

Review

[Couao-Zotti, Florent](#) (2018): *Western Tchoukoutou*

Paris : [Éditions Gallimard](#), Continents Noirs, 176 p. ISBN : 9782072780066



vodun, mural painting
Grand Popo, Benin, foto, D.K., 2015

Key-words: *Genre:* novels and stories. *Categories:* [Francophone Literature](#), [African Literature](#), African [Francophony](#). *Country:* [Benin](#). *Epoch:* 21st century.

A new star has opened in the sky of authors from Francophone Africa. So far, he is hardly known outside of the language area of the Francophonie. His name is [Florent Couao-Zotti](#) and he comes from [Benin](#), the former French colony Dahomey, in West Africa, west of its big neighbour [Nigeria](#).

The [Académie française](#) awarded him the prestigious [Prix Roland De Jouvenel](#) in 2019 for his novel 'Western Tchoukoutou' published by [Gallimard](#) in 2018. Why should we be interested in a novel with such a strange title? Well, the reader will quickly notice that as soon as he or she picks up the book. From the first page, the rich, flowery language, polished French and the magic of words are fascinating. Regardless of the content, the reader is captivated by the outstanding eloquence of words. But the content also has it all. The author and publisher promise nothing less than the birth of a new genre of literature, with a slight wink:

“After the American Western, the [Spaghetti-Western](#) [Italian-Western], there is the Beninese speciality: the Western, which applies an alcoholic passive weapon of destruction: the 'Western Tchoukoutou'.”¹

¹ Extract from the blurb of the book, [Ed. Gallimard](#)., translation, D.K.

In fact, it's not exactly a new genre. Stephen Atalebe, for example, a Ghanaian novelist, published the first book of his cowboy trilogy already back in 2013. But what exactly does this strange word 'Tchoukoutou' mean? This is how the [Tammari](#), better known as [Somba](#) people, in the [Atacora department](#) in northern Benin name their popular local strong beer, brewed from millet or sorghum. With this and a multitude of similar details, the author visually shows us how intimately he knows and appreciates the country and people of this region of Northern Benin, between [Djougou](#) and [Natingou](#). The small town 'Natingou-City', the main place of history, is only a slight alienation, if not a malapropism of the real existing Natingou, the district capital. Three of the five main protagonists live here: men of dubious character, called 'granite heads' in Beninese French, as well as their counterpart, Nafissatou Diallo, known as Kalamity Djane. *Nomen est omen*, the nickname reminds us not without good reason of calamities, misfortune, but especially of "[Calamity Jane](#)", the legendary American frontierswoman and wild west heroine of the 19th century. Only at the end of the novel the reader learns whether she is just a ghost, a guilty conscience, persecuting the evildoers, or real, as well as the real reason for her vengeance crusade.

Couao-Zotti develops in 18 episodes, one crazier than the other, literally a fabulous story. To begin of the melodrama, Kalamity Djane enters the saloon of Natingou-City in which she searches for her opponents who she wants to kill. Admirable Xuo Luo, the landlady and wife of Ernest Vitou, one of the three 'granite heads', panics and tries to warn her absent husband. She speaks a difficult-to-understand French gibberish, with which the author, with a little irony, takes the prejudices of some Beninese against the numerous foreign Chinese in the country who have been looking for a new home in Africa as migrants and small traders since the early 2000s.

The three quirky Desperados, inseparable friends since childhood, hence their nickname "*Tchoukoutou sauce*", are a cowboy, the sheriff and a successful businessman called Ernest Vitou, a landowner, founder and owner of the "*Saloon du Desperado*". He has made it the most popular and busiest in the city within three years. And this not without good reason: ladies of easy virtue, striptease, Tchoukoutou and other related vices enter here into a profitable liaison. The characters may be bizarre, but they are by no means portrayed unrealistically. This shows up very soon in the course of the story, which now develops in a humorous, casual way in front of the reader, as if it were nothing, spiced here with a funny phrase, there with a saying, not to mention the languishing love songs of the storyteller.

In the latter, Florent Couao-Zotti uses a popular medium in African oral literature. The [griot](#), a desolate knight in shining armour, in fact not entirely without reproach, reports on events and murders, about the powerful, who otherwise remain in the dark, for fear of persecution. Dassagoutey, the bard and fifth in the group, is also the former lover of Nafissatou, the revenging angel. He cries elegiacally about his lost love, spins the thread of the story and also introduces her characters.

The cowboy, Alassane Gounou, a bull of a man with a rather simple mind, the second in the league, pretends to be a shepherd. But something is wrong with him. Al, as his buddies call him, never shows his head to the world, possibly because bull horns are hidden under his hat? In any case, he prefers to hide it under his pointed cylinder. A small leather pyramid, tied under the chin with a strap, as we know it as the typical headgear of the [Fulani](#), the wandering herdsmen of the region. The third "granite head" in the group, and second in the hierarchy of buddies after the businessman, is called Chérif Boni Touré. He is the police inspector of the city's crime brigade.

The three ally to terrorize the city, but especially because of a crime committed together that remains in the dark until the end and whose culprits had been allegedly detained long ago. Each of the three deserves contempt, but the author ironically pays a little pity. The mild irony with which the author denounces what men can do to women without mincing words gives the novel a special charm.

In the course of history it becomes clear that behind the mask of each of the courageous Desperados hides a monster and loser. However, everybody is fully responsible for his misdeeds and finally receives the just judgment, by the woman, whom everyone believed long ago to be dead and buried. Is it just her avenging mind or herself that is now pursuing them like a fury? This remains unclear until shortly before the end, as is so often the case in real Africa, which believes in magic, but especially in Benin, the [kraal](#) of [vodun](#).

It would be in the English reader's best interest that the novel will soon find a publisher who translates the book into English, not least so that the readers of neighbouring Anglophone Africa can enjoy this marvellous taste of new African literature.

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