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## The foreign atmosphere of Africa as part of magical expression in the fiction of Marek Vadas

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### Abstract:

*The prosaist Marek Vadas is a contemporary Slovak writer who has won several literary prizes. A unique part of his bibliography is represented by short stories inspired by African culture and environment. The main objective of this paper is to analyse via interpretation these stories and to prove the role of the African environment in the process of creating the magical as a quality of expression. Stories from the following collections are looked at: Liečiteľ, Čierne na čiernom, and Zlá štvrť. The methodological approach of the interpretation is based on the theory of František Miko and his system of expression categories. The portrayed image of Africa interpreted in this contribution proceeds from Vadas's personal experience. We conclude that the unique African element in his work adds to the magical quality of expression, which is based on the coaction of several elements: different cultural experience, thematic scheme, blend of multiple qualities of expression and of compositional techniques. The final magical quality of expression represents the specificity of Vadas's writing style.*

### Introduction

Marek Vadas established himself as a Slovak writer more than 30 years ago, but he became famous to a large extent only about 15 years later. Winning the prestigious Anasoft Litera Literary Prize in 2007 for the work *Liečiteľ* [The Healer]<sup>1</sup> (2006) certainly contributed to raising awareness of his work. Later, the name of Marek Vadas was associated with this award again, because his work *Zlá štvrť* [The Bad Neighbourhood] (2018) was ranked in the top 10 and also won the René Literary Prize<sup>2</sup> (Literárne informačné centrum). Vadas's writing from 1994 to the present bears certain characteristic features that make up his unique authorial style. His latest prose fictional pieces are characterized by a unified feature, which forms a

distinguishable part of his authorship. We are talking about works that are undeniably inspired by the author's personal experiences of the African continent. In this category we include works dedicated to child readers, such as *Rozprávky z čiernej Afriky* [Tales from Black Africa] (2004), *Útek* [The Escape]<sup>3</sup> (2016), as well as the aforementioned *Liečiteľ, Zlá štvrť* and *Čierne na čiernom* [Black on Black] (2013) (Domorák).

In this paper, we focus on Vadas's above-mentioned storybooks marked by a foreign atmosphere, in which we notice the magical as a peculiar quality of expression of the author's texts. The magical expression in question is made up of several aspects of the text: the African environment in which the stories take place; their themes and motifs (healing, shamans, death); the vague boundaries of reality and dreaming; the interplay of several qualities of expression (such as fantastic, unusual, curious, uncertain expression, but also expression of comicality, irony, horror, harshness, and brutality). The aim of this study is to detect and explicate the atmosphere of Africa in Vadas's prose fiction. We want to prove that the African environment is really one of the factors that enhance the magical expression of the writer's books. We will analyse not only the cultural thinking itself or the natural conditions and the environment, but also the relationship between Slovak culture and African culture, which can be characterized by binary opposition foreign-own.<sup>4</sup>

The methodological and theoretical basis for our interpretation is the expressive concept of style based on the reader-experienced quality of the text. The expression system created by the literary scientist and linguist František Miko (1920-2010), which is elaborated in detail in *Tezaurus estetických výrazových kvalít* [Thesaurus of Aesthetic Expressive Qualities] (Plesník et al., 2008), serves as a functional tool for interpreting the text. The interpretation is based primarily on a literary source (Vadas's collections of short stories), but to better understand the author's experience, which determines the style of his texts, we use information provided in various journalistic interviews with the author. In order to clarify the expressive effect of the African atmosphere rendered in the prose collections, we rely on the explanation of the concept of atmosphere (colour) as the expressive quality of the text, which arises due to the author's specific stylistic ability to authentically and reliably describe the nature of the depicted environment (ibid., pp. 203, 206).

### **Foreign atmosphere of Vadas's Africa**

Vadas visited Africa for the first time on a business trip during his career as a journalist. His first contact with Africa enchanted him so much that he returned repeatedly to the continent. He visited mainly countries on the equator, such as Gabon and Cameroon, and it was in

Cameroon that Vadas met and befriended the local king of one region and became his adviser (Balász, 2018). The author wrote his first stories after his second return from Cameroon. The author remembers his sojourn in Africa as an experience of a completely different world: “Prebudil som sa do iného sveta s úplne iným spôsobom rozmýšľania, s iným rebríčkom hodnôt, s inými problémami a radosťami. Večer som ešte v Bratislave sedel nad číslami z marketingu a o dvadsaťštyri hodín na to som už s čiernou starenkou opekala dikobraza a počúval príbehy o chodiacich palmách a neviditeľných ľudoch” (Vadas in Andrejčáková, 2007).<sup>5</sup> Some later texts, such as those in the book *Zlá štvrť*, were written directly at a bar in Cameroon. Although Vadas is currently unable to return to Cameroon due to the ongoing war, his books will continue to tell us magical stories from faraway Africa (Nagy, 2018).<sup>6</sup>

Vadas is culturally integrated into the Western environment, but the authenticity of his storytelling is based on his personal experience with the African environment and culture. In his writings we find an authentic, literary, mediated experience written in natural and unforced style. However, it would be presumptuous to think that Vadas’s work is authentic in terms of complete assimilation into African culture. As the author himself admits in one interview, he himself is aware of this fact: “Nie som natoľko domýšľavý, aby som svoje písanie považoval za africké. Do tradícií sa dá nahliadnuť, čiastočne sa nimi inšpirovať, ale spôsob uvažovania môžem iba napodobniť, nikdy doň nepreniknem dostatočne hlboko. Okrem toho si myslím, že v knihe sa dajú objaviť aj čisto európske vplyvy” (Vadas in Hučko, 2015).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Vadas’s rendering of African everyday life, depicting the connection between people’s lives and magic, spirits, healers, shamans, and at the same time the common hardships of man, such as relationships, money, alcohol or death, is based on an experienced culture and environment.

### **Exotic Africa**

For a comprehensive description of the atmosphere of Vadas’s Africa, we will begin with the primary and most perceptible feature of its expressive effect, which is exoticness. The environment and culture described by the author may have a strange, exotic effect on recipients of Western cultures. The given character of African reality is based on a comparison of our known (occidental) and foreign cultural experience. That opposition between two cultures seems to be crucial in the reception of these texts and is reflected in several spheres. The greater the differences in this comparison, the more exotic and interesting the stories seem. The exotic as a quality of expression of the text is inextricably connected with the unconventionality hidden in the choice of thematic and linguistic elements, and that is a choice of elements typical of the original culture and at the same time unknown, unusual for

the receiving culture. We are talking about the so-called exoticization as the text-making process, which responds to the conceptualization of Popovič (1983, p. 217), defined within the theory of translation, however as he adds, this construction of the text can also be applied in the original author's works. In the following parts of the paper, we will focus on how exoticization has manifested itself in the description of a culturally and naturally specified environment at the linguistic and thematic level.

The prose fiction texts are inspired in many ways by the equatorial part of Africa, which may differ from its southern or northern parts. The author presents a specific image of the African environment to the reader in all its colour palette, from the jungle to the cities. Vadas portrays the scenery of clay cottages, often surrounded by small fields, forests, and lakes<sup>8</sup> (Vadas, 2015, p. 15); the scenery of wooden shacks in Bona Beri (ibid., p. 39), fertile valleys dotted with small settlements and dense forest full of night pitfalls (p. 124), mangrove swamps<sup>9</sup> (p. 71); or the natural jungle landscape with a simple pygmy settlement, which consists of a swept area, huts made of leaves as big as kennels (Vadas, 2018, p. 105). The reader goes on to discover the nature of the rainforest, the beaches on the shores of the ocean, the banks of raging rivers and even a small island surrounded by the calm waters of the Atlantic (Vadas, 2013, p. 123). In contrast to the picturesque or wild natural landscape, there are images of towns and cities full of life and bustle: a gas station and constantly trumpeting taxis (Vadas, 2015, p. 71) playing *makossa* (Vadas, 2018, p. 87), a bus station crowded with people shouting and pushing into already crowded bush taxis (Vadas, 2015, p. 49), or main streets full of noisy businesses (ibid., p. 25), where women walk with vessels on their heads (p. 158). The cities and towns of the short stories are urbanized, there are libraries, markets, hotels, ports, warehouses of mineral water and a barber shop (p. 70), which illuminate city parks with different coloured lights (Vadas, 2013, p. 35). Above all, the cities are characterized by a large number of pubs and bars: "Tu je každý dom krčma, všade, kde vidíte vlajočku s logom dákeho pivovaru, vám dajú teplé pivo za štyristo frankov" (Vadas, 2015, p. 60).<sup>10</sup> Some bars greet characters from afar with the rumble of bass and the screams of people fooling around (Vadas, 2018, p. 88).

The diversity of the environment in which the characters appear varies from book to book. *Liečiteľ* offers the most diverse composition of the environment. On the pages of this storybook, the recipient observes as the stories move from the city to the wilderness, then to the beach and back to the city, and so on. In the second book, *Čierne na čiernom*, the environment is no longer so varied, it is paid (even) less attention to and a more extensive description is rarer. The latest book, *Zlá štvrť* suggests by its title where the stories take place

in most cases. Situations and narration are mostly situated around the *bar Na úrovni* [Classy bar] in the seedy, dilapidated district of Akwa.

The exotic environment of Africa is also created by the exotic lexical field of local plants and animals. The characters find themselves in the shadows of mango trees and palm trees (Vadas, 2015, pp. 7, 46); they eat peanuts, mangoes and cassava (ibid., pp. 48, 126, 25); while they drink palm wine, their lives are made uncomfortable by mosquitoes (p. 11); they play with coconuts (p. 73); grow cassava, peanuts, and tomatoes (p. 107); collect caoutchouc and become the target of leopard attack (ibid., p. 63); a storm breaks the banana trees (ibid., p. 39); and the women wear clothes called kanga (p. 25). These plants and animals are typical of an African country, but at the same time they are known to domestic (Slovak) recipients. The writer skilfully uses them to create a picture of reality in the minds of readers that is sufficiently understandable to everyone, one that forms the basis for other incomprehensible and magical elements. An interesting element of exoticization that Vadas uses is a group of indigenous words that have no Slovak equivalent and are closely related to African culture, traditions and way of life. Some words the reader can understand based on the context, some the reader can explain at least approximately, but some of them remain a mystery and the reader can only guess their meaning. The author himself stated that he uses expressions that are not close to Europeans to complete the atmosphere. He does not explain their significance in the short stories because he believes that readers can look up the unknown terms in case of interest (Hučko, 2015).

The frequent African word in short stories from all three books is the Slovak word *džudžu*, which is a phonetic equivalent of an African word written in English as *Juju*.<sup>11</sup> It appears in several short stories, but nevertheless, the definition of the word is unclear. In some short stories, Juju appears to be something alive:

“Bola práve výročná slávnosť, starci strieľali do vzduchu zo storočných pušiek, po drôtoch nám nad hlavami chodilo biele džudžu s palicou a v bare pred palácom hrala živá hudba” (Vadas, 2018, p. 98).<sup>12</sup>

The short story *Posledný súd* [The Last Judgment] (Vadas, 2013, pp. 193-199) from the book *Čierne na čiernom* connects Juju with sanctity, with death and at the same time depicts it as an indefinite being on the border of man and animal:

“Ak niekto zomrie, do mesta k nám príde džudžu. Nie je to človek ani zviera, nosí kabát z peria, masku krokodíla, koňa. Keď prechádza ulicami, každý sa mu pokloní. My deti musíme bežať, nesmieme sa o neho ani obtrieť pohľadom. Keby som džudžu stretol a pozrel mu do tváre, zomrel by som. Vzalo by ma k duchom” (ibid., p. 193).<sup>13</sup>

Other stories represent Juju as an object connected with magic and shamanism, which substantiates magical powers and spells. We notice this in short stories from the book *Liečiteľ*, for example in *Raz hnedá, raz čierna* [Once Brown, Once Black] (Vadas, 2015, pp. 21–28) a woman hides Juju in food to enchant men; in the next one, *U fúzatého doktora* [At the Bearded Doctor] (ibid., pp. 59-64), a white man borrows Juju from a blind man as an aid in returning to his body after borrowing another one, and in the story *Ludia s mäsom a kosťami* [People with Meat and Bones] (pp. 109–118) *nganga* creates Juju by sacrificing a goat to protect the graves of the deceased. The next moment, Juju is hung around the man's neck to protect him, and when it doesn't work, Juju's power is strengthened by ceremoniously sacrificing a goat (Vadas, 2013, pp. 51-52). Thus, Juju is a polysemous word that can represent or typify various phenomena. Vadas uses it in a variety of its meanings, thus ensuring its ambiguity, which only supports its magical expression. By reinforcing the ambiguity of the meaning of the word, the author lets the reader among the many ideas and connotations in his mind. Vadas bases the application of these meanings on his own experience (he personally saw such Juju) as stated in an interview for *Plus7dni* [Plus7Days] magazine. We learn from the article that Juju figures hold secrets and traditions, embodying various ancient forces and working full-time in courts of kings. They are a part of every important ceremony, wedding, coronation, and of course, funerals (Plus7dni, 2013).

*Nganga* represents a healer, a shaman, and in the short story *Rieka* [River] (Vadas, 2015, pp. 65-47) he is called a magician during the treatment of the main character. Other foreign words that the author explains in the text include *zuu*: “Práve doviezli zuu, lacnú nerafinovanú naftu” (ibid., p. 84)<sup>14</sup> and the word *makossa* is also widely explained. The word appears in the title of the short story *Ako sa tancuje makossa* [How to dance makossa] (pp. 141–148) which clarifies that *makossa* represents a certain musical style associated with dance, typical for the areas that Vadas visited. The above-mentioned short story *Ludia s mäsom a kosťami* also contains another mysterious, not explicitly explained African word *mbwembwel*. There is no explicit explanation of this concept in the text, but from the treatment of this word it can be implicitly deduced that it is something demonic, powerful, scary: “Nikto nechcel riskovať, že sa dostane do spárov samotného mbwembwela” (p. 116).<sup>15</sup> It also represents a person, figure, a being who poses a threat, but also arouses respect: “Nikdy nevieš kedy mbwembwel zavíta do tvojho domu. Ale ten deň príde čoskoro” (p. 109).<sup>16</sup> *Fufu* is presented as a food without further description, *ofofó*, on the other hand, is briefly explained and represents a special strong and disgusting hard liquor with leached herb (p. 132). The last undefined exotic terms that appear in the text are *matango* and *mimbo*, which

we can only deduce from the text are some kind of raw material: “Máme pivo, palmové víno, pravé matango aj mimbo od mora” (p. 32).<sup>17</sup> Vadas’s tendency to leave words (or even whole scenes) without explanation forms the expressive quality of ambiguity, peculiarity, oddness and mystery, which is one of the distinctive features of his magical poetics.

Vadas completes the exotic atmosphere of the depicted Africa through an interesting, partially reduced character description. In general, the recipient does not encounter a detailed visual description; the writer reduces the description of his characters to information such as: lonely people talking to themselves (Vadas, 2018, p. 80), a woman with rattles on her wrists (Vadas, 2013, p. 88), a guy in a long shirt made of fine fabric (Vadas, 2015, p. 136), etc. The exotic feeling embodied by the encounter of different cultures occurs at the moment when the reader is confronted with the following description:

“Dve ruky, dve nohy, telo a hlavu so všetkým, čo k nej patrí. Ale niečo sa mi na ňom nepozdávalo už od začiatku. [...] Dlho sa nič nedialo, až po dlhej chvíli prišiel ten biely muž (už viem, prečo bol čudný – bol celý biely!) a niečo nám rozprával” (Vadas, 2013, pp. 91-92).<sup>18</sup>

The author suddenly mentions the colour of skin in the narration of the characters – a white man, whose visual characteristics he additionally emphasizes with the adjectives odd and strange. In this way, Vadas captures the norm of skin appearance in Africa, which is, of course, natural and understandable. By occasionally emphasizing the character of white skin and moving it to the extreme (odd, strange, different), the author intensifies the Western recipient’s sense of exoticism, at that without constantly repeating and accentuating the (black) skin colour of the main characters. The author draws on the reception experience of the Western recipient who is confronted with a new reassessment of the relationship between own-foreign. The Western recipient is used to seeing the figure of a white person as their own, but in Vadas’s works, a white-skinned person is placed on the other side of this binary opposition. The white man is portrayed as a foreigner and in this way the author assures readers about the home environment of Africa. He suggests that the way we look at the world is truly African, because “African” is native, natural, and peculiar to the characters. However, it should be added that the author uses the otherness of a white person in African culture very sparingly and always purposefully for the story, so there is no effect in which the reader feels that the author brings any segregationist undertone to the stories. On the contrary, the author succeeds in underlining the naturalness of the African environment and culture.

### **Poor Africa**

The representation of the exotic part of Africa is not the only image of this continent that the

author depicts in his short stories. We will continue to analyse the atmosphere of Africa, but we will present its unattractive and disturbing side. Africa, despite its appeal, is simultaneously described by Vadas naturalistically even harshly or brutally. The writer does not embellish this opposing face of the continent in any way, but presents it as it is, or as he experienced it. This view of Africa reveals its poverty, which is reflected in the state of cities and their buildings, and so in the text the reader very often encounters dilapidated objects, mouldy huts (ibid., p. 118), a hotel full of overgrown cockroaches, where electricity does not work and the whole city centre is without electricity (Vadas, 2015. p. 29, 31), mouldy garages, functioning as pubs, into which water flows during a storm to the ankles (ibid., p. 40) or to an abandoned and mouldy residence that will collapse in an instant (Vadas, 2018, p. 76). Another story depicts how the characters make money by searching the dump and then selling usable things. Vadas describes the atmosphere of poor, oppressive and dirty Africa realistically, as evidenced by the situation taking place at the dump:

“Všade, kam som sa pozrel, boli odpadky a nad nimi sa vznášal opar. Nikde žiadna stopa po plameni. Všetky tie smeti tam kvasili a vydychovali pri tom zadúšajúci hnobilný zápach. Topánky sa mi zabárali do mazľavej hmoty, z ktorej trčali igelitové vrecká najrôznejších farieb” (Vadas, 2013, p. 12).<sup>19</sup>

Such a suggestive description of an impoverished, appalling environment creates an even more expressive impression because of the contrast with the narration from the point of view of a little boy (the naive child narrator). Vadas evokes a vivid imagination and invokes a feeling of disgust, revulsion in the reader. Vadas's short stories have a strong environmental undertone, indirectly pointing to the problematic aspects of the state of the environment and environmental threats. The prose writer implicitly leads the recipient to think about the critical state of the planet.

Not only destroyed buildings, dirt roads, mud-filled roads, ubiquitous clutter, rubbish or shabby furniture are images of poverty and it is also reflected in the health condition of the characters. In all of the books we can find a character who suffers from common diseases: malaria, dysentery, typhus, elephantiasis, intestinal plagues, fevers of various kinds, syphilis ... (Vadas, 2018, p. 85). In *Liečiteľ* there are people (characters) wandering with bandaged amputated limbs on a morning walk (Vadas, 2015, p. 59), but also a girl who has had more than five kilos of threadworms taken from her stomach (ibid., p. 159). *Čierne na čiernom* offers an image of a man, whose hand gets run over by a bus which bruises all of his fingers (Vadas, 2013, p. 172), however for us, the most powerful and at the same time most chilling story from this collection, which captures the terrible state of health services and public



health, is the short story *Narodil som sa prvého augusta* [I was born on the first of August] (ibid., pp. 157-159). In the story, a 14-year-old girl becomes pregnant and tries in various brutal ways to get rid of the child:

“Skúšala všetko, pila bielidlo aj farbu na vlasy, čuchala éter [...] Keď žiadna z bylinkárkiných metód nepomohla, matka sa vybrala k rieke za čiernou vdovou. Tá si ju prezrela, vzala peniaze a uložila ju do postele. Obkročmo si jej sadla na tvár a celou silou jej mlátila drúkom po bruchu. [...] Potom vdova matke rozťahla nohy a niekoľko krát do nej zasunula železnú tyč” (p. 158).<sup>20</sup>

Vadas depicts brutality and drastic expression without refinement. Harsh, violent scenes are not central to the story, although the quotes presented may create this impression. The harshness of these situations, misfortune, disease and death are part of reality, the ordinary day or the backdrop of everyday African life:

“Pred stanicou motorkár zrazí dieťa, chlapca, čo ledva začal chodiť do školy. Potom, keď sa už veziem v autobuse, vidím, ako padá nákladiak s cisternou zo svahu do rieky a na prvej križovatke v meste do seba vbehnú dva taxíky tak, že z nich zostanú len zakliesnené zadné kapoty” (p. 206).<sup>21</sup>

Poverty, poor health and the natural conditions contribute to high mortality in Africa. Death is a motif in several short stories, with its depiction varying from the birth of a dead child (p. 210), through a rapidly decomposing body in the back room (Vadas, 2015, p. 99) and a body strewn with ants and worms (ibid., p. 152), through death visiting village houses and observing small children (ibid., p. 18) to a grandmother who is completely grey with empty eyes and her head twisted at a strange angle (Vadas, 2013, p. 75).

The interpretation presented could lead to the notion that the characters in the books are impoverished beings who experience nothing but hunger, disease and hopelessness in their lives. This notion is again related to the comparison of the foreign and the own. But (Vadas's) Africans don't think that way. According to Vadas himself,<sup>22</sup> Africans deal with more serious existential problems than we Europeans. The characters are not even taken aback by what seems to us to be the height of poverty. Vadas recalls a similar experience: “Keď som prvý krát prišiel na dedinu a vybalil svoje zbytočnosti do hlinenej chatrče, zistil som, že v batohu mám viac vecí ako desaťčlenná rodina. Hanbil som sa ako pes, pretože im k spokojnosti stačí jedna rohož, hrniec, náhradná košeľa a tri taniere” (Vadas in Andrejčáková, 2007).<sup>23</sup> Vadas demonstrates the modesty of indigenous Africans using the example of several characters. For instance, the character of an old man from the short story *Pole* [Field] (Vadas, 2015, pp. 107-108), who has only a goat and a small box and who never needed more, or the man from the

short story *Ale tá koza!* [But the goat!] (Vadas, 2018, pp. 31-33) who himself gets rid of things he once owned because he feels that they spoiled him and now he lives better<sup>24</sup> or in characters who eat only beans with rice, spinach and fufu at home and usually only hear about meat (ibid., p. 136). Despite the depicted poverty, the characters themselves do not feel poor:

“Mrknite, henten si dáva ôsme pivo, takže biedu trieť nebude. Máme vlastne všetko, čo potrebujeme, nezomiera sa od hladu, pred stánkami s jedlom je vždy plno. Možno život trvá pridlho, jednoducho sa nám veci zunovali” (p. 34).<sup>25</sup>

Through Vadas's short stories, the reader looks at the world from a different perspective, based on cultural differences. The author was enchanted by the world of Africa, by the way of thinking of people who are much happier than we would expect them to be given their living conditions. By getting to know a foreign world, the author himself came to realize his own world and being. Through the reading experience, the recipient begins to feel that Vadas understood and was able to empathize with the real experience of Cameroonians because his descriptions are never critical, on the contrary, they seem empathetic. In his short stories, he shares a fascinating experience with his readers, where poverty is not a cause for grief because wealth is hidden in other values. Recipients observing the fates of literary figures in the collections are implicitly confronted with their own values, perceptions of poverty and of what is really valuable and important in their lives. In *Ale tá koza!* the author presents to the recipient an opposite way of thinking about property, about the materialism of the modern way of life. In our culture, it is increasingly common to feel the joy of acquiring (material) things. Due to the parallel between Vadas's literary figures and the African natives he knows, it is clear that material interests are not a priority for the people of Africa. The man, the main character, feels happy when he gets rid of his property – he even consciously seeks this feeling. In this way, Vadas manages to confront the recipient with the question of their own materialism and the associated relationship to the things they own.

Literary characters who have their prototype in Cameroonian reality simply think differently, solve other problems and have different value charts. Therefore, the plots of the stories in the individual collections are based on different principles. As Vadas says: “Ide o to, čo považujú za problém Afričania a čo my” (Vadas in Sedláková, 2013).<sup>26</sup> To illustrate this, we present an example of the character of a man from the short story *Náhoda neexistuje* [Coincidence does not exist] (Vadas, 2013, pp. 43-48), who spends all his money, is hit by a taxi, loses his leg and is abandoned by a woman. The character tells his story vividly, but without remorse and he finally adds: “Brat mi potom vybavil drevenú protézu. Darí sa mu a stará sa o mňa, odkedy Júlia odišla. Nemôžem sa sťažovať. Nič mi nechýba” (ibid., p. 48).<sup>27</sup>

Author depicts the Africans who simply live and enjoy the present: “V Kamerune existuje iba prítomnosť, ktorú si treba náležite užiť a vychutnať. Domáci väčšinou minú svoje výplaty za jediný deň na mäso, palmové víno a lesklé topánky” (Vadas in Plus7Dni, 2013).<sup>28</sup> The experienced optimistic way of Cameroonian thinking culminates in expressive claims of one of the characters: “Lepšie povedané, v našej krajine považujeme za šťastie už samotný fakt, že nás oserie vták a vďaka tomu môžeme začať dúfať v lepšie správy” (Vadas, 2018, p. 78).<sup>29</sup>

Because this image of Africans is based solely on the author's personal experience, it renders only his vision of reality and shows the characteristics which attract his attention or which seem interesting and remarkable to him. In this sense, we consider it a very subjective image influenced by the author's personality traits, therefore, we cannot generalize about the depicted way of life, and the way of thinking or living of “a common African or a Cameroonian” depends on several factors (region, family, employment, religion, etc).

### **Magical Africa**

In one interview (Andrejčáková, 2007), Vadas says that the beautiful and frightening are in close contact in Africa. In parallel, we can say that the exoticism depicted represents the beautiful part of Africa and the poverty the frightening part. The fusion of the positive (dance, music, colours, life) and negative (death, disease, dirt) features of Africa is both appealing and terrifying. The resulting juxtaposition creates a paradox, which in this sense is characteristic of most of the short stories in Vadas's collections. To analyse the African environment of short stories as one of the aspects of a specific magical expression, we have clarified the natural and cultural-social conditions (social conditions, living conditions, way of thinking of the population). As his stories show, magic is fully related to the lives of Africans, who, as the author confirms, are closely tied to traditions, spells and rituals. It is this aspect of African culture that will be the subject of the last part of the interpretation of the African environment, focusing on the thematic-motive structure of the texts. We will gradually uncover recurrent motives, such as magic, shamanism, (natural) healing, spirits, death and the understanding of time, without losing sight of their position in the world and in everyday life.

In the reality of Africa, we find magic also when playing football. Soccer teams have their priests and sorcerers who check the goals before the matches to see if they are in any way enchanted (Ogurčáková, 2010). Not only Vadas, but also the anthropologist Arnold Pannenburg (2008) mentions the presence, even the important role of, magic and rituals (often including palm wine) in practising this popular sport in Cameroon. In Vadas's short stories, magic and the supernatural emerge in places where the reader would expect them least. Very often the character does not even realize when he's gone beyond reality. This is because magic

is not excluded from the reality and everyday routine in Africa or in Vadas's short prose. A frequent rendering of magic in books is the practice of spells, which we find in a variety of situations. Women use magic to secure the affection and fidelity of men as in the story *Niekoľko viet o láske* [A few Sentences about Love] (Vadas, 2018, pp. 126-129):

“Keď zaspal, vytrhla mu z hrude chlp, z miesta pri srdci. Tie sú najvhodnejšie. Zauzlila ho dokopy so svojim chlpkom a v žabej krvi povarila. Potom stačilo kvapnúť jednu-dve kvapky ráno do kávy alebo piva a človek stratil zajačie úmysly” (ibid., pp. 127-128).<sup>30</sup>

Such spells and enchantments, together with the mentioned Juju, are among the more evident forms of magic that have their source clearly defined. It is a spell that is performed for some purpose, such as in the short story *Prvý pacient* [The First Patient] (pp. 78-80). In it, a man comes to the main character, a healer, asking for help in a situation in which he is cheating on his wife, but also his wife is cheating on him, and asks the healer for a spell to solve the problem. Other types of spells, in which all sorts of mixtures or pure palm wine are poured on the doorstep, are intended to ensure communication with the dead (Vadas, 2013, p. 146; Vadas, 2018, p. 17). Magical thinking can also be found in the act of painting one's face with black cock's blood to ward off evil forces and spirits (Vadas, 2013, p. 152) or in smearing children's faces with chalk to prevent death from taking them (ibid., p. 193). Black cocks, hens or goats are also used in magical ceremonies and rituals, whose task is mostly to connect with the dead (ibid., pp. 162-163).

Concerning religion, Catholicism is now predominant in Cameroon, but Islam and animist religions are also widespread (Kopecký – Chren – Grosu, 2015, p. 96) and the previously mentioned animist religion is known as the traditional African religion too (Tabard, 2008). The African version of Catholicism is not the same as that of Western countries; regarding this phenomenon, René Tabard (2010), referring to Gérard Buakassa's assertion, states that African religion is found everywhere, in the consciousness, spiritual and empirical activities, representations, attitudes, gestures, proverbs, legends and myths, and that it is found everywhere from the countryside to the cities, from the juridical processes to political agreements. As we have already mentioned in this study, Vadas paints a similar picture of the omnipresent African traditional religion in his image of Africa from his fictional stories as well. He expresses it in numerous interviews about his personal experience which have been published in many newspapers. As for this fragmented form of religious belief, part of which are the customs of the traditional African religions. Maud Lasseur (2005) documents it in his study about the Bamiléké tribe, and Vivien Baeke (1987) makes reference to the specific acts related to the magic, magical objects, animal sacrifice (mainly hens) and rituals

in her paper about the Western Cameroon tribe named Wuli.

Enormous spiritual and magical power is also hidden in various talismans, protective amulets, but mainly masks. It was thanks to the mask that the woman in the short story *Každý deň nedeľa* [Every Day Sunday] (Vadas, 2018, pp. 101-103) is able to control her husband, to force him to do things he would not otherwise do. The characters of witches, shamans and healers abound with the strongest magical powers, and the last two people intersect many times in one figure.

In Africa, in the context of indigenous peoples, healing is an integral part of society. As we outlined in the section analysing poverty, Africans are confronted with diseases of various kinds on a daily basis, so healers are highly respected members of communities:

“Keď sa objavil v hocakom neznámom podniku, ľudia hneď stíchli a úctivo kývli na pozdrav” (Vadas, 2015, p. 53).<sup>31</sup>

African healing, as it is imaged by Vadas, has been maintained by oral tradition. Herbalism is an inseparable method of healing in Africa – the other half of healing practices associated with divination and spiritualism, the ubiquitous magic (Ozioma – Chinwe, 2019). Healers rely on the advice of ancestors whom they meet in dreams, relying on the help of magical items or rituals:

“O ngangovi z Bona Beri som už toho počul dosť. [...] Ako vo sne zistil príčinu ťažkostí a svojich pacientov potom liečil kameňmi z rieky, alebo choroby vyháňal tancom” (ibid., p. 66).<sup>32</sup>

The healers' way of seeking advice and answering healing questions is not pure fiction.<sup>33</sup> The very ability of Africans to heal is related to the connection with ancestors and spirits. It is a highly spiritual affair in African culture, and healers are often a bridge between worlds. The knowledge gained through the spirits and the connection with them is a gift not only for patients, but also for healers themselves. This is probably why healers do not charge money for their treatment. We register this motif in the short story *Prvý pacient* or in the short story *Pán Klobúk* [Mr. Hat] named after the main character (Vadas, 2015, pp. 53-56):

“Klobúk nebral peniaze, len symbolickú najmenšiu mincu a dal si zaplatiť za pivo alebo miskú ryže” (Vadas, 2015, p. 54).<sup>34</sup>

“Tu nejde o peniaze. Uvidíme, čo sa dá robiť. Ak budete spokojný, na konci mi na stole necháte, koľko uznáte za vhodné” (Vadas, 2018, p. 79).<sup>35</sup>

Respect for healers and healing from the point of view of other people determines their access to these spheres of life. By abusing the healing endowment, the guilty person is exposed to the possibility of punishment and anger of spirits. Healing, as a form of charity

and a consequence of greedy human acts in connection with it, is presented as a theme or motif in several stories. In interpreting the image of African healers, it is necessary to distinguish between healing and the opposing quackery under the vision of profit. The last short story of the same name in the storybook *Liečiteľ* serves as a good example. Vadas describes the story of the main character, Ike Ngoma, who embarks on a healer's journey after dreaming about it after being fired from his original job. In his dream he finds a mission to heal people, but also with the ulterior intention to capitalise on it:

“Mohol začať s praxou. Ľudia sa vždy radi odmenia človeku, ktorý ich vyseká z najhoršieho” (ibid., p. 157).<sup>36</sup>

The story ends with the death of a healer who misuses the gift of healing. He pays for it with his life – spirits take him to the other world. However, it should be added that the author does not shift responsibility for the fate of the healer to the spirits. The spirits are not to blame, but the healer himself and his dishonesty for which he is punished. Similar ethical principles and motifs of punished evil occur in stories around the world, and Africa is no exception. We allude to fairy-tale structures which, in their variations, contain the principle of rewarded good and punished evil. In the mentioned short story, evil is personified by a negative human quality and the actions associated with it. In many short stories, Vadas uses the theme of good and evil, wherein evil, which is habitually punished, usually represents a complaint of human character and behaviour. For instance, the (wood)carver of sacred masks from the story *Kto sa tam mláti?* [Who's Brawling There?] (pp. 135–139) is punished for his greed with madness, and in the short story *Raz hnedá, raz čierna* there is a character punished for exaggerated self-confidence and arrogance. On the contrary, the main character in the short story *Prichádza hlas* [The Voice Arrives] (Vadas, 2018, pp. 81-83) is rewarded for his obedience with healing abilities, which symbolizes the motif of rewarded good.

Behaviour, good or bad, affects the existence of Africans, which is more of an energy or power in their perception. This energy/power is contained in places, things, animals and people, and its character can change depending on the other forces with which it comes into contact. It is magic and spells that can change the potential of this power by its gaining, strengthening or weakening, or removing (Oriešek, 2013). “Africans believe that the cause of ill health, misfortunes, and other afflictions could be traced to both the visible and the invisible elements of the world” (Ngetcham – Assiatou, 2023, p. 111), which is why the death and disease in Vadas's short stories have always been caused by someone. The bad behaviour of neighbours, disputes and subsequent enchantment or simple Juju can change the power and induce disease. Then the locals turn to healers who can help if the dispute is resolved:

“Potom prišiel trest, pretože nič sa na svete nedeje len tak. Všetko na svete má svoju príčinu. Teraz to už viem, každému v našej osade je to jasné. Sused raz dostal horúčku dengue. Zoslabol, krvácal a rodina už chystala máry. Je jasné, že horúčku dostal, pretože ho uštipol nakazený komár, ale on ho neuštipol len tak. Niektó si to želal. Starý Joshua, ktorý u nás lieči choroby, určil vinníka bez dlhého premýšľania. Mal ním byť Manu, otcov najlepší priateľ. Manu mal kedysi dávno s chorým nejaký spor so záhradami. [...] Nakoniec celá záležitosť dopadla dobre. Manu zašiel do pacientovho domu, poprosil ho o odpustenie a zaplatil mu lieky. Sused vyzdravel a u liečiteľa sa oslavovalo”. (Vadas, 2018, p. 67)<sup>37</sup>

If the enchantment is too strong, or the disease is serious, even a healer with the help of spirits, spells and medicinal herbs cannot avert the coming death. We have already demonstrated the frequent occurrence of the motif of death in the short story collections in the section about images of poor Africa. However, its connection with magic and spirits cannot be left out. The diverse variation of the motif of spirits and death in the stories indicates a lot about the thinking of the African people. Spirits in general, not just in the context of healing, are part of the real world and cultural thinking. The use of these motifs is the most important way to prove the connection between magic and death and the afterlife. Death is a matter for every culture, but returning to the differences between the West and Africa, we see differences in its perception. In Western cultures, death is the ultimate end for the living world. Depending on the philosophy of life, and often also on religious beliefs (Christian-Jewish tradition), existence in this world ends with death, alternatively it continues in the afterlife in another separate world.

In Africa, the world of the dead and the world of the living are not strictly separated as is the case in Europe. Death is a natural component of this world because the borders of the worlds are not definitive, impenetrable. They are relative, because the dead go somewhere else, but they constantly stay in touch with family and the loved ones.<sup>38</sup> During dreams or ceremonies, the living can contact non-living members and, sometimes, the deceased will come to visit, help or to warn them. For example, in Cameroon, the family meets every Saturday to talk to their ancestors and ask for their advice (Vadas in Andrejčáková, 2017). The deceased represent protectors and counsellors for their families, and at the same time the bereaved still respect them:

“Večer k nám občas chodieval na návštevu starý otec. [...] Objaví sa poležiačky, najprv nohy, potom hlava, dlane zopnuté na hrudi. Chvíľu sa vznáša nad mojou posteľou a potom žuchne do perín. [...] Aj on večeria, ale ani sa pri tom nepohne. Iba z taniera

pomaly mizne kúsok za kúskom. [...] Potom poďakuje mame za rybu a zodvihne sa z postele. Poležiačky vychádza z izby, preklízne pootvorenými dverami a ja s bratmi za ním vybiehame na dvor. To vám je úplne parádna vec, ten pohľad, keď starý otec odchádza do tmy a ligoce sa vo svetle mesiaca” (Vadas, 2013, pp. 127-128).<sup>39</sup>

“Jacobovo telo som pochoval na konci starcovej záhrady. [...] Chlapec sa sklonil po nejaký šuter a nespúšťajúc ma pritom z očí vykrikoval niečo o bastardoch, čo mu špinia ulicu. Roztočil prak, skala sa so svišťaním odrazila v mláke do strany. Opäť namieril, ale vyrušil ho ostrý psí štekot. Poplašene sa rozhladol, pretože žiadneho psa nebolo vidieť. [...] Potom sa ozvalo tlmené vrčanie a ten chudák sa dal na útek. Po niekoľkých metroch vykrikoval, tričko na slabinách sa mu roztrhlo a odhalilo čerstvú ranu. [...] Niečo neviditeľné sa mi obtrelo okolo nôh. Bol to môj Jacob. [...] Vedel som, že môj jediný priateľ ma nemôže opustiť! Zostal so mnou a dával na mňa pozor”. (Vadas, 2015, pp. 47-49)<sup>40</sup>

In the first passage, we observe a short story of a boy describing a family dinner. Right at the beginning, we learn that sometimes their grandfather also visits them, and then he actually enters the house. However, the manner of his arrival (in a supine position) has a strange, irrational effect on the recipient. The recipient begins to suspect that something is not as it should be and progressively realizes that the figure of the grandfather is actually a ghost. The Western recipient may feel consternation because it is not natural in his culture for ghosts to appear in households, moreover, during a quiet family dinner and then leave, sparkling. The whole situation is all the more strange because the characters do not show any wonder, astonishment or horror. On the contrary, based on the narration of the main character (the little boy) it is noticeable that the situation excites him. What amazes and frightens the Western recipient seems to the main character to be an “absolutely great thing” (Vadas, 2013, p. 128). The character is reconciled to the death of his grandfather; he considers it normal and the presence of the spirit is natural too.

In the second illustration, the author introduces a boy who buried his dog, but it still stays close to him in the form of a ghost to protect him as it had done during its life. While in the first example the author works mainly with the atmosphere of strangeness, in the second text the atmosphere shows a trace of the scary, horror even. The threat, which remains invisible, escalates the tension until it culminates in an attack. Vadas represents a completely different type of spirit and its behaviour in the living world. The ghost is menacing and hostile to a boy who attacks his companion. In sharp contrast, the release of the established tension comes, and the situation turns and gains a more pleasant character. The boy recognizes in the



ghost his deceased dog friend who protects him. He is pleased with its presence and the whole situation is extremely real and unquestionable to him.

In contrast to the behaviour of the dog spirit, the author depicts the general African attitude to their existence. Ghosts really have a place in the living world. They can be helpful and friendly, but they need to be held in respect. Otherwise, the dead can be hostile or frightening; they can be offended or even harm the living. An example of a vengeful ghost is the main character and at the same time the narrator of a short story named *Budem sa pozerat'* [I'll Be Watching] (Vadas, 2015, pp. 15-16). He is a man who once lived with his family in a small settlement, but after his death, his sons leave to live in a distant town and the old man's house becomes run-down. His sons forget about him and no one calls him or invites him to return to his family for a while. That is why he returns by himself to the place where he once lived and spends his time scaring others.

“Nepotrebujem nič. Stačí, aby som sa mohol pozerat'. A strašiť. A ak niekto pred svitaním pôjde na hajzel, možno ho vezmem so sebou, na druhú stranu” (ibid., p. 16).<sup>41</sup>

But, spirits in Africa represent not only deceased people but also ancient spirits who live in nature and have diverse abilities and appearances and are usually rich in wisdom and knowledge. Some know the cure for alcoholism (p. 60), others are evil and take the form of a rainbow snake (p. 76), another will possess people who subsequently cannot control themselves (p. 79) or there may be a woman with a fishtail living in a sea palace, and many others. To set the record straight, it must be added that in Vadas's stories the boundaries are absent not just between reality and magic or the world of the living and the dead. They do not exist in time in general. The author's characters do not rush, time is much less important in their world, as Vadas claims: “Čas tu nič neznamená” [Time means nothing here] (Vadas in Ogurčáková, 2010). African time is in opposition to our European time because in Africa it is perceived more as a cycle, while in Europe time is a purely linear process (Babalola – Alokun, 2013, p. 144). As Vadas adds: “Možno aj preto sa domáci nezaoberajú budúcnosťou. Neplánujú, ale výdatne a bezprostredne si užívajú prítomnosť. Žijú bez času. Náš európsky čas, presne rozrátaný a zadelený v diároch, nás oberá o čas žiť” (Vadas in Andrejčáková, 2007).<sup>42</sup> For this reason too, Vadas's short stories are characterized by mostly ambiguous times. Time prolongs, then it flows quickly, night and day merge together (Vadas, 2018, pp. 90-91), weeks pass, or vice versa, time stops completely (Vadas, 2015, p. 128).

Magic is simply indispensable to African culture; it is found in every bit of it and is a natural part of it. The African finds it in shrines, in shacks of shamans, in healers, or in nature itself:

“Nik by ich nepresvedčil o opaku, že stromy nevedia chodiť. Každé malé dieťa u nich vie, že stromy môžu človeka pozorovať, sledovať ho na nočnej ceste, robiť mu spoločnosť, ukazovať mu smer, keď zablúdi, ale aj strašiť ho v spánku. Vedia, čoho sú stromy schopné” (Vadas, 2015, p. 127).<sup>43</sup>

Magic is also manifested in the characters, their abilities and appearance. Where else, in magical Africa, would it be possible to meet a woman who, instead of her head, has a jerrycan full of palm wine from which she pours (Vadas, 2018, p. 29); an old woman who will instantly turn into a young woman and show love to men (ibid., pp. 38-39); an old woman who digs her own grave and buries herself in it (Vadas, 2013, pp. 113-116); a man who changes people's destinies by writing books (ibid., 139-144); a boy from a book who comes to life (Vadas, 2015, p. 7); a lion woman (ibid., p. 102); or death itself, sitting in a corner, reading a newspaper calmly during a dance (p. 17)? Every being, no matter how special, unlikely or unrealistic it seems to a recipient from a Western tradition, has a place in Africa. Africans consider everyone to be society: the living, the dead, and those who have not yet been born. They are real in the same way (Oriešek, 2013). This fact allows Vadas in the short story *Narodil som sa prvého augusta* to use a first-person narrator who is an unborn child telling the story of how his mother tried to get rid of him during pregnancy.

## Conclusion

Vadas's collections of short prose, inspired by his personal experience of life on the African continent, present works with a special, unique poetics and magical quality of expression of his stories. The uniqueness of this poetics is connected with the author's style, which arises on the one hand from a different cultural experience, one that is different from the world of experiences common in Western culture, and on the other hand, it arises from the simplicity of his narration. The author's direct experience with Africa is reflected in his works in depiction of a world that deviates from the natural sciences, a world in which reality intertwines with fantastic moments based on traditions, myths and dreams. The African environment captured in the author's texts has an exotic effect on the Slovak recipient. An important element involved in the fascinating exotic nature of the texts is the thematic structure; also important are the characters of healers, ghosts or shamans, etc., who appear in the environment of exotic, poor and magical villages, jungles, caves, cities, etc. The specific magical expression of the texts at the level of spatial settings of stories is completed by the confrontation of this exoticism with the harsh realism of poverty and the living conditions of the African (literary) population.

The depicted African mentality is essential to the African magical atmosphere, in

which magic is inextricably connected to everyday life and permeates every moment of it. These two mentioned worlds, one of reality and the second of fantasies or irrationality, blend into each other and form an unusual fusion. Despite the fact that the author speaks of the African environment of his stories only as a backdrop to mix reality and fantasy better (Sedláková, 2013), we are of the opinion that exotic Africa with all its aspects is an important part of the magical effect of his texts.

But we also realize that the settings and the depicted image of Africa are not the only reason for the specific magical effect of Vadas's texts. In his short stories, there are several other qualities of expression, such as mysterious expression, as well as the comic, the ironic, the brutal and the crude, which cooperate in creation of the final style. This study presents an interpretation focused only on one aspect of the global magical quality of textual expression as a partial section of a comprehensive research of Vadas's poetics.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> *The Healer* is the official English translation made by Julia and Peter Sherwood in October 2023, but for most of the literary works in question there are no official translations. Thus in these cases we will provide our free translations of these titles. In case of an existent official translation, there will be a remark of the translator and of the publication year in the endnotes. In order to improve the readability of the main text, these translations will be given in each case only when they are first mentioned, further we will use only the original Slovak titles.

<sup>2</sup> Réne Literary Prize – Anasoft Litera from high school students (prestigious Slovak literary award).

<sup>3</sup> Translation made by Magdalena Mullek in 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The issue of opposition “foreign – own” which we use in the interpretation of the text is related to the issue of semiotic modelling of the world in the text, which Anton Popovič was dealing with from the mid-1970s: the structural principle of construction of the thematic universe in a literary work is a complexly modelled organization of binary oppositions (reality – image, old – new, own – foreign, etc.) (Plesník et al., 2008, p. 180). In this particular study, “own” represents the depicted world (or its elements), which the recipient identifies as their own, known and “foreign” as a world that is different.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of all of the literary excerpts for illustrative purposes we proceed as in the case of the titles, thus we present our free English translation in endnotes for each extract or for the quotations from the interview with the author. Translation of the first literary passage: “I woke up to a different world with a completely different way of thinking, with a different scale of values, with different problems and joys. In the evening, I was still sitting and meditating about marketing numbers in Bratislava, and 24 hours later I was roasting a porcupine with an old black woman and listening to stories about walking palms and invisible people.”

<sup>6</sup> This source is in the form of an interview published as a video; the information can be heard at about 24 minutes and 30 seconds.

<sup>7</sup> “I’m not pretentious enough to think of my writing as African. It is possible to look into traditions, take inspiration from them partially, but I can only emulate the way of thinking, I will never get deep enough into it. In addition, I also think that purely European influences can appear in the book.”

<sup>8</sup> “Example: “Mám tu zopár hlinených chalúp, z jednej strany polia s pomarančovníkmi, z druhej les s vystupujúcimi papájami, uprostred chodník k jazeru” [I have a few clay cottages here, on one side a field with orange trees, on the other a forest with protruding papaya, in the middle a path to the lake] (Vadas, 2015, p. 15).

<sup>9</sup> Mangrove forests are located at the interface of oceans and land in mixed salt and fresh waters in the equatorial zones; in the case of the African continent it is the west coast.

<sup>10</sup> “Every house is a tavern here, everywhere you see a banner with the logo of a brewery, they give you warm beer for 400 francs.”

<sup>11</sup> Aside from the citation, we will use its English transcription further in the text.

<sup>12</sup> “It was an annual celebration, the elders fired into the air from centuries-old rifles, white Juju with a stick walked the wires over our heads, and live music played in the bar in front of the palace.”

<sup>13</sup> “If someone dies, Juju will come to our city. It is not a human nor an animal, it wears a feather coat, a mask of a crocodile, a horse. As it walks the streets, everyone bows to it. We children have to run, we must not even look at it. If I met Juju and looked him in the face, I would die. It would take me to the ghosts.”

<sup>14</sup> “They have just imported zuu, a cheap unrefined fuel.”

<sup>15</sup> “No one wanted to risk falling into the clutches of the mbwembwel himself.”

<sup>16</sup> “You never know when mbwembwel will come to your house. But that day will come soon.”

<sup>17</sup> “We have beer, palm wine, real matango and mimbo from the sea.”

<sup>18</sup> “Two hands, two legs, a body and a head with everything that belongs to it. But something about him didn’t seem right to me from the beginning. [...] Nothing happened for a long time, until after a long while the white man came (I know now why he was odd – he was all white!) and was telling us about something.”

<sup>19</sup> “Everywhere I looked, there was rubbish and a haze hovering above it. No sign of a flame anywhere. All the rubbish fermented there, exhaling a suffocating putrid odour. My shoes dug into the slimy mass, from which plastic bags of various colours stuck out.”

<sup>20</sup> “She tried everything, drank bleach and hair dye, sniffed the ether [...] When none of the methods of the herb doctress helped, the mother went to the river to find the black widow. She looked at her, took the money, and put her to bed. She sat down on her face and beat her on the stomach with a stick with all her might. [...] Then the widow spread the mother’s legs and inserted an iron bar into her several times.”

<sup>21</sup> “In front of the station, a biker knocks down a child, a boy who had barely started going to school. Then, when I am sitting in the bus, I see a tanker truck falling from a slope into a river, and at the first crossroads in the city, two taxis run into each other, leaving only their wedged rear hoods.”

<sup>22</sup> The illustration: “Africkej žene zomrú štyri z ôsmych detí, pretože nemá lieky, ktoré ani nestoja veľa a bez problémov by jej deťom pomohli. Africká rodina žije v iných reláciách ako rodiny v Európe. Aj keď ste v Európe chudobný, nejde vám o život.” [Four out of eight children of an African woman will die because she does not have drugs that do not cost much and would easily help her children. The African family lives in different conditions than families in Europe. Even if you are poor in Europe, you’re not risking your life] (Vadas in Sedláková, 2013). Vadas was in Africa mostly in the first decade of this century, but reports of organizations, such as UNICEF, still indicate poor healthcare and lack of medicines (Pheage, 2017) as the reasons for the high mortality. Moreover, they state malnutrition (Fleshman, 2002), injuries and traffic accidents too (Sidhu – Leclercq Balde, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> “When I first came to the village and unpacked my necessities in a mud hut, I found that I had more things in my backpack than a family of ten. I was very ashamed, because one mat, a pot, a spare shirt and three plates are enough for them to be satisfied.”

<sup>24</sup> “Doma mám len posteľ a prútené kreslo na terase. Verte mi, o pár dní si na tie veci ani nespomeniete” [At home, I only have a bed and a wicker chair on the terrace. Believe me, you won’t even remember those things in a few days.] (Vadas, 2018., p. 33).

<sup>25</sup> “Take a look, he’s having his eighth beer there, so he won’t live in poverty. In fact, we have everything we need, we do not die of hunger, in front of food stalls it is always full. Maybe life lasts a long time, simply we got tired of things.”

<sup>26</sup> “It is about what Africans see as a problem and what we do.”

<sup>27</sup> “Then my brother equipped me with a wooden prosthesis. He is doing well and has been taking care of me since Julia left. I can’t complain. I don’t lack anything.”

<sup>28</sup> “There is only a presence in Cameroon that needs to be properly enjoyed and savoured. Locals usually spend their pay checks in a single day on meat, palm wine and shiny shoes.”

<sup>29</sup> “Better said, in our country, we consider happiness the very fact that a bird shits on us and thanks to that we can begin to hope for better news.”

<sup>30</sup> “When he fell asleep, she yanked out a hair from his chest, from a place near his heart. These are the most suitable. She knotted it with her hair and boiled it in frog blood. Then it was enough to put one or two drops into a coffee or a beer in the morning and the man stopped having a yellow belly.”

<sup>31</sup> “When he appeared in some spot/bar, people immediately fell silent and nodded in respectful greeting.”

<sup>32</sup> “I’ve heard enough about nganga from Bona Beri. [...] About how he found out the cause of the difficulties in a dream, and then treated his patients with stones from the river, or expelled the diseases by dancing.”

<sup>33</sup> Vadas proceeds from his direct experience with a healer and with the African mentality, which he mentions in an interview: “Muyah je totiž nezvyčajný vladár, je zároveň liečiteľom, komunikuje s duchmi a na ozdravné procedúry používa rastliny či kôru rôznych stromov. [...] Muyah objavil svoje schopnosti po otcovej smrti, ktorý ho začal navštevovať vo vidinách a pošepol mu celú liečiteľskú múdrosť” [Muyah is an unusual ruler, he is also a healer, he communicates with spirits and uses plants or the bark of various trees for healing procedures. [...] Muyah discovered his abilities after his father’s death, who began to visit him in visions and whispered all the healing wisdom to him] (Vadas in Plus7Dni, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> “(Mr.) Hat did not take money, only a symbolic smallest coin, and he let them pay for a beer or a bowl of rice for him.”

<sup>35</sup> “This is not about money. We’ll see what can be done. If you are satisfied, in the end you will leave me on the table as much as you see fit.”

<sup>36</sup> “He could start the practice. People always like to reward the person who gets them off the hook.”

<sup>37</sup> “Then came the punishment, because nothing in the world happens just like that. Everything in the world has a cause. Now I know it, it’s clear to everyone in our settlement. A neighbour once got dengue fever. He was weak, bleeding, and the family was preparing the bier. It’s clear he got a fever because he was bitten by an infected mosquito, but it didn’t just bite him for no reason. Someone wished it. Old Joshua, who treats our diseases, identified the culprit without much thought. It was supposed to be Manu, (my) father’s best friend. Manu once had a dispute with the sick over the gardens. [...] In the end, the whole thing went well. Manu went to the patient’s house, asked for forgiveness, and paid for his medicine. The neighbour recuperated and there was a celebration at the healer’s.”

<sup>38</sup> We based that statement on a quotation of Marek Vadas himself: “Na rovníku mŕtvy odíde kamsi inam, ale svoju rodinu ďalej kontroluje, stráži a pomáha jej. Deti sa ho pýtajú, ako sa zachovať, na stole má prichystané svoje obľúbené jedlo a žena o ňom hovorí tak, ako by si iba odbehol nakúpiť na trh” [At the equator, the dead man departs somewhere else, but he continues to control, guard and help his family. The children ask him how to act, he has his favourite food ready on the table and his wife talks about him as if he just went shopping to the market] (Vadas in Andrejčáková, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> “In the evening, our grandfather sometimes visits us. [...] He appears lying down, first the legs, then the head, palms clasped on the chest. He hovers over my bed for a moment and then flops down into the sheets. [...] He’s having dinner too, but without moving. Only (the food) from the plate slowly disappears bit by bit. [...] Then he thanks Mom for the fish and gets out of the bed. Lying down, he leaves the room, slips through the slightly open door, and my brothers and I run after him into the yard. It is an absolutely great thing, the sight of grandfather walking into the darkness and sparkling in the moonlight.”

<sup>40</sup> “I buried Jacob’s body at the end of the old man’s garden, [...] The boy reached down for a rock and not letting me out of his sight he was shouting something about the bastards who were polluting his street. He spun the sling, the whizzing rock bounced from a puddle to the side. He aimed again, but was interrupted by a sharp dog bark. He looked around startled because no dog was visible. [...] Then a muffled growl was heard, and the poor boy fled. After a few meters, he screamed, his T-shirt on his groin tore, revealing a fresh wound. [...] Something invisible brushed against my legs. It was my Jacob. [...] I know my only friend couldn’t leave me! He stayed with me and watched over me.”

<sup>41</sup> “I need nothing. It is enough that I can watch. And scare. And if someone goes to the crapper before dawn, maybe I’ll take him with me, to the other side.”

<sup>42</sup> “Perhaps that is why the locals are not concerned with the future. They do not plan, but they enjoy the present extensively and instantly. They live without time. Our European time, precisely counted and divided in diaries, deprives us of a time to live.”

<sup>43</sup> “No one would convince them otherwise, that trees cannot walk. Every young child at their place knows that trees can observe a person, follow him on a night journey, keep him company, show him the direction when he gets lost, but also scare him in his sleep. They know what trees are capable of.”

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