream of Africa*, he writes about that time: “And then I understood why there were men and women who walked alone in the streets of the city talking to themselves or gesticulating, weighed down by eternal material concerns, haunted by money that doesn’t stretch far enough, that never will because the shrewdest always snatch it up, leaving only a tiny amount for the rest.” Out of an intense sense of loneliness, and fearing that he would forget his African heritage, Laye began to write down his memories of his childhood in the Guinean countryside.

THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

L’Enfant Noir (subsequently *The Dark Child* in the English edition) relates, in the first person, the story of a Guinean boy’s life in a very self-contained rural environment, largely untouched by colonialism. Laye’s father was a blacksmith and goldsmith, occupations held in high esteem in the community. Women came to him to have gold fashioned into jewellery. This was no simple transaction. A singer would accompany the woman. He would chant the praises of the goldsmith and act as an intermediary in the process.

While his father worked, a small snake stood guard;

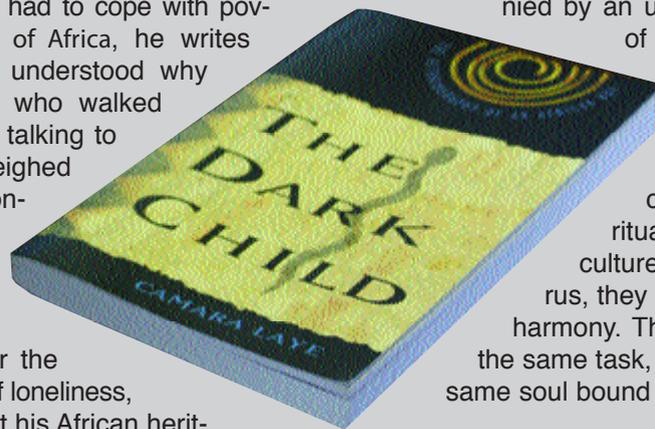
“his body, black and brilliant, glittered in the harsh light of the sun”. The snake always appeared when his father was working with gold. On questioning his father, the young boy was told, “that snake is the guiding spirit of our race”. The belief in magic and supernatural powers was very much part of Laye’s heritage, a heritage which predated the coming of Islam – via Arab traders – to West Africa.

The novel, also, recounts visits to his mother’s home village. The journey which normally took two hours on foot was happily extended to four as Camara, accompanied by an uncle, marvelled at the secrets of the roads and pathways. In the village he spent long happy days playing with the other children. Involved in communal harvesting and in celebrating the local feasts and rituals, he absorbed the traditional culture of his people. “Singing in chorus, they reaped, voices and gestures in harmony. They were together! – united by the same task, the same song. It was as if the same soul bound them.”

Aged fourteen, Laye travelled to Conakry, the distant coastal capital of Guinea, to continue his education in a technical secondary school. There he lived with another uncle and his two wives, both of whom treated him as a son; their many children regarded him as a brother. During this time he met Marie who was later to become his wife.

NO LONGER AT EASE

The Dark Child concludes with Laye leaving home to go to Paris: “And so one day I took a plane for France. Oh! It was a terrible parting! I do not like to think of it. I can still hear my mother wailing. I can still see my father, unable to hide his tears. I can still see my sisters, my brothers... No. I do not like to remember that parting. It was as if I were being torn apart.”



Published in Paris in 1953, *The Dark Child* won the prestigious French Prix Charles Veillon. The income from the book allowed Laye to write full-time and soon afterwards he published *Le Regard du Roi*, (*The Radiance of the King*). Unlike *The Dark Child*, where the African travels to Europe and becomes unsettled, in this story a white man, Clarence, makes a journey to Africa to seek his fortune and to gain the recognition of an African king.

In 1956 Laye returned to Africa, settling first in Dahomey (now Benin) and then in The Gold Coast (now Ghana), before returning to Guinea. When Guinea gained independence from France in 1958, Laye held a number of minor posts in the new Government of President Sekou Touré. However, when Sekou Touré read what Laye was currently writing, he warned him to either stop writing or to leave the country. Laye chose the latter and went to Dakar, the capital of neighbouring Senegal. He was never to return home.

Dramouss (*A Dream of Africa*), a sequel to *L'Enfant Noir*, was published in Paris in 1966. The enthusiastic young man of *The Dark Child*

is replaced by a wary adult, who is concerned about the political situation in his now independent home country. Sekou Touré appears in the story, thinly disguised as the Big Brute.

Laye and his wife, Marie, had four children. In 1970 she returned to Guinea to visit her sick mother. Imprisoned as an enemy of the state, by President Sekou Touré, she was held for seven years. By the time she was released Camara had taken a second wife and they had three children. Marie found the situation unacceptable and divorced him.

Laye's fourth and final novel *Le Maître de la Parole*, (*The Guardian of the Word*) was published in 1978. Perhaps fearing for his relatives in Guinea, this time he steered clear of political themes. This novel is set in thirteenth century West Africa and recounts the life of the first emperor of Mali. It was a story Camara had heard from a local griot (a recorder of oral tradition) when he was growing up.

Camara Laye died in Senegal in 1980. ■



Guinea

Guinea, with Conakry as its capital, has a population of about ten million. Comparable in size to Great Britain, it has significant agricultural and mining potential.

The former territory of French West Africa became an independent republic in 1958. Ahmed Sekou Touré was the country's President until he died in 1984. As indicated in Helen Fallon's article, he was a controversial leader. There were major disagreements with France, the Soviet Union and Portugal. His Chinese-modelled, socialist policies were not successful and more than a million Guineans, including the distinguished writer, Camara Laye, decided or were obliged to leave the country.

Guinea has been ruled, since 1984, by President Lansana Conté.



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