

M A L I



OUOLOGUEM YAMBO

Ouologuem Yambo, novelist and poet, was born in Bandiagara in the region of Mopti in the Republic of Mali. The son of a civil servant and a member of a traditional Dogon ruling-class family, he speaks several African and European languages. Ouologuem was educated in Bamako in Mali and Paris and has university degrees in literature, sociology, and philosophy. His first novel, Bound to Violence, won the coveted Prix Renaudot in France in 1968 and was translated into many foreign languages. Written in the griot, or village storytelling tradition, it is a scathing exposé of African history. This novel was followed by a collection of letters that denounced the hypocrisy of Europeans and Africans alike. Ouologuem's poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies, but has not as yet been collected into a single volume. "When Black Men's Teeth Speak Out" is a good example of the author's mocking sense of humor and moral outrage.

When Black Men's Teeth Speak Out

People think I'm a cannibal
But you know how people talk

People see that I have red gums but then who has
White ones
Hurrah for tomatoes

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People say that there aren't as many tourists coming
Nowadays
But you know

We aren't in America and nobody
Has much cash 10

People think it's all my fault and that they're afraid of my teeth
But look
My teeth are white not red
I've never eaten anybody

People are pretty nasty and they say I gobble up 15
Tourists boiled alive
Or maybe grilled
So I said which is it grilled or boiled
Then they shut up and took an uneasy look at my gums
Hurrah for tomatoes 20

Everyone knows that they grow things in a farming country
Hurrah for vegetables

Everyone says that no farmer
Can live off his vegetables
And that I'm a pretty husky guy for someone so 25
under-developed
A no good lowlife who lives on tourists
Down with my teeth

So all of a sudden I was surrounded
Tied up 30
Thrown to the ground
At the feet of justice

Cannibal or not a cannibal
Yes or no
Ha ha you think you're pretty clever 35
Playing high and mighty

Well we'll see about that I'll settle your hash
You're sentenced to death poor thing
What are your last words

I yelled hurrah for tomatoes 40

People are no good and women are a pretty inquisitive bunch
There happened to be one in the curious crowd
Who yapped
With a voice like a leper's rattle and the gurgle

Of a leaky pot 45
Open his stomach
I'm sure that daddy is still inside

With no knives around
Which is understandable for vegetarians
Of the Western world 50
Somebody grabbed a Gillette blade
And very patiently

Slishhh
Slashhh
Plonkkk 55
They opened my belly

And there they found a tomato field in bloom
Washed by streams flowing with palm-tree wine
Hurrah for tomatoes

Translated from the French by Gerald Moore

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of exaggeration in "When Black Men's Teeth Speak Out"?
2. How does the poem expose and counteract racial stereotypes?