

The bird-dreaming baobab

Couto, Mia . Couto, Mia.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

The bird-dreaming baobab

Birds, all those who know of no abode on the ground.

That man will always remain in shadow: no memory will be enough to save him from the dark. To be true, his star was not the Sun. Nor did he come from a country called life. Maybe that was why he lived with all the caution of an outsider. The bird seller didn't even have a name to shelter him. They called him the birdman.

Each morning, he would pass through the white folks' neighbourhood carrying his enormous cages. He made these cages himself, from such flimsy material that they didn't even look like a prison. What they did look like were winged cages, cages that might fly away. Inside them, the birds fluttered around in a twinkle of colour. A cloud of twitters enveloped the bird seller, so loud that they made the windows rattle:

'Mother, look, here comes the dicky bird man!'

And the birds would flood the streets. Joyfulness was exchanged: the birds shouted and the children chirped. The man would take out a mouth organ and put sleepy melodies to tune. The whole world was filled with stories.

Behind their curtains, the settlers tut-tutted at such abuses. They sowed suspicions among their children—who did that black think he was? Did anyone know his credentials? Who had authorized those grubby feet to dirty the area? No, no, and no again. The black ought to return to his proper place. But the birds, they're so sweet—the children insisted. The parents took on sterner airs: enough said.

But the order was not destined to be greatly respected. One [Page 32] little boy more than all the others disobeyed it, and devoted himself to the mysterious birdman. That was Tiago, a dreamy child, whose only gift was to pursue his fancy. He would wake up early, put his nose to the window pane waiting for the bird seller to come by. The man would come into view and Tiago would rush down the stairs, thirty steps in five jumps. Feet bare, he would go down the street and disappear among the swarm of birds. The sun would sink and there was no sign of the lad. At Tiago's home, people would start to give their worries a polishing:

'Barefoot, just like them.'

The father planned his punishment. Only the mother's soft heart brought relief to the little boy's arrival, in the fullness of night. The father insisted on an explanation, even if it were but the outline of one:

'Did you go to his house? But does that good-for-nothing have a house?'

His dwelling was a baobab, the empty hollow inside its trunk. Tiago told them: it was a sacred tree, God had planted it upside down.

'See what that black has been filling the child's head with.'

The father turned to his wife, heaping blame on her. The lad continued: *'It's true, Mother. That tree is capable of great sadness. The old men say that a baobab can commit suicide in despair by way of fire. Without anyone setting it alight. It's true, Mother.'*

'What nonsense,' the lady of the house soothed.

And she would draw her son away from his father's reach. Then the man would decide to go out, and join his rage to that of the other settlers. At the club there was clamour from all: the birdman's visits had to be stopped. Measures could not include death by killing, nor anything that might offend the eyes of women and children. In a word, the cure would have to be thought about.

The following day, the bird seller repeated his joyful invasion. Even the settlers hesitated: after all, that black was bringing with him birds of a beauty never before seen. No one could resist their colours, their chirping. The sight was like nothing else in this [Page 33] true and natural world. The bird seller bowed in nameless modesty, disappearing from himself out of humility.

'These are truly excellent birds, these ones with their wings all ashow.'

The Portuguese began to wonder: where in the name of magic did he get such miraculous creatures? Where, if they themselves had already brought the most distant bushland to heel?

The bird seller dissembled, answering with a chuckle. The whites began to fear their own suspicions—might that black have a right to enter a world which was closed to them? But then they set about paring down his merits: the fellow lived in trees, among the birds. They were like creatures of the wild, was the general conclusion.

Whether because of the scorn of the powers that be, or because of the admiration of the meek, the birdman became a topic of conversation in the concrete part of town. His presence began to fill the length of a conversation, unsuspected empty moments. The more people bought from him, the more their houses were filled with sweet song. Such music fell strangely on the settlers' ears, proving that the area they lived in had little in common with the land around them. Could it be that the birds were eroding the residents' sense of self, turning them into foreigners? Or was it the black who was at fault, that son-of-a-bitch who insisted on existing, unaware of the duties of his race? The traders ought to realize that there was no room for his bare feet in those streets. The whites were concerned at such disobedience, blaming it on the times. They yearned jealously for the past, when creatures could be tidied away depending on their appearance. The bird seller, by overstepping himself in such a fashion, was leading the world towards other awareness. Even the children, thanks to his seduction, were forgetting their behaviour. They were becoming more like children of the street than of the home. The birdman had even made inroads into their dreams:

'Pretend I'm your uncle.'

And they all joined the family, all became related, relatively speaking.

'Uncle? Have you ever heard of a black being called uncle?'

[Page 34]

The parents were determined to arrest their dreams, their tiny, boundless souls. The command was issued: the street is out of bounds, you can't go out any more. Curtains were drawn, the houses shut their eyelids.

Order seemed to rule once again. That's when things began to happen. Doors and windows opened by themselves, furniture appeared turned back to front, drawers were swapped round.

At the Silvas' house:

'Who opened this cupboard?'

No one, no one had. Old man Silva got angry: everyone in the house knew that firearms were kept there. With no sign of having been forced, who could the burglar have been? Such was the indignant plaintiff's doubt.

At the Peixotos' house:

'Who scattered grass seed among my papers?'

No one, nothing, not anyone, came the reply. The Peixoto supremo warned: you know very well what type of documents I keep in that drawer. He listed their secret functions, their confidential matters. Let the spreader of grass seed own up. Bloody birds, he mumbled.

At the mayor's residence:

'Who let the birds in?'

Nobody had. The governor was unable to govern his temper: he had come across a bird inside a cupboard. Solemn municipal discussion papers covered in bird droppings.

'Just look at this one: bird shit in the middle of the official seal.'

In the wake of all these occurrences, a general uproar gripped the area. The settlers held a meeting in order to try and reach a decision. They assembled at the home of Tiago's father. The lad slipped out of bed and stood at the door listening to their grim threats. He didn't even wait for the sentence to be passed. He rushed off through the bush in the direction of the baobab. There, he found the old man settling himself by the warmth of the fire.

'They're coming to get you.'

[\[Page 35\]](#)

Tiago was gasping for breath. The bird seller was not put out: he knew, he was waiting for them. The little boy tried harder, for never before had the man meant so much to him.

'Run away, there's still time.'

But the bird seller set himself at ease, in sleepy langour. He stepped serenely into the trunk and there he tarried. When he came out, he was wearing a tie and a white man's suit. Once again he sat down, clearing the sand underfoot. Then he paced up and down, surveying the horizon.

'Run along, boy. It's night time.'

Tiago lingered. He glanced at the birdman, awaiting his gesture. If only the old man were like the river: still but moving. But he wasn't. The bird seller belonged more to legend than to reality.

'And why did you put on a suit?'

He explained: he was the natural offspring of that land. It was his duty to know how to receive visitors. It was for him to show respect, the duties of a host.

'As for you, go, go back home.'

Tiago got up, reluctant to leave. He looked up at the huge tree, as if he were asking it for protection.

'Can you see that flower?' asked the old man.

And he recalled the legend. The flower was where the spirits dwelt. Whoever harmed the baobab would be persecuted for the rest of his life.

The settlers began their noisy arrival. They surrounded the place. The little boy fled, hid, and watched. He saw the birdman get up and greet the visitors. The beating started straightaway, with cudgels and kicks. The old man didn't even appear to be suffering, a vegetable were it not for the blood. They bound his wrists and pushed him up the dark road. The settlers followed behind, leaving the boy alone in the night. The child hesitated, now stepping forward now back. Then it happened: the flowers of the baobab fell, like stars of felt. Their white petals turned red on the ground.

[\[Page 36\]](#)

Suddenly, the boy made up his mind. He dashed off through the bush after the procession. He tailed their voices and learnt that they were taking the birdman to gaol. When it became pitch black behind the wall next to the prison, Tiago began to suffocate. Was it any use praying? If the world around him had stripped itself of beauty. And in the heavens, just as in the baobab, no star glittered with pride any more.

The birdman's voice reached him from beyond the prison bars. Now he could see his friend's face, and all the blood which covered it. Interrogate the fellow, squeeze him hard. That was the order which the settlers left behind them as they withdrew. The guard saluted obediently. But he didn't even know what secrets he was supposed to drag out of the old man. What madness could they prove against the old street hawker? And now, standing there all alone, the figure of the prisoner seemed free of all suspicion.

'May I have permission to play? It's a tune from your part of the world, boss.'

The birdman put the harmonica to his lips and tried to blow. But he recoiled from the effort with a wince.

'They beat me a lot around the mouth. It's a pity, otherwise I'd play.'

The policeman became suspicious. The harmonica was hurled out of the window, and it fell near where Tiago was hiding. He picked the instrument up, and stuck its pieces together again. Those pieces were like his soul, starved of a hand that might make it whole. The lad curled up in the warmth of his own roundness. As he set off into sleep, he put the instrument to his lips and blew, as if he were playing his own lullaby. Who knows whether the birdman, shut away inside, didn't hear

the sound of such comfort?

He awoke in a kingdom of chirping. The birds! An infinity of them covered the whole police station. Not even the world, in its universal dimensions, seemed a big enough perch. Tiago approached the cell, surveyed the gaol. The doors were open, the prison deserted. The bird seller had vanished without trace, the [Page 37] place had lost all recollection of him. He called the old man, but was answered by the birds.

He decided to return to the tree. There was no longer any other place where he might go. No street, nor house: only the baobab's belly. As he walked along, the birds followed in a twittering cortège, high in the sky. He arrived at the birdman's abode, and looked at the ground covered with petals. They were no longer red, having returned to their original whiteness. He entered the trunk, putting distance between himself and time. Was it any use waiting for the old man? For sure, he had vanished, a fugitive from the whites. Meanwhile, he began to blow on the harmonica once more. He lulled himself in its rhythm, no longer with an ear to the world outside. If he had paid due attention, he would have noted the arrival of a host of voices.

'That black son-of-a-bitch is inside the tree.'

Vengeful steps surrounded the baobab, crushing the flowers underfoot.

'It's the fellow, along with his mouth organ. Play away, you scallywag, for you'll soon be dancing!'

Torches were put to the trunk, and the flames licked the ancient bark. Inside, the boy had unleashed a dream: his hair was growing into tiny leaves, his legs into timber. His wooden fingers dug rootlike into the soil. The boy was in transit to another realm: he was turning into a tree, consenting to the impossible. And from the dreaming baobab, there rose the birdman's hands. They touched the flowers, the corollas curled: monstrous birds were born and released, petal-like, on the crest of the flames. The flames? Where were they coming from, invading the remotest frontier of the dream world? That was when Tiago felt the sting of the blaze, the seduction of ash. Then the boy, a convert to the ways of sap, emigrated once and for all to his newfound roots.

DETAILS

Subject work:	The bird-dreaming baobab
Identifier / keyword:	Couto, Mia, 1955-; The bird-dreaming baobab
Publication title:	Every Man Is a Race; Oxford
Pages:	32-37
Publication year:	1994
Publisher:	Heinemann
Place of publication:	Oxford
Country of publication:	United States

Publication subject:	Literature
ISBN:	0435909827
Source type:	Book
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Prose, Translation, Book chapter, Short Story
Publication note:	Copyright © 2008 ProQuest LLC. All Rights Reserved. Do not export or print from this database without checking the Copyright Conditions to see what is permitted.; Preliminaries omitted.; First published by: Editorial Caminho; First published in the African Writers Series in: 1990; First published: 1986; First published: Lisbon; Language of original publication: Portuguese.
Accession number:	AWS00030
ProQuest document ID:	3114846264
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/litcollectioneawso/books/bird-dreaming-baobab/docview/3114846264/sem-2?accountid=15083
Copyright:	© Mia Couto 1989, 1990. This translation © David Brookshaw 1994
Last updated:	2025-05-01
Database:	African Writers Series

Database copyright © 2026 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)