Extract from *Tomorrow I’ll be Twenty*

By [Alain Mabanckou](http://www.litro.co.uk/author/alain-mabanckou/)

*About the Author:* Alain Mabanckou (born 24 February 1966) is a [novelist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novelist), [journalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journalist), [poet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poet), and academic, a French citizen born in the [Republic of the Congo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_the_Congo), he is currently a [Professor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professor) of [Literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literature) in the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States). He is best known for his novels and non-fiction writing depicting the experience of contemporary Africa and the African diaspora in France. He is among the best known and most successful writers in the [French language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_language) and one of the best known African writers in France.

*About the Book:* Michel is ten years old, living in Pointe Noire, Congo, in the 1970s. His mother sells peanuts at the market, his father works at the Victory Palace Hotel, and brings home books left behind by the white guests. Planes cross the sky overhead, and Michel and his friend Lounès dream about the countries where they'll land. While news comes over the radio of the American hostage crisis in Tehran, the death of the Shah, the scandal of the Boukassa diamonds, Michel struggles with the demands of his twelve year old girlfriend Caroline, who threatens to leave him for a bully in the football team. But most worrying for Michel, the witch doctor has told his mother that he has hidden the key to her womb, and must return it before she can have another child. Somehow he must find it.*Tomorrow I'll Be Twenty*is a humorous and poignant account of an African childhood, drawn from Alain Mabanckou's life.

**Extract from *Tomorrow I’ll be Twenty***

We’re sitting outside the front door. Maman Martine is scaling the fish we’re going to eat this evening when everyone’s here. It doesn’t matter if it’s not beef and beans. I eat everything here, and I pretend I like everything. I can be fussy with maman Pauline but not with maman Martine, it would really upset her.

At home there’s only Mbombie, Maximilien and little Félicienne, who’s just pissed on me when I was being really kind and giving her her bottle. I don’t know where the other children have gone. Yaya Gaston left early this morning for the port, and papa Roger won’t get back till sundown. My other brothers and sisters ought to be here too, because it’s the end of year holiday.

Seeing I can’t stop looking at the white bits in her hair, maman Martine says, ‘Ah yes, I’m not young like your mother Pauline, now. She must be the same age as one of my little sisters, the youngest, she’s just twenty seven, she still lives in Kinkosso.’

She looks up at the sky, murmuring, as though she was talking to someone else. She begins to talk, and she tells me how she grew up in Kinkosso and that to get to the village from the district of Bouenza you have to go in an Isuzu truck which takes four or five days. You go through other villages, across bridges which are just two trees laid side by side from one bank of the river to the other, so the trucks can pass.  The only time they ever replace the trees is when there’s an accident, and lots of people die. That’s where she and papa Roger met.

I like the way maman Martine’s voice sounds when she tells the story about her and papa Roger. Somehow she puts a bit of magic into it. I sort of believe her, but sometimes it sounds a bit like one of those stories from the time when animals and men could talk to each other about how to live together in peace.

When maman Martine talks about when she met papa Roger, she has a smile that lights up her whole face, and smoothes out the little lines, she looks young again, like maman Pauline. Her face is all smooth, her skin is like a baby’s, her eyes shine and you forget about her grey hair. I imagine her as a young girl, turning boys’ heads. Somehow she manages to forget I’m there, and imagine it’s someone different listening to her, her eyes are somewhere above my head, not focussed on me directly. She’s talking to someone who doesn’t exist, and I think: ‘That often happens, it happens all the time, grown ups are all like that, they’re always talking to people from their past. I’m still too little to have a past, that’s why I can’t talk to myself, pretending to talk to someone invisible.’

Maman Martine doesn’t realise that for a little while now her lips have been moving, her head gently swaying, her eyes growing moist, as though she’s about to cry. Sometimes she misses a few scales on the fish in her hands and I point out to her that there are still some scales left on the fish, that we might choke when we come to eat it.

She speaks very quietly. ‘Roger was a real little heart throb! I can see him now, as he was that year, back then in the village they still called him Roger le Prince.’

Then she suddenly gives me a look as if to say she’s finished talking to the people from the past, now she’s talking to a real person. And that’s when I learn that aged twenty, papa Roger was the best dancer in the Bouenza. In Ndounga, his home village, he was respected. When the rhythm of the tam-tams really got going he could actually rise off the ground and dance in mid-air while the crowd applauded and the women looked on adoringly, including the ones who were already married. When it came to dancing no one could get a win over him, or even a draw. He was famous then, and that was how he got his nickname ‘Roger le Prince’. When there was a burial in that part of the country, they summoned him urgently, like calling a doctor when you’re sick. He’d turn up with his group of dancers – there were ten of them, all strong and handsome – and they danced all through the night, so that the deceased would not be sad on their journey to the other world, where the road doesn’t run straight, and there is no music, no dance.

The year he met maman Martine, Papa Roger had been asked to go and dance in the village of Kinkosso, whose chief had died, aged one hundred and ten. Everyone, from all the villages in the region, had come to his funeral, because it wasn’t every day someone died aged one hundred and ten. When he got to Kinkosso, Roger le Prince announced to the villagers, who were showering him with presents, ‘This evening I will dance more then ten centimetres off the ground, because it’s our grandfather’s grandfather who’s died.’

The old sorcerers of the village threatened to make gris-gris against it, because they didn’t want the other villages in the Bouenza to think Roger le Prince was the best dancer in the whole world. The old sorcerers knew the secret of the levitation dance but ever since it’s invention, no one had seen a human being dance ten centimetres off the ground.

Roger le Prince insisted:

‘No one’s going to stop me paying my respects to our grandfathers! I *will* dance ten centimetres off the ground!’

The old people went a long way off from village and held a big meeting against the rude young man who was poking fun at them.  They nearly started fighting among themselves in the meeting. They all accused each other of inviting that rude Roger le Prince. But in the end they reached agreement: they must make sure that the stranger’s dance went no higher than ten centimetres off the ground.

That evening when Roger le Prince turned up in the village with his troupe, to find the women weeping over the corpse of the chief, he walked past three of the fetishers, and the oldest one came close to jostling him:

‘Hey, son, this isn’t just any village you know. You’re in our village here, and here we have rules that date back to the time when our ancestors walked about naked and didn’t yet know the word made flesh. You’ve got no grey in your beard yet, you’re too young to understand certain things only those with four ears and four eyes can grasp. You’d better watch out, you mark my words. You may not respect our village, but you’d better respect my grey beard and bald head.’

Roger le Prince replied:

‘Grandfather, I accepted your invitation to come to Kinkosso because the man who just died is someone special. He’s not just the chief of the village, he’s our grandfathers’ grandfather.’

‘Yes, but if you dance more than ten centimetres off the ground, you’re done for! You dance how you want, but no higher than ten centimetres! Don’t disgrace us in front of our people!’

Another unpleasant old man threatened:

‘Who d’you think you are anyway? Why d’you take this tone with us, when you’ve no grey beard and no bald head? Where were you the day the first White man set foot in this village, offering his mirrors, his sugar and guns, and taking our strongest men far away, across the sea? There’s Maniongui, who just asked you to show respect for his grey beard, his bald head, do you have a gold war medal too, like him? Old Maniongui’s seen every French president, since Emilie Loubet at the start of the century, to Général de Gaulle! Anyway whoever gave you the title of Prince, you don’t deserve it! We’re the ones who give titles! I’m giving you one last warning; if you dance more than ten centimetres off the ground, we’ll be burying you next, after our grandfathers’ grandfather! And your corpse won’t find its way home, you’ll be buried in the bush like a wild beast!’

The third old man spat on the ground. Which meant that he wasn’t going to waste his words like the others.

Roger le Pince moved away from the old men, but they went on threatening him behind his back. He called together his ten dancers to give them their instructions:

‘These old men are afraid they’ll look stupid, no dancer from this village has ever gone higher than ten centimetres, even though the levitation dance first started here in Kinkosso. We won’t be influenced by a handful of old goats who fancy themselves the guardians of tradition. We’ve learned their technique, we’ve mastered it, and now we’re the best in the region. And tonight we’ll prove it again, so get yourselves ready and don’t lose heart. You beat your tam-tams, as usual, and I’ll look after the rest.’

Maman Martine is scaling the last of the fish, and she almost curs herself with the knife when she cries, ‘Roger le Prince! What a fine young man! What a stubborn young man!’

When she saw I was waiting for the rest of the story, she cleared her throat and continued:

‘The evening of the grandfather’s funeral the men of Kinkosso lined up on one side and the women on the other. And between the two, Roger the Prince danced bare-chested, with a wrap made of raffia, and cowries round his waist, bells on his ankles and white clay on this face and in his hair. The bravest of the women were meant to step into the area left for Roger le Prince, and dance along with him. But none came. Now the crowd was growing restless, this wasn’t the kind of show you put on to say goodbye to the chief of the village. You could hear angry whistles, people shouting for a proper show. There had to be dancing, so everyone could get into a trance. Roger le Prince whispered something to one of his dancers, who then yelled a challenge to the audience, and I can still hear that low voice shouting: ‘Roger le Prince is very disappointed in this village! Have you no women in Kinkosso, or what? Is this the way to salute the memory of the grandfather of our grandfathers? If that’s the way it is, Roger le Prince is stopping right now, he’s going home to his village. And he swears he won’t be coming back to help you next time someone dies, you’re all too shy!’ At this one skinny young village girl shot out of the line of other women, like an arrow. Roger le Prince’s dancers all applauded, the crowd clapped too, and the drums went wild, as though the hands of ghosts were drumming. You could hear them the length and breadth of the district, they even woke the animals sleeping in the forest. The young village girl kicked up the dust as she danced. The wind blew so hard now, it lifted the pagne round her waist up to her chest, and you could see her red pants. Everyone stepped back, and gradually the levitation dance began. The old men of Kinkosso shouted for joy, and they danced too, happy to see that the dance was led by a girl from the village, and not that rude Roger le Prince. One of the old fetishers who had threatened Roger le Prince earlier in the day asked his colleague: ‘Tell me, whose daughter is that? What’s her family name again?’ Another replied ‘What does it matter? Who cares who it is and what her name is, I just know it’s she’s a girl from Kinkosso, and she’s leading the dance! So let’s dance with her! That rude little guy who claims he’s a prince is finished now! Shame on him!’ Everyone booed Roger le Prince. They all said he was useless. All this time, he was watching the girl with his arms folded. He turned to the chief drummer of his group. ‘Hey, who’s this stick insect coming on to me, who is she, she dances like a sparrow that’s just fallen out of her parents’ nest.’ The chief drummer almost shouted, ‘We don’t know her, but she’s got to almost 5 centimetres off the ground, you’d better do something or it’ll be a disgrace for us and the village of Ndounga!’ Roger le Prince made his mind up. ‘I’ll just have to go higher myself. After all, I’m the prince! Give me ten bars of *mutuntu* beat, the one Mubungulu used to play when he was alive, when he played for the dead in the Batalébé cemetery!’ One of his dancers was afraid. ‘You really want us to play that? It’s too dangerous! The last time we played that rhythm it almost got you killed!’ Roger le Prince was adamant.’ I’m telling you, it’s an order!’ And so the rhythm of the tam-tams suddenly changed. Even the sky started to stir, as though something might fall on our heads any moment. When the drummers beat their rhythm it was as though the skin of the drums was bursting and the clouds were parting. The villagers’ eardrums were fit to burst with the unknown rhythm, and they covered their ears. Up went Roger le Prince, up off the ground. He reached six centimetres, then seven, then eight. He never got up to ten, because the three old fetishers who’d been on at him earlier that day were upon him, tearing at their beards in anger. He came back down to earth, the old sorcerers sighed with relief. Now, behind them, the skinny little village girl from Konkosso had started dancing again, and now she was ten centimetres off the ground and all the villagers were applauding. Furious, Roger le Prince pulled himself up to his full height, span round in a circle, nodded to the drummers, who doubled, then tripled then quadrupled the speed of the lamented Mubungulu’s *muntuntu* rhythm. And there they saw Roger le Prince begin to rise, pedalling now, then up he rose, then pedalled again, then rose again, then pedalled harder and harder. We knew he must be over ten centimetres by now, but because no one believed it, there was now total silence in the village. They said it was the spirit of the grandfather of our grandfather’s that had hidden inside Roger le Prince’s body. The villagers were frightened and fled from the wake with their mats rolled up under their arm pits, with their wailing children. The dogs ran off into the bush with their tails between their legs, like wild beasts. Even the old men who’d challenged Roger le Prince and his dancers had gone. The corpse of our grandfathers’ grandfather was abandoned, and Roger le Prince had come back to earth, panting as hard as if he’d been lugging great sacks of potatoes for miles. He fell into a coma, the people in his group brought him round by throwing cold water over him. As soon as he opened his eyes he asked the drummers, ‘How high did I get?’  And they all replied in chorus, ‘Over fifteen and a half centimetres!’ He got to his feet, murmuring, ‘Let’s get back to Ndounga straight away, I don’t knows what’s happened here. I’ve never been that high before, I wasn’t alone, a spirit was pushing me, and I could have died, I couldn’t breathe properly up there.’ It was already past four in the morning when Roger le Prince and his group set off again for Ndounga. On the road they heard a strange noise behind them. They turned round, each one ready to run for it, as you do when you meet a devil out in the bush. The dancers had already scattered, but Roger le Prince stayed where he was and saw someone coming towards him. He shouted after the men who’d disappeared, ‘Come back! Come back! It’s no devil! It’s the skinny little dancer from Kinkosso.’

Maman Martine said, with a broad smile, ‘And that skinny little girl from Kinkosso was me…’

Then she burst out laughing.

‘Roger le Prince, what a gangster! He took my hand, all I said was, my name was Martine, but straightway he answered, ‘There’s a reason you followed me all this way. You are the future mother of my children. We’ll leave Bouenza, otherwise the old men in your village will be after us for the rest of our lives. We’ll go and live in the town.’ And so I followed Roger le Prince, because I knew he would be the father of my children, too, and that the grandfather of our grandfathers had given me a sign, because I’d never danced the levitation dance before that night and I don’t know what it was pushed me to step out of the line of women and start out-dancing your father. Destiny, that’s what they call it, it’s destiny.’

She finished scaling the fish and put them on the board. I can see her scattering them with flour and salt.

‘I’ll grill them in a while with palm oil, and I’ll make you a nice little tomato sauce. You’ll see, you’re going to love it.’

Before going to tip the bowl of water mixed with scales and blood into the gutter, she said, ‘I could have been someone different, you know. But perhaps this was the best life I could have had. I only stayed at school till the 4th grade, your father had his lower school certificate, and even studied at the high school in Bouenza till 7th grade. That helped when we came to live here: the Whites wanted people who’d been to school, especially with diplomas, like him. A few weeks after everything that happened in Kinkosso, Roger le Prince and I secretly boarded an Isuzu truck bound for Kouilou, making for Pointe-Noire. We needed to leave Bouenza without telling anyone. So we left just like that, each of us with a little bag. I was already pregnant, that father of yours is a real rabbit. I knew our life was going to change, and Roger le Prince got a job at the Victory Palace Hotel, just after Yaya Gaston was born. That has to be fate, don’t you think?’

*Tomorrow I’ll Be Twenty* (2013)

by Alain Madanckou

Instructions: In your number groups, analyze the three passages below by following steps A, B and C:

*Note: Letters in italics indicate that the individual in that letter group is to lead the task.*

A: Which character says the quote? To whom is this character speaking? (*A*)

B: Write the passage in your own words. (*B*)

C: What is the connection between this passage and Congolese cultural roots? (*C*)

(Read aloud – *D*)

1. “I like the way maman Martine’s voice sounds when she tells the story about her and papa Roger. Somehow she puts a bit of magic into it. I sort of believe her, but sometimes it sounds a bit like one of those stories from the time when animals and men could talk to each other about how to live together in peace.” (page 1, paragraph 5)

A.

B:

C:

(Read aloud – *E*)

1. “The old people went a long way off from village and held a big meeting against the rude young man who was poking fun at them.  They nearly started fighting among themselves in the meeting. They all accused each other of inviting that rude Roger le Prince. But in the end they reached agreement: they must make sure that the stranger’s dance went no higher than ten centimetres off the ground.” (page 2, paragraph 9)

A:

B:

C

(Read aloud – *F*)

1. “‘Hey, son, this isn’t just any village you know. You’re in our village here, and here we have rules that date back to the time when our ancestors walked about naked and didn’t yet know the word made flesh. You’ve got no grey in your beard yet, you’re too young to understand certain things only those with four ears and four eyes can grasp. You’d better watch out, you mark my words. You may not respect our village, but you’d better respect my grey beard and bald head.’” (page 2, paragraph 11)

A:

B:

C:

Discuss: Roger le Prince and Maman Martine were not *actually* levitating and dancing ten centimeters off the ground. Explain this metaphor. (*G*)