

PART II

Performance and Myth-Making

4 Creation through Inversion: The Carnavalesque Postcolonial State in the Novels of Alain Mabanckou and In Koli Jean Bofane

Authors of the new generation of Francophone African writers, far from rejecting the politically engaged stance of their predecessors,¹ are proposing a new form of engagement that, as Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier have similarly posited,² is tentative and often expressed to disturb instead of to transform.³ This disturbance consists of representing what Achille Mbembe has described as the ‘banality of power’ in postcolonial Africa.⁴ To make my argument, I draw on the concept of the carnivalesque, first proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin and then linked to the ‘postcolony’ by Mbembe in his work *On the Postcolony*.⁵ Bakhtin linked carnivalesque elements to ‘non-official’ cultures in early modern Europe,⁶ but Mbembe states that

- 1 Most famously the explicit political positions taken by the Négritude generation, that continues to haunt much modern Francophone fiction.
- 2 Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier, *Contemporary francophone African writers and the burden of commitment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 48.
- 3 Cazenave and Célérier, *Contemporary francophone African writers and the burden of commitment*, 48.
- 4 This notion is developed by Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony*.
- 5 For Mbembe, postcolony ‘identifies specifically a given historical trajectory – that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves’. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony: Studies on the History of Society and Culture*. Translated by Steven Rendall, A. M. Berrett, Janet Roitman and Murray Last, with assistance from the author, (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 102.
- 6 Mikhail Bakhtin, *L'oeuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Âge et sous la Renaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

obscene and grotesque elements are ‘intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed’,⁷ including in modern-day Africa. In this chapter, I link carnivalesque elements to the novels of Alain Mabanckou and In Koli Jean Bofane. Bofane and Mabanckou, hailing respectively from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo, are representative of the new generation of Francophone authors because both make continuous ‘passages’ between Africa, America and Europe.⁸ Like other authors of the new generation, they live in exile, and their ‘Africanity is accessory’, as Abdourahman Ali Waberi states.⁹ Yet, both also participate in colloquia and public events¹⁰ to interrogate the position of the francophone African writer and the necessity of engagement.¹¹ These authors mobilize strategies such as their use of the carnivalesque, elements of fetishism and character choice, to represent and depict postcolonial dictatorship. Their fiction illustrates the phenomenon that Mbembe describes, and provides a space to present an alternative version of reality through which they question the performance of postcolonial government, viewed exactly as that: a performance, with its own set of accompanying rituals and conventions.

Considering this, what we need is not to assess whether or not the elements mentioned above are present in the postcolonial state, but how postcolonial literature reflects them and uses them to interrogate the

7 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 102.

8 Lydie Moudileno and Frederick Cooper, *Parades postcoloniales: la fabrication des identités dans le roman congolais: Sylvain Bemba, Sony Labou Tansi, Henri Lopes, Alain Mabanckou, Daniel Biyaoula* (Paris: Karthala Editions, 2006), 107.

9 Abdourahman A. Waberi, ‘Les enfants de la postcolonie: esquisse d’une nouvelle génération d’écrivains francophones d’Afrique noire’, *Notre librairie*, 135 (1998): 11.

10 See, for example, Alain Mabanckou, Closing remarks, colloquium on the ‘Génocide des Tutsi au Rwanda et la reconstruction des saviors’ (The genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda and the reconstruction of knowledge), 25 July 2008, Kigali, Rwanda, and *Le Sanglot de l’Homme Noir*, Paris: Fayard, 2012. For In Koli Jean Bofane, see ‘Vivre c’est écrire’, radio programme with In Koli Jean Bofane, *RCN Justice & Démocratie*, 15 July 2013, and Nicolas Michel, ‘Littérature – In Koli Jean Bofane, le Satyricongolais’, *Jeune Afrique* 2778 (2014): 98–100.

11 Cazenave, and Célérier, Contemporary francophone writers, 48–50.

performance of postcolonial dictatorship. In the first part of this chapter, I look at the supernatural and theatrical elements in the novels of Mabanckou and Bofane. In the second part, I draw on Achille Mbembe's concept of the 'aesthetics of vulgarity' and will consider the significance of orifices and scatology, followed by the representation of the supernatural elements associated with the postcolonial state. I finally examine the role that carnivalesque elements, those silent actors, play in the interrogation of performances of dictatorship and the ways in which character choice helps to shape the representation of the African dictator and produce an alternative version of reality.

The spectacular and supernatural character of postcolonial dictatorship

Theatrical elements are extremely important in the way postcolonial governments define their power, as several scholars have pointed out. In *Parades postcoloniales*, for example, Lydie Moudileno underlines the function of the imaginary in the construction of postcolonial identities. Achille Mbembe has similarly shown how the power of the state seeks to dramatize its importance through performances that seem to be spontaneous and that will be remembered by the citizens.¹² Thus, commenting on public executions, he writes that in the postcolony, even death opens up a space for enjoyment; people are encouraged to laugh about death and give it wild applause. The obscenity of such performances reveals, as Mbembe writes, the 'headiness of social forms – including the suppression of life.'¹³ It seems that postcolonial power is defined by and settled through its theatrical character and

12 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 115

13 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 116.

that this 'is evidence that power is not an empty space. It has its hierarchies and its institutions, it has its techniques'.¹⁴

Besides the dramatic components, there is a large space for symbolic elements in postcolonial political life. As Jean-Godefroy Bidima states, political life first of all is a series of negotiations with the symbolic.¹⁵ He implies here that postcolonial societies – like all societies – are predetermined by myths, rituals and liturgies.¹⁶ Gilbert Durand defines myths as a 'dynamic system of symbols, archetypes and schemas, a dynamic system that tends, when prompted by a schema, to take the form of a story'.¹⁷ Myths may also promote the historical and legendary story of a nation-state.¹⁸ When people have a more fixed belief in these myths, it is easier for rulers to play with them and to promote their government. Subsequently, myths may be the object of more or less theatrical performances and may appear in various literary guises. Jean-Godefroy Bidima questions how best to unpick the underlying tendencies or myths that guide the postcolonial government. He states that the plot in literature and novels, in particular, may refer to the falsely innocent representations that rulers use to keep the system intact.¹⁹

In his *Mathématiques congolaises*, In Koli Jean Bofane links political activities to the theatre in his portrayal of modern Kinshasa. Célio Matemona, the protagonist, has grown up in a poor village but because of his mathematical knowledge, he is hired to work for the military officer Tshilombo. Bofane attributes spectacular elements to the activities that take place on the postcolonial political scene. When Célio and his companion Gaucher have to participate in a political meeting this is explicitly

14 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 116.

15 Jean-Godefroy Bidima, 'Beauté et critique des emblèmes: politiques du visible en Afrique', *Diogenes* 237 (2012): 107.

16 Bidima, 'Beauté et critique des emblèmes', 107.

17 Gilbert Durand, cited in Brunel, Pierre (ed.). *Companion to literary myths, heroes and archetypes* (Oxford: Routledge, 1992), x.

18 Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire: introduction à l'archétypologie générale* (Grenoble: Imprimerie Allier, 1960), 54.

19 Bidima, 'Beauté et critique des emblèmes', 100.

characterized as a ‘mascarade’ by Célio.²⁰ When the army tries to commit a coup d’état, this is also described as a staged play:

Tshilombo avait écrit sa pièce et il allait prendre soin de la délivrer jusqu’au dernier acte, jusqu’à la dernière réplique. Il avait prévu des rebondissements nombreux et passionnants. [...] Le casting d’ailleurs était parfait. [...] Il jouait là le rôle de sa vie [...].

[Tshilombo wrote his play and he would make sure to deliver it until the last act, until the last line. He had planned many unexpected and exciting twists. [...] By the way, the casting was perfect. [...] He played the role of his life [...].]²¹

Bofane uses the semantic field of the theatre to highlight the dramatic character of postcolonial state activities (‘play’, ‘act’, ‘line’, ‘twists’, ‘casting’, and ‘role’). By underlining the artificiality and insincerity of every activity in the postcolonial state, In Koli Jean Bofane shows the ‘institutionalized chaos’ (*le chaos institutionnalisé*)²² in his native country and demonstrates the fundamental hollowness of state power. In *Congo Inc., le testament de Bismarck*, the protagonist Isookanga, who has grown up in a forest village, dreams of travelling to the capital Kinshasa to ‘do business’, but becomes entangled in a nightmare of ethnic cleansings carried out by armed groups. Kiro Bizimungu, a politician, ‘S’en foutait, de la flore et de la faune, comme de sa première balle dans la tête d’un ennemi’ [‘didn’t give a fuck about the flora and fauna, just as he didn’t give a fuck about his first bullet in the head of an enemy’] (80). During the ethnic cleansings, which are described *ad nauseam*, ‘smiles appeared on the soldiers’ faces’, and there is a general indifference about death among the soldiers.²³ This activity has a theatrical character; it is like a ritual in which rhythm is an essential element: people sing ‘Un chant ancestral évoquant des gloires passés’ [‘an ancestral chant evoking past glories’] and ‘Les bottes battaient la cadence et constituaient

20 Bofane, *Mathématiques congolaises*, 12.

21 Bofane, *Mathématiques congolais*, 284. My translations, unless otherwise indicated.

22 Literary evening with In Koli Jean Bofane in Genval, as part of *Les nuits d’encre*, 26 March 2015.

23 ‘Des sourires apparurent sur les visages des soldats.’ (*Congo Inc.*, p. 135)

des basses puissantes' [the boots beat the rhythm and constitute powerful basses] (135).

In the novels I discuss here, laughter, spectacle and theatre are used to address grave and serious situations in the postcolonial state and to underline the essentially fictional character of the state. Bofane and Mabanckou refer to the internal division of Africa due to Bismarck's arbitrary drawing of borders during the Berlin Conference. The title of Bofane's novel, *Congo Inc., le testament de Bismarck*, is an explicit reference to the conference. Mabanckou alludes to this in *Verre Cassé* when the protagonist states:

Je m'en fous aussi de la carte de notre pays parce que ce pays c'est de la merde, c'est des frontières qu'on a héritées quand les Blancs se partageaient leur gâteau colonial à Berlin, donc ce pays n'existe même pas.

[I don't care [...] this country is shit, we inherited these borders when the Whites carved up their colonial cake in Berlin, so this country doesn't even exist.] (*Verre Cassé*, p. 174)

Not just the fictional element is used to make a mockery of the government; elements of the supernatural also take part in it.

Towards the end of *Mathématiques congolaises*, Bofane refers to the fetish-character of the postcolonial government during a public trial: 'Leurs regards éperdus exprimaient toute leur incompréhension et leur certitude d'être condamnés à l'issue de ce simulacre de procès' [their distraught gazes expressed their complete incomprehension and their certainty of being condemned as the outcome of this trial-simulacrum] (307). Referencing Baudrillard's theory of simulacra,²⁴ this trial is presented as a simulacrum, appearing to stand for a real trial, one that does not exist. The incomprehension could be linked to the fact that such a trial '[masks] the absence of a basic reality, [...] it is of the order of sorcery',²⁵ it is incomprehensible. The simulacrum, as Baudrillard states, 'bears no relation to any reality

24 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).

25 Jean Baudrillard, *Selected writings*. Translated by Jacques Mourrain and others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 173.

whatever.²⁶ By linking the trial to the simulacrum, Bofane underlines the fundamental emptiness of the postcolonial state.

The texts show that since political systems in the postcolony are not based on fixed laws or on a natural logic, politicians and rulers are presented as claiming supernatural powers. Alain Mabanckou refers to the arbitrary character of the presidential election in the postcolony. When the prime minister asks his government to think of a new slogan, somebody proposes a famous citation of Shakespeare. This episode shows that the governors do not even ask themselves anymore if their power is still justified, for it has become self-evident: “Être ou ne pas être, c’est la question”, et le chef des nègres a dit “non, c’est pas bon, nous n’en sommes plus à nous demander si nous sommes ou ne sommes pas, nous avons déjà résolu cette question puisque nous sommes au pouvoir depuis vingt-trois ans, allez, on passe.” [‘To be or not to be, that is the question’ and the ‘chief negro’ replies ‘no, no good, we’ve already settled that one, we’ve been in power here for twenty-three years, next!’] (27–8). Mabanckou is probably referring to President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who has been the president of the Republic of the Congo since 1979 (with a four-year interval). Governors define themselves as a fetish, which demands power and sacralization. The myth of autocracy they then create helps them to play with the citizens and to justify their autocratic power.

The aesthetics of vulgarity

As Cécile Bishop²⁷ has shown, the emergence of central African authors such as Henri Lopes and Sony Labou Tansi could be described as a ‘post-independence aesthetic “renewal”’.²⁸ These authors made use of irony and

26 Baudrillard, *Selected writings*, 173.

27 Cécile Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: The Aesthetics of Tyranny* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014).

28 Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship*, 20–1.

parody in their texts to demand more freedom against dictators.²⁹ The authors discussed here can be placed in this literary tradition. Laughter in their novels seems often to be forced and exaggerated and goes hand in hand with repugnance, extravagance and horror, which recalls the title of Henri Lopes' novel *Le Pleurer-rire*. In Koli Jean Bofane explains in *Congo Inc.* that during the ethnic cleansings, during 'Cette barbarie paroxystique' [this paroxysmal cruelty] (55–6), the postcolonial power shows its grotesque and obscene character. During these kind of activities 'Le vagin des femmes était détruit, on tranchait les parties génitales des hommes et on les leur introduisait dans la bouche avant de les achever' [the women's vagina was destroyed, the men's genitals were cut off and put in their mouth before they were killed] (55). State power and the control over subjects' sexuality are closely linked. Bofane seeks to show 'le réel du pays' [the reality of the country].³⁰ In the description of a bloody operation in the east of the country – that is, the massacres in the Kivu region – it becomes clear that the government does not recoil at obscenity. The inversion of humanistic values mobilized by critics of the postcolonial government is actually also promulgated by the regime itself:

Simple, mais délicate à appliquer, elle s'intitulait la 'règle de la soustraction posément accélérée' et consistait à débiter un homme en morceaux de façon à ce qu'avant qu'il ne se vide de son sang il puisse assister, conscient, au démembrement de son propre corps, son appareil génital dans la bouche.

[This rule, which was called 'the rule of the calmly accelerated subtraction' was easy but delicate to apply. It was composed of cutting a man into pieces so that, before he loses his blood, he could assist, consciously, to the dismemberment of his own body, having his penis in his mouth]. (135)

Mbembe states that for male postcolonial rulers, it is important to possess an active sexual organ and that this has to be dramatized.³¹ Once Kiro

29 Georges Ngal, *Création et rupture en littérature africaine* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1994), 27.

30 Nicolas Michel, 'Littérature – In Koli Jean Bofane, le Satyricongolais', *Jeune Afrique* 2778 (2014), 100.

31 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 110.

Bizimungu, one of the political characters in *Congo Inc.*, no longer possesses an active penis, he looks nostalgically back to the period when ‘Son sexe gonflait et durcissait à lui faire mal’ [his penis swelled up and hardened till it hurt] (82). When he dies, immolated by fire, his penis ‘Fut le dernier membre à bouger. En une monstrueuse érection’ [was the last member that moved. In a monstrous erection] (278).

Verre Cassé, the main character of Mabanckou’s eponymous novel, lives in poverty, spending his days in a low-life bar where he records the life stories of the customers. His political importance is minimal, which means that his private parts are not noteworthy and he will not be able to satisfy a woman of great corpulence, both political and physical:

Et puis y a un grand problème technique, je crois que je ne suis pas bien membré, faut être réaliste, et vu les fesses à la balance excédentaire de Robinette, je suis sûr que je passerais la journée à chercher le point G de son Pays-Bas, j’arriverais à peine au point B, et il resterait les points C, D, E et F, donc elle ne serait jamais satisfaite comme il faut. (108)

[And there’s a big technical problem, I don’t think I’m that well-endowed, let’s be realistic, and considering all the excess baggage she’s carrying behind, I’d probably spend the whole day scouring her Nether Regions for her G spot and only ever get as far as her B spot, if that, and still have her spots C, D, E and F to go, so I’d never satisfy her properly]. (*Broken Glass*, 66)

In *Verre Cassé* sexual elements are omnipresent. The protagonist ridicules the government commissioner when he describes him as ‘Pédé parce qu’il remuait son derrière comme une femme quand il marchait’ (173) [gay, from the way he wiggled his behind like a woman when he walked] (*Broken Glass*, 112). His explicit sexualization of the commissioner is typical of the carnivalesque style as described by Mbembe. By focusing on the corporeal, sexual identity of postcolonial power-holders, the author operates a carnivalesque, Bakhtinian inversion of official values, whereby what was held to be ‘high’ is degraded to a new, ‘low’ status, and vice versa.

Besides its obscene and grotesque elements that characterize the power of postcolonial state and invert official values, postcolonial society is dominated by men and characterized by its misogyny. The essential is male pleasure and women are unconditionally subordinated. Bofane writes that

‘Être femme et jeune de surcroît n’a jamais été un préjugé favorable dans la société actuelle’ [being a woman and moreover young has never been a favourable prejudice in contemporary society] (*Mathématiques* 155). Women in the postcolony are ‘a tool of the system’ (*un outil du système*), underlining the importance of male pleasure.³² On the other hand, in the postcolony, men need women. In *Congo Inc.*, Bofane draws a direct link between the postcolonial government and women: ‘Contrôler une région [...] c’était également faire main basse [...] sur les femmes dont ses hommes avaient besoin’ [To control a region [...] was also to walk off [...] with the women whom men needed] (78). Thus, women are a tool, used by men to ‘Aider à faire baisser [leur] taux d’endorphine [...]’ [help [them] lower [their] endorphin [...]] (138). The author here highlights that women in the postcolony are both subordinated and necessary.

The significance of orifices and scatology

Food plays an important role in the carnivalesque, as Bakhtin underlined. Food is a symbol of wealth and power and that is why postcolonial rulers are often described as obese and characterized by their stoutness. The chiefs in the country display their conspicuous consumption in great feasts of food and drink, which make their physique impressive, cause obesity and lead to a ‘flow of shit.’³³ This is what Joshua Esty called ‘excremental writing’, with the first symbolic value of excrements being ‘that it marks the fuzzy boundary between inside and outside.’³⁴ Characters in the novels talk about the quantity of excrements produced by such a physique to mock the political system, to invite laughter and to see the rulers as just human beings. However, the ruler’s corpulence is also a body, a physique

32 Literary evening with In Koli Jean Bofane, 2015.

33 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 107.

34 Joshua D. Esty, ‘Excremental postcolonialism’, *Contemporary Literature* 40.1 (1999): 34.

that is open 'in both ways: hence the significance given to orifices, and the central part they play in people's political humour'.³⁵ As in the novels of Sony Labou Tansi³⁶ and Ibrahima Ly,³⁷ scatological and excremental writing are used to mock the ruling class and to reduce the governors to what they are, to human beings.

In *Congo Inc.*, In Koli Jean Bofane uses a Lingala expression, which he explains in a footnote. The expression is 'Sœur, ya poids' and Bofane adds that this means: 'sister with weight (either financial, in influence or in corpulence)'.³⁸ It seems that he wants to make a connection between nourishment and opulence and that corpulence goes together with power. Waldemar Mirnas, a United Nations officer, thus a character of great political importance, is also characterized by his corpulence: 'L'embonpoint avait envahi sa taille' [the stoutness had overwhelmed his length] (225).

Alain Mabanckou similarly often uses references to food, bodily corpulence, orifices and scatological elements in his novels. In *Mémoires de porc-épic*, a novel based on the idea that every human being has an animal double, a porcupine tells his memoir, the story of his master. He describes that, to try to deceive the sorcerer that the 'Maître avait alors enfoui une noix de palme dans son rectum' (140) [master had stuck a palm nut up his rectum].³⁹ He tries to beat the sorcerer, who has an important place in postcolonial society, through scatological practices. Thus, what Mabanckou seems to underline here, is that the political state system being morbid, the only way to behave is in a carnivalesque way. This is not the only example of scatology that shows the protagonists' character in the works of these two authors. As I will show below, character choice and the way protagonists behave are important elements in these authors' representation of reality in the African postcolonial state.

35 Esty, 'Excremental postcolonialism', 34.

36 Mainly in *La Vie et demie* (Paris : Seuil, 1979) and *L'Etat-honteux* (Paris : Seuil, 1983).

37 In *Toiles d'araignée* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1982).

38 'Sœur qui a du poids (financier, en influence ou en corpulence, au choix.)' (*Congo Inc.*, p. 208).

39 Alain Mabanckou, *Memoirs of a porcupine*. Translated by Helen Stevenson (London: Serpent's Tail, 2011), 93.

Character choice

The main characters in the novels of Bofane and Mabanckou have trickster characteristics, similar to the use of trickster strategies studied by Pascale de Souza in Mabanckou's *Black Bazar*.⁴⁰ I propose to link the tricksters in the novels of Mabanckou and Bofane to two well-known characters in African oral literature: the Zande trickster Ture and Anansi, a trickster from West Africa and the Caribbean. Like many other tricksters, Ture is a liar, a cheat and a murderer, he is vain, greedy and selfish. He kills his father, tries to kill his brother and he attempts to murder his wife. Ture has sexual intercourse with his mother-in-law and with his sister too. What Ture does is the opposite of all that is moral.⁴¹

Anansi is able to transform himself into another animal or even a human being. Tricksters in tales act and speak like humans but have animal characteristics. Like Ture, Anansi is amoral, duplicitous and greedy.⁴² This transformation and constant identity-change reflects the human activity 'of making guesses and modifying them in light of experience – the process of 'schema and correction'.⁴³ In his classic study, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard writes that he has to confess that he often had the feeling that 'there is a good bit of Ture in the Zande character [but] whose personality among ourselves has not been in some degree shaped by characters of fiction with whom he has identified himself in imagination?'⁴⁴

The trickster, who has a mirror-function, can also be seen as a counterpart of the subject in the postcolonial state. The idea of a mirror is also represented in *Mémoires de porc-épic*. The porcupine reflects the state of

40 Pascale De Souza, 'Trickster Strategies in Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar*', *Research in African Literatures* 42.1 (2011): 102–19.

41 Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 28–9.

42 Graham Seal, *Encyclopaedia of folk heroes* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 8.

43 Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, 'A Tolerated Margin of Mess': The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered', *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11 (1975): 181.

44 Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster*, 29.

mind of his master Kibandi. It is ‘Comme si [il était] saisi par la même colère, la même frustration, la même rancœur, la même jalousie que [son] maître’ (188) [as though [he was] gripped by the same anger, the same frustration, the same bitterness, the same jealousy as [his] master] (*Memoirs of a Porcupine*, 126). These reflections give Mabanckou a weapon to criticize society. He presents the imperfections of the porcupine and he gives him the function of a *speculum mentis* of his master. Through this character, he indirectly criticizes society. The trickster does what he pleases and what others would probably like to do themselves too. The trickster possibly is a pointer to darker desires.⁴⁵ The trickster-view enables a form of what cultural critics van den Akker and Vermeulen have described as metamodernism or ‘new sincerity’,⁴⁶ that is, a return to political engagement, but now in a distinctly ironic mode, that according to them characterizes cultural production after post-modernism. Contemporary African postcolonial writers seek to be sincere, but use sarcasm, humour and irony to depict postcolonial governments. The tricksters show the subconscious desires of human beings in the African postcolonial state. Behind the masks they wear due to social convention, people have the same desires, the same feelings and the same imaginations as does the trickster⁴⁷ and so the inexpressible is expressed through the trickster’s speech.

Isookanga, the main character of *Congo Inc.*, can be seen as a trickster figure because of his paratopic place. He is a character who lives between two different worlds: he is part of the Ekonda clan, but has a Pygmy father. He never feels at home and this position ‘L’obligeait à rechercher sa véritable place [...] politiquement, socialement et surtout physiquement’ (22) [forced him to search for his true position [...] in politics, in society and above all physically]. The Ekonda clan on itself discredited in the country,

45 Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster*, 29.

46 See Allard Den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, ‘Notes on metamodernism’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2 (2010): 1–13.

47 Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster*, 30.

as Bofane underlines,⁴⁸ and thus has a marginal status. Célio Matemona, the main character in *Mathématiques congolaises* also has a paratopic status. Having grown up in a district in a village where people were racked by famine, Célio has studied and is able to enter into governmental circles. His ‘Capacité innée à se fondre dans de nouvelles situations lui rendait la vie plus facile’ [natural capacity to blend into new situations made his life easier] (310). By using the trickster figure, Bofane can show the two worlds that exist in Congolese society.

This paratopic position could be seen as the will to reverse the established order. Célio, for example, enters into two different worlds. He is considered an ‘esquiveur’, or someone who is a cheat, a liar, and not serious at all; one cannot trust the ‘esquiveur’ as he always wants to get around rules and laws. These are typical trickster characteristics. In *Mathématiques congolaises* Célio even has the will to reverse the established order: ‘En même temps, il avait une envie folle de défier son boss et le système qui le nourrissait’ [At the same time, he had a strong desire to stand up to his boss and the system that fed him] (240). As we see in the characteristics of Ture, his private parts are given special attention, and they can even speak:

Ture’s private parts blurted out ‘Oh! So you’re eating termites, you who were just sleeping with your mother-in-law while they were flying away!’ His mother-in-law’s private parts answered, saying ‘Do you say it is a lie?’⁴⁹

Isookanga’s private parts are described as a ‘python’ or a ‘boa’ (pp. 194–5) and his powerful organ helps him to punish Aude Martin, who represents the culpability of her Belgian ancestors. His penis takes over and makes decisions for him. Mbembe underlines the importance of active private parts and an active penis. This makes the trickster a carnivalesque character par excellence.

The trickster generally is aware of something before the others know about it, because the trickster has close relations with the divine world. The

48 ‘Nous, les Ekonda, sommes discrédités dans le pays.’ (*Congo Inc.*, 20).

49 Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster*, 146.

divine power of the totem animal is underlined in *Mémoires de porc-épic*. The porcupine speaks about his power:

J'étais le troisième œil, la troisième narine, la troisième oreille de mon maître, ce qui signifie que ce qu'il ne voyait pas, ce qu'il ne sentait pas, ce qu'il n'écoutait pas, je le lui transmettais par songes, et lorsqu'il ne répondait pas à mes messages, j'apparais-sais devant lui. (14)

[I was my master's third eye, his third nostril, his third ear, which means that whatever he didn't see, or smell, or hear, I transmitted to him in dreams and if ever he didn't reply to my messages, I'd appear before him.] (*Memoirs of a Porcupine*, 5)

Nikola Kovač writes that the essence of a political novel is 'l'individu aux prises avec les abus [du] système' [the individual subject fighting with the abuses of the system].⁵⁰ *Verre Cassé* presents the stories of individuals that have been defeated by the system. The main characters in the other novels I have discussed reflect the society that they derive from. In Koli Jean Bofane makes a reference to Obiechina's statement that it is impossible to find decent people in a government that is itself far from decency:⁵¹

Dans un environnement vicié par les odes mortifères de l'uranium, du cobalt, du colombo-tantalite, que peut-on attendre de la part d'individus passés à la centrifugeuse, évoluant dans le contexte d'un réacteur nucléaire dernière génération ? L'irradiation permanente ne ramène pas l'innocence, elle conduit à la rage. (289)

[In an environment contaminated by the deadly odes of uranium, cobalt and coltan, what can we expect from people who have been passed through the centrifuge, people who move in the context of the most modern of nuclear reactors? The permanent irradiation does not bring back innocence, it leads to rage.]

The protagonists in the novels of these two African postcolonial writers have in some cases been the victims of the postcolonial political system.

50 Nikola Kovač, *Le Roman politique: fictions du totalitarisme* (Paris: Editions Michalon, 2002), 48.

51 Emmanuel Obiechina, 'Post-Independence Disillusionment in Three African Novels' in *Neo-African Literature and Culture: Essays in Memory of Janheinz Jahn*, Bernth Lindfors and Ulla Schild (eds) (Wiesbaden: Heymann, 1976), 127.

The trickster figure provides a representation of the postcolonial citizen, formed by this destructive system. This figure's amoral nature therefore proposes a severe criticism of those who wield power within this system.

Conclusion

Even if writers like In Koli Jean Bofane and Alain Mabanckou seem to reject the direct, politically engaged stance of their predecessors,⁵² and occupy a paratopic space between Africa, America and Europe, they do criticize and interrogate the performances of African postcolonial dictatorship and government in their novels. In this sense, they participate in the movement of the 'new sincerity' described by cultural critics van den Akker and Vermeulen,⁵³ but they do so through a process of inversion of traditional humanistic values. Their representation of the African postcolonial government is sincere, but has a theatrical and satirical character. The semantic field of the theatre, which is omnipresent in the novels of both Alain Mabanckou and In Koli Jean Bofane, attributes a fictional character to the system, through which these authors then interrogate the performance of postcolonial dictatorship. As I have shown, it is possible that mythologizing the postcolonial state creates a stronger belief in the state among its citizens, but it could also be seen as constituting a simulacrum government. Revealing the simulacrum at work shows the fictional and vicious character of the African postcolonial government. Furthermore, In Koli Jean Bofane and Alain Mabanckou underline the supernatural logic of the postcolonial government and describe it through its obscene and grotesque, 'low' characteristics. While both use similar narrative strategies, however, there are also differences: Bofane uses the obscene and grotesque to describe the horrors of ethnic cleanings and massacres in the contemporary

52 Especially in *Le Sanglot de l'Homme Noir* (Paris : Fayard, 2012).

53 Vermeulen and van den Akker, 'Notes on metamodernism', 1–13.

Democratic Republic of the Congo, while Mabanckou deploys irony and humour to depict state power in the Republic of the Congo more obliquely, from a greater critical distance.

Character choice is another tool these writers use to present an alternative version of reality in the postcolony. They give individuals that have been defeated by the postcolonial political system the floor and move trickster-figures onto centre stage. Tricksters show the real people behind the masks they wear in carnivalesque society, and by a process of specular inversion present the real imaginations, feelings and desires of disenfranchised citizens in postcolonial society. The way they behave corresponds to the way the political system has formed them. Furthermore, these specular, trickster protagonists have the ability to blend into different worlds, which gives them the possibility to show both sides of the coin. Significantly perhaps, the indeterminate position of their protagonists mirrors that of the two authors, whose ‘passages’ between different continents would seem to put them in a uniquely paratopic position characteristic of many writers of their generation.

By combining carnivalesque and theatrical attributes with trickster characters, Bofane and Mabanckou produce an unsettling image of the postcolonial theatre-state. Through the inversion of values these strategies create, they set up alternative versions of reality, which enable them to question the performances (in various senses of the word) of African postcolonial dictators and the political system.

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5 From Ritual to Fiction: *The Wizard of the Crow*

From Eldoret to Eldares

In 2006, the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o published *The Wizard of the Crow*, which can be read both as a work of dictator fiction that shares many traits with postmodern historiographic metafiction (Hutchinson, Walsh) and as an African sorcery novel. The novel develops the anti-epic of a very specific historical sequence from the Kenyan dictatorship after independence: the rule and politics of Daniel arap Moi. The novelty of Ngũgĩ's work of fiction consists in using the figures and performance of witchcraft (cursing, dance, divination and incantations) to make a statement about development on the African continent after independence. A witch doctor (Kamiti) and a revolutionary woman, at times disguised as a Limping Witch (Nyawira), join forces to cure the megalomaniac apparatus of the Ruler and his absurd 'Marching to Heaven' project that illustrate all too well the arbitrary rule in the postcolony, the private indirect government and its out-worldly logic ('du hors-monde').¹ I will argue in this article that Ngũgĩ uses the fiction of sorcery to make optimally visible the development of the African continent as a problematic field through which the question of the possibility of an African democratic life must be addressed. The narrative around the Wizard constitutes a 'rhetoric of fictionality' that allows Ngũgĩ to question (Walsh) whether an instance of African democracy rooted in the voices and practices of the African people and the subaltern subject is strategically more efficient than the 'extraversion strategy' imposed by the

1 Achille Mbembe, *De la postcolonie*, 'Du hors-monde', p. 217–64.

neo-liberal politics of the World Bank in the postcolony.² The main literary device turns very specific religious symbols and rituals into elements of a fictional narrative that acquire highly philosophical and political meanings in the new context of the novel. By being fictionalized, the main traits of the ritual described by Catherine Bell are laid bare: the misrecognition of ritual as power strategy, and of power as ritualization of life, whereby the ritualized subjects do not see themselves doing what they do.

Ritualized agents do not see themselves as projecting schemes; they see themselves only acting in a socially instinctive response to how things are. [...] This misrecognition involves another in turn: participants do not recognize that the objectified schemes which they re-embody have been orchestrated so that the patterns of dominance and subordination they contain generate the sense of integrated totality and embracing holism experienced by the participants.³

The misrecognition involved in the formation of a ritualized political body (the Ruler, his ministers and their surveillance apparatus) or the new financial elite (Tajirika) is made manifest by rituals of healing, divination and cursing, which contain the promise of a true democratic body politics. Democracy will thereby be perceived in the increased visibility of the links between ritual performance, and its power to shape both the mind and the social body.⁴ On the one hand, the Dictator's commandment is revealed as an anomalous ritualized body. On the other hand, the people's religious and spiritual rituals gradually reveal their hidden political potential. The opposition between the postcolonial state-apparatus and the religious symbolism rooted in pre-colonial traditions is the major form through which the postcolonial body politic is ritualized in the novel. Hereby the main difference between ritual action and dramatic performance comes into play: while performance theory relies on the given opposition between actor and spectator, stage and audience, a theory of the ritual makes visible

2 Walsh, *The rhetoric of fictionality*, 'The pragmatics of narrative fictionality,' p. 13–38; Bayart, *L'état en Afrique*, 'Introduction: l'historicité des sociétés africaines,' p. 19–64.

3 Catherine Bell, *Ritual theory, ritual practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 206–7.

4 Bell, *Ritual theory*, 204.

the ways in which new oppositions are created ‘through a social instinct for creating and manipulated contrasts.’ These are meant to produce a new ritualized body that ‘facilitate[s] the envisioning of personal empowerment.’⁵ Gichigiri Ndígírígí offers a very astute interpretation of the novel through a theory of performance:

[The] dramaturgy of the state ceremonials in the Wizard present the Ruler as a bungling scriptwriter/actor/director. Since the state deploys ceremonialism as a means of staging its majesty, the analysis pays attention to the people’s staging of their resistance by seizing on the inherently dialogic nature of performance. Guided by the understanding in performance studies that an audience is actively involved in the construction of meaning of a performance, the analysis shows how as co-participants, the people appropriate and deform state ceremonies.⁶

My own reading pushes this line of thought further by bringing to the fore how the ‘Movement of the Voice’ of the people gains power when they do not only react to and resist given ceremonials and rites imposed by the state and the Ruler, but mostly when they discover their own power of ritualization in various figures of healing, cursing, and practices of sorcery. Sorcery, unlike the state apparatus described in the novel, is imbedded in precolonial traditions and lore, both African and East-Asian. The sorcerer’s intervention catches everyone unaware and evades the Ruler’s coercive power, precisely because it is not merely reactive and interpretive, but essentially creative and productive in its ethical motivation and political imaginary. Unlike modern medical practices for which the sick body is essentially a sign of weakness unable to adduce any form of sovereignty, the traditional African healing power of the witch doctor, often involves the ability to heal one’s own malady as well as understand one’s own weakness and thus overcome it. Thus, the interpretation of the Ruler’s illness as simply a form of ‘loss of control over his own material body which signals absolute humanization’, is fully reliant on Western and modern understandings of a medical

5 Bell, *Ritual theory*, 97; 84.

6 Gichigiri Ndígírígí, ed., *Unmasking the African dictator: Essays on postcolonial African Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 185.

condition.⁷ African traditional thinking, and sorcery in particular, understands that moral and political disorder are triggered by the vicious acts of various political agents, and not by the politician's lack of sovereignty. The traditional cure of a medical condition reveals not only the gaze of a doctor who controls a powerless patient, but mainly the forces of the invisible (spirits and ancestors) who use the witch doctor as a conduit in order to redress the disrupted order, bring back the threatened well-being and redeem the imperiled meaning of the community. The communal and thus political meaning of traditional medicine is absent from most modern medical practices.

The political rituals around the Ruler become increasingly visible in the narrative through the logic of the 'modern sovereign', which functions through a 'violent imaginary' that goes through a series of imprisonments without trial, torture, recorded interrogations, surveillance, and acts of sudden disappearance of suspected individuals.⁸ It also functions through 'indirect private government' that uses power for the individual interests of a charismatic leader, through the creation of private militia, advisors, doctors, performers and councils.⁹ The witch doctor's words and herbs, on the other hand, aim to cure the symptoms of a strange malady that affects the main actors of the government and the financial elite of the country. In this way, healing and witchcraft practices reveal the ropes of the belly politics described by Peter Geschiere and Jean-Francois Bayart as a paradigm for thinking the egalitarian ideology in the context of new inequalities after Independence, in particular, 'celui d'une tension continue entre une idéologie égalitaire et une pratique d'inégalité' [that of unrelenting tension between an egalitarian ideology and a practice of inequality].¹⁰

La 'politique du ventre', c'est simultanément la corpulence qu'il est de bon ton d'arborer dès lors que l'on est un puissant. C'est aussi le lignage qui demeure une réalité sociale très présente et non dénuée d'effets politiques à l'échelle nationale. C'est enfin, de manière plus suspecte, la localisation des forces de l'invisible dont la maîtrise est

7 Ndígírígí, *Unmasking*, 172.

8 Joseph Tonda, *Le souverain moderne* (Paris: Karthala, 2005), 39–47.

9 Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: Éd La Découverte, 2013), 95–139.

10 Peter Geschiere, *Sorcellerie et politique en Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1995), 125.

indispensable à la conquête et à l'exercice du pouvoir: la manducation peut être symbolique et assassine sous la forme dramatique mais quotidienne de la sorcellerie.

['Belly politics', which means at once the portly build which is convenient to display for those in power. It points as well to the importance of lineage which is a social reality with political consequences nationwide. Last but not least, as a more ambiguous term, it refers to place of the invisible forces that should be mastered if one wants to come into power or use it: the act of ingestion can thus be symbolic and murderous on the daily basis, in the form of sorcery.]¹¹

This article develops an argument around the sorcery fiction of the novel, which has not yet constituted the focus of any piece of scholarship. The novel is organized around several themes that are recalled and developed rhythmically, each fictionalizing through the means of parody and generalization a very precise moment from the rule of the Kenyan president and dictator Daniel arap Moi. The project of Marching to Heaven, the main theme of the narrative that has the power to launch other subsequent plots, is based on the real and controversial development project around the Western city of Eldoret in Kenya. This project was part of Daniel arap Moi's plan to move the concentration of power, mostly financial and urban, from the Central Plateau dominated by the Kikuyu GEMA parastatal association to the Rift Valley, which is the Western part of the country.¹² Eldoret town, a sleepy, dusty, hamlet established in 1912 by Afrikaner refugees from South Africa, experienced a long-term growth trajectory and is today Kenya's fastest growing town. In Ngũgĩ's novel it appears as Eldares, the capital of Aburiria. Many critics have read it as an allegory of contemporary Kenya, or of the postcolonial African state, where Eldares would stand for Nairobi, or the postcolonial megacity, and Aburiria for Kenya, or the postcolonial state. My argument is that Eldares is the fictional ingredient that reconfigures the development project in Eldoret, and Aburiria, a wink at the growing political interest in Rift Valley region (Western Kenya), which reminds the reader of the strong ethnicization of power and

11 Jean-Francois Bayart, *L'État en Afrique: La politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), 12.

12 The association was established under Kenyatta in the 1960s and 1970s.

economy in 1980s and 1990s Kenya. During these decades, the economic centre moved gradually from the Kikuyu institutions into the domain of previously disadvantaged ethnic groups, such as Luhya, and the pastoral tribes of Kalenjin, where president Moi himself was born. The name of the Luhya populations from Western Kenya is Abaluyia, of which Aburiria becomes the veiled signifier. The Marching to Heaven project is an allegorical hyperbole of the Moi International Airport built around Eldoret and the Turkwell Dam, the most iconic and controversial development project, which started 1986 and was only in use from 1993.

The English word ‘wizard’, unlike ‘sorcerer’, is used for both the science of the occult and for financial wizardry. There is thus a very conscious choice of this word, when used to refer to Kamiti, a Kenyan citizen of Indian origin, who in the beginning walks into Eldares in search for work. Since he does not find work, he becomes a beggar who spends his days in front of the presidential palace, only to later become a witch doctor of the suburb of Santalucia. Ngũgĩ’s use of sorcery emphasizes the economic aspect of ritual practices in the postcolony, within what Joseph Tonda calls the modern sovereign logic and Peter Geschiere and Jean-Francois Bayart designate as the belly politics (*politique du ventre*) in the colony. The name of the character who manages the fictionality of the sorcery plot by launching the story of the wizard (p. 96–7) in the form of rumors and urban legend, is Constable Arigagai Gatherere, and it should be read as a reference to the anthropologist’s tradition.¹³ In this vein, Peter Geschiere reads sorcery in relation to the main new form of the invisible and the occult – namely the economic transactions and pacts in Africa before or after the independence.¹⁴

Geschiere interpreted the performance of sorcery in the postcolony as a paradigm for thinking the egalitarian ideology in the context of new inequalities after independence. This is also the main aspect of the populist politics of Daniel arap Moi, which comes to the fore in his fierce economic

13 Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo’o, *The Wizard of the Crow* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 96–7.

14 Geschiere, *Sorcellerie et politique en Afrique*, ‘Sorcellerie et politique locale: la dialectique de l’égalité et de l’ambition,’ p. 93–124; Bayart, *L’état en Afrique*, ‘La politique du ventre,’ p. 281–317.

war against the Kikuyu capitalist elites, through the politics of development of the traditionally underdeveloped pastoralist regions of the country. The figure of the Indian wizard fictionalizes Moi's strategic alliance with the European and Asian financial experts to weaken the forces of GEMA: 'the fear and frustration over Asian economic power were reawakened by the scandals of the Moi's era, in which Asian executive names featured with disturbing frequency'.¹⁵ Kenyatta's politics drew the Asian traders out of their important intermediary roles, for a pro-African policy, which resulted in the strengthening of the economic hold of the GEMA association in the 1970s; these policies of Africanization came at the expense of the Asian population and business changes under Moi.¹⁶ These historical facts are encoded fictionally in the wizard's narrative, where some of the main anti-Asian politicians try to monitor and repress the occult activity of the witch doctor's shrine. Such are the forces of order of Sikiokuu and his militia.

The fiction of sorcery

The main character Kamiti, the unemployed young man of Indian origin, comes to play the role of the city's Wizard for all other characters in the novel. Without any formal training in traditional village councils or cursing rituals, it is surprising to see an Indian man rise so easily as a convincing candidate for an African sorcerer, a job he did not apply for, but whose skills are secretly sought after by the urbanite politician and suburban folk alike. Sorcery is introduced in the novel as a game of make-believe staged by two beggars with the police on their heels. This incident ends up being taken seriously by the policeman A G Geschiere, who will launch the urban legend of the Wizard of the Crow.

15 Charles Hornsby, *Kenya: a history since independence* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 11.

16 Hornsby, *Kenya*, 233; 388.

He simply groped in the dark and came back and produced a cardboard, a bone, some rags, and a string, silently handing them over and continuing his watch at the window. The other beggar tied the bones and the rags together. He then took a felt pen from his bag and wrote on the cardboard in big letters: WARNING! THIS PROPERTY BELONGS TO A WIZARD WHOSE POWER BRINGS THE HAWKS AND CROWS FROM THE SKY, TOUCH THIS HOUSE AT YOUR PERIL. SGD. WIZARD OF THE CROW. With great care not to make any noise, he slowly opened the door and saw something even better, a dead lizard and a frog.¹⁷

This off-hand ritualization does resonate in the Kenyan traditions of cursing and curse-removal practised once by the hunters of Mount Kenya. When Kamiti comes home to visit his family, we find out that he belongs in an old family of hunter-sorcerers and that his grandfather was a reputed healer of his community.¹⁸ The ritual improvised by the two beggars is reminiscent of a very precise ritual ('the claw ritual') designed by the Meru hunter population, a minority group inhabiting Mount Kenya, to curse intruders.¹⁹ This ritual was meant to protect their economic welfare from the mainstream population of cultivators and pastoralists and later from British settlers.

Invented on the basis of a long-held tradition of witchcraft, which is re-appropriated during the independence war by Kamiti's grandfather, this story plays three main roles in the narrative: Ngūgī plays against the postcolonial politics of racial discrimination and purging based on distorted information that the Asian population is supposedly a late migrant to East Africa. On the other hand, the performance of seemingly fictive superstitions still meaningful to contemporary African society speaks up for the harrowing spiritual and moral crisis during the years of political dictatorship. It puts forward a solution to this crisis in the postcolony in the fiction of the return to those traditions that have proved most beneficial as enduring forces of unity and harmony during earlier, similar moments of deep political unrest and crisis. And thirdly, we find in the novel a subtle critique of these traditions, which, despite their effectiveness, leave in the

17 Ngūgī, *Wizard*, 77.

18 Ngūgī, *Wizard*, 294.

19 Jeffrey Fadiman, *When we began there were witchmen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 79.

shadow a large sector of the Kenyan population: the female half of the community. In joining forces with Nyawira and the women power movement of the Voice of the People, Kamiti goes beyond the patriarchal practices of his own family traditions and empowers women with the same agency that in the past was the privilege of men's occupational castes (hunters, ironsmiths or other supernatural specialists, *murogi* and *urogi*).

The analogy between illness and political crisis traverses several scenes in the novel: when testifying in front of the video-cameras, Tajirika likens his sudden illness to a *coup-d'état*,²⁰ an analogy that will make him the main suspect of the intelligence minister Sikiokuu. When Sikiokuu in turn comes to imagine himself in the posture of the Ruler, he gets immediately contaminated by the 'if' *white-ache* disease.²¹

The final stages of the social and physical malady are embodied by the fact that the witch doctor himself falls sick with 'the malady of words.'²² The figure of the sick doctor points to the process of degradation of the social and political body, which becomes the key signal of the only social force left healthy in Aburiria: the subaltern women, fighting for their freedom under the guidance of the activist Nyawira.

From ritual to fiction

In this section I read two scenes from the fiction of the witch doctor: the first passage regards the cure of Tajirika's recent disease named by the Wizard *white-ache*; in the second scene we witness the cure of the Ruler himself, and his new mysterious disease contracted in New York during the humiliating negotiations with the World Bank agents in the absence of the American president. At this point the Ruler suffers an anomalous inflation of his belly, which makes him look like a pregnant man. The

20 Ngũgĩ, *Wizard*, 342; 337.

21 Ngũgĩ, *Wizard of the crow*, p. 414.

22 *ibid.*, p. 415.

malady of words and the pregnancy of the Ruler are the two main fictional motifs of the narrative that reappear at critical moments in the plot, each time introducing turning points in private individual lives (Tajirika and his wife, the Wizard himself, Sikiokuu and the Ruler). In this way, they have a structuring power in the narrative, regulating both our empathy with the main characters and what Richard Gerrig calls the force of being transported into the fictional world by anomalous suspense and anomalous replotting.²³

The burlesque or grotesque dimension (Smith, Gikandi, Granqvist) of each of these scenes is obvious. What is less obvious is that they are travesties of precise rituals and symbols, which are chosen in such a way as to resonate both within African and Indian lore and religion.

One day, Tijirika, the real-estate businessman and a construction-firm patron who embodies the GEMA business elite, wakes up unable to speak, and obsessively looks in his bathroom mirror, terror-stricken and babbling two mysterious syllables 'if-if, if-if'. At the suggestion of her friend Nyawira, his wife Vinjina accompanies him to the Wizard's shrine to seek a remedy for an illness which cannot be mastered by Western healthcare. The Wizard's method of healing is unusual: instead of fetishes, abstruse verbal formulae, or hallucinatory substances, Kamiti uses rational discourse, arranged as question-answering. The only witch doctor's paraphernalia is a mirror where he pretends he can capture both the future and the past of the bewitched patient, and through whose mirrored shadows and images he warns or advises him how to avoid evil and future danger.²⁴ A clear parody of Kenyatta's discourses on the Africanization of power in the 1960s, Kamiti unmasks what the ethnicization of power after independence hides: the colonial logic that it actually imitates in all respects. The method of healing employed at this point mobilizes figures and shards of ritual which are embedded in two distinct traditional figures: the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and the African rituals of divinations (such as ifa divination). 'The mirror-like wisdom,' where personal memory and perception (attention to

23 Richard Gerrig, *Experiencing narrative worlds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 'Participatory responses,' p. 65–96.

24 Ngũgĩ, *Wizard*, 180.

the self) is used to discover the true un-duality of the world (neither black nor white, both black and white), by following if-clauses in a reductio-ad-absurdum line of reasoning is altogether the path of the Buddhist 'critique of causation' that Paul Williams describes.²⁵ On the other hand, the fits of 'if', 'what if', 'only if', are a burlesque imitation of the ritual of *ifa divination*, *odu ifa* (only if) that originated in Yoruba culture (Igbo and Ewe) and has become part of a pan-African reality. The mirror here is the divination tray, where various signs and marks are imprinted on the white flour.²⁶

Playing on the postcolonial discourse, such as Fanon's unfinished sentences which constitute the first lines from his *Black Skin, White Masks*, the fiction of the Wizard's divination places Tajirika's symptoms and destiny in the context of Black reason as 'enigmatic mirror' (Mbembe) to which it gives full relevancy:

Au coeur de cette tragédie se trouve la race. [...] Elle apparait au détour d'un commerce – celui des regards. C'est une monnaie dont la fonction est de convertir cela que l'on voit en espèce ou en symbole [...]. De la race on peut dire qu'elle est à la fois l'image, corps et miroir énigmatique au sein d'une économie des ombres.

[Race is at the heart of this tragedy [...]. It appears at the end of an exchange: – that of glances. It serves as the currency that converts what is seen into money and symbols [...]. Race can be conceived at once as an image, a body and an enigmatic mirror inside an economy of shadows.]²⁷

The misrecognized political aspect of the divination ritual will determine Tajirika's subsequent evolution as an instrument of submission through a ritual of political legitimacy (prison, political interrogation and persecution

25 'In Buddhist thought generally something is a cause because it produces its effect. If the cause is present then it does indeed produce its result. If X causes itself then having caused itself, X would be present again. Since X is the cause as well as the effect, so, being present again, it produces the effect – that is itself again. And so on ad infinitum'. Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The doctrinal foundations* (London: Routledge, 1989), 73.

26 William Bascom, *Ifa divination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 17; 22.

27 Mbembe, *Critique*, 163.

first, only to become the Ruler's first councillor and in the end the new Ruler of Aburiria).

Kamiti who masters symbols and rituals from several cultural backgrounds (here African animist and Buddhist) embodies the secret of a new form of healing power against a regime that uses ethnic division and murderous identities to perpetuate the Ruler's self-interest and political longevity. *Wizard of the Crow* points to a spiritual utopia, a secret power of healing through cultural translation and communication between various ethnic groups and mutual understanding. On the one hand, it upholds the Buddhist truth of the non-duality between the self-and the world, and between one's actions and one's identity, obtained in 'mirror-like wisdom'; on the other hand it exploits the power of truth to emerge as the continuity between God, men, human affairs, and world as in the *ifa recitation*.

The burlesque travesty of ritual and cult objects points to a situation of crisis where, as Joseph Tonda notes, identity appears through a series of travestied signs, following the logic of merchandise fetishism, where the social character of work is erased or eclipsed:

... le charme ou le trouble est synonyme de travestissement ou de perversion du rapport social à soi-même, qui s'inscrit simultanément dans le rapport aux autres et aux choses. En d'autres termes, les sujets sociaux tourmentés, charmés, troublés sont ceux dont les structures de causalité réfléchissent, tel un étrange miroir, des images d'eux-mêmes dans lesquelles ils ne se reconnaissent plus et dans lesquelles ils ne sont pas non plus reconnus par les autres (Tonda 76) "la forme marchandise" qui est un miroir anormal en produisant l'homme comme un autre, des miroirs déréalisants, c'est-à-dire des fétiches'.

[charm or disorder become synonymous with disguise and the perversion of the social relation to oneself, which marks at the same time the relation to others and to things. In other words, the tormented, charmed and troubled social subjects are those whose causal structures reflect like in a strange mirror their own images in which they do not recognize themselves and in which others do not recognize them either. (Tonda, 76), 'The merchandise-form, which is an anomalous mirror that produces the human as another-onself, a derealization mirror, that is a fetish'.²⁸

28 Tonda, *Souverain*, 80.

Another narrative thread that punctuates the novel as a leitmotif is the Ruler's inflated stomach. This first becomes visible when the African dictator is confronted with the image of the Aburirian Dictatorship in the letter written by those entreated to support the Ruler's foolish development plan of Marching to Heaven: 'The Ruler rose to make a speech, completely unawares that the letter in his hand was now shaking ... But when the Ruler opened his mouth, no word came out [...] Suddenly his cheeks and stomach began to expand. No, not just the cheeks and the tummy but the whole body.'²⁹ Not without fictional precedent, but masterfully reworked in the new context of dictatorship to hyperbolic dimensions, the mysterious malady manifested through the inexplicable inflation of the body along with the impeded power of speech is present in one of the most widely read fictions of the colonial period. In *Lord Jim* by Conrad, the grotesquely swollen body of the captain of the *Patna* displays the workings of a mysterious poison:

he seemed to be swollen to an unnatural size by some awful disease, by the mysterious action of an unknown poison. He lifted his head, saw the two before him waiting, opened his mouth with an extraordinary, sneering contortion of his puffed face – to speak to them, I suppose – and then a thought seemed to strike him. His thick, purplish lips came together without a sound, he went off in a resolute waddle to the gharry and began to jerk at the door-handle with such a blind brutality of impatience that I expected to see the whole concern overturned on its side, pony and all.³⁰

This unequivocal intertextual link between *Wizard* and *Lord Jim*, through which Ngũgĩ forces the reader to discover under the figure of the Ruler the imperialist figure of the *Patna* skipper. He stands as the 'incarnation of everything vile and base that lurks into the world we love,' and is meant to elicit the following question: to which extent are various forms of authoritarian rule in the postcolonial state in continuity with the colonial apparatus and ideology of commandment.³¹ By extension, the reader may also feel invited to see under the Wizard of the Crow, a new version of Lord Jim himself.

29 Ngũgĩ, *Wizard*, 486.

30 Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim: A romance* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co, 1905), 41.

31 Mbembe, *De la postcolonie*, p. 50–1; Bayart, *Etat en Afrique*, p. 281–317.

Conrad's ambiguous position regarding the moral and political tenets of imperialism resurfaces in Ngũgĩ's narrative when he reworks it to make visible the ambiguous relation between the postcolony and its colonial past; the persistence of the violent domination of the African population from the colonial period into the present makes even more visible the neocolonial extraversion and dependency of the African continent. While the moral profile and often the physical appearance of the characters from Conrad's novel are used by Ngũgĩ for his own fictional universe, their identity is inverted in *Wizard's* new context: under the physically monstrous and morally unscrupulous white German captain, we find an African dictator, and behind the romantic white British chief-mate who finds redemption through political action in Patusan (East Indies), we imagine the young Indian Kamiti who espouses a similar trajectory of self-discovery through political action in the fictional country of Aburiria (East Africa).

Interpreted as the pregnancy of the Ruler by the African people, yet named by the American white doctors as the disease of self-inflation (SIE: self-induced expansion), the Ruler's inflated stomach is indeed the second ambiguous sign. Its burlesque nature points directly, in the context of the postcolony, to the essence of Bayart's *belly politics*, as what Achille Mbembe calls the 'arbitrariness of the African rule' in a megalomaniac delirium of power. Mbembe also reads in this new form of African politics a production of 'hors-monde' [otherworldliness].³² The Ruler's symptoms present an aggravated form of the same malady of words that we have seen with Tajirika. The witch doctor cures the malady of words, but he is at a loss regarding the new symptom of the inflated belly, that he is not able to cure until the end of the book, a failure which will eventually entail the sickness of the doctor himself. The new form of cure that the Wizard has in mind is a ritual-journey more akin to a shamanic flight, the only remedy able to cure the new maladies of otherworldliness, self-expansion and later on self-induced disappearance.

The voice became more distinct: Go back in time. Arise and go to all the crossroads, all the marketplaces and temple sites, all the dwelling places of black people the world

32 Mbembe, *De la postcolonie*, p. 217–64.

over, and find the source of their power. There you will find the cure for SIE He had left his body behind, and now a bird, he was flying freely in the open sky.³³

At the end of the novel, Kamiti recounts this journey to Nyawira, and his discovery of the source of the black power in real and symbolic country of Tanganyika.³⁴

This second, democratic meaning of otherworldliness is comprised in the diasporic existence of the black people, and their narrative-journey, which is at once cosmic and historical (marching to heaven has here a ritualistic meaning). The figure of the pregnant Ruler, beyond its precedent in Conrad, is embedded in a fertility ritual from East Africa, performed by an ethnic group living in current day Tanzania and Mozambique, with a small diaspora in Kenya: the female fertility body-mask is worn by the Makonde community's male dancer, who can enter a trance state when possessed by the group's ancestress, the Goddess of fertility. The female body mask depicts a pregnant belly and breasts with scarification patterns, and is worn by a male to promote fertility in the context of the difficulty in conceiving.

The myth of creation from the Makonde tradition bears witness to the difficulty of creating life in the postcolony. The real child of the political body, Baby D (democracy), is delivered from the Ruler's body. The impending delivery points to the shift from single-party to multi-party system, but is in no way reducible to it. Real democracy comes from the movement of the Voice of the People led by Nyawira, who is Kamiti's first disciple and whose image Kamiti continuously carves in his mind, while returning political democracy to the roots of African (cum Asian) black ritual. Kamiti and Nyawira together refashion the old Makonde original couple who gave life to the Makonde people, by extension the African people, as free, and living in harmony with nature and itself.

The main question that this chapter has addressed is whether an increased awareness of ritual can deepen our understanding of the relationship between postcolonial novels that use sorcery plots as a core device, and the socio-political events that condition or are expressed by them. I have

33 Ngũgĩ, *Wizard*, 494.

34 Ngũgĩ, *Wizard*, 757.

shown that ritual, in its apparently a-political literary and oral performance, tells us something about human singularity, of which the wizard and the witch become the symbol. This bridges the divide between political theories that laid the foundations of precolonial egalitarian societies and the search for democratic values in the postcolonial state.

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6 Mythical Representations of Dictatorial Power and their Real Referents in the Novels of Ahmadou Kourouma¹

In the majority of cases, being President of the Republic has been considered the privilege of an elected minority, especially since in a democratic context the word 'elected' refers to somebody who has been chosen among many others for his distinctive characteristics. From the moment a population projects this image of a distinct being onto those who govern them, mechanisms by which to mythicize their power are clearly established, and result in establishing a particular image of the ruler in the collective memory. In the context of a dictatorship, the mechanisms that bring myth to the fore are magnified, and give a certain aura to the Father of the nation. A myth is generally considered a true story depicting exceptional beings, which comes to serve as an example to be used to justify a current state of affairs. Mircea Eliade believes that 'le mythe raconte comment, grâce aux exploits des Êtres Surnaturels, une réalité est venue à l'existence, que ce soit la réalité totale, le Cosmos, ou seulement un fragment: une île, une espèce végétale, un comportement humain, une institution. C'est donc toujours le récit d'une «création»: on rapporte comment quelque chose a été produit, a commencé à être. Le mythe ne parle que de ce qui est arrivé réellement, de ce qui s'est pleinement manifesté' [myth recounts how a reality has come into existence, thanks to the actions of Supernatural Beings. This can be a complete reality, the Cosmos, or just a fragment: an island, a plant species, human behaviour, an institution. It is therefore the tale of a 'creation': it

1 Translated by Hannah Grayson.

explains how something was produced, how it began to exist. Yet myth does not speak of what has really happens, of what truly occurs].²

Yet, in Ahmadou Kourouma's texts, this initial and original definition is distorted, perverted even, in a postcolonial and post-independence context that departs from this tradition. The figure of the President of the Republic has become a mythical figure, retaining the best parts of the myth and adapting them to the tough demands of the newly independent African societies they control. Kourouma's novels depict several African dictator figures and most of those who control the fate of these countries employ mythic strategies if not to rest in power *ad vitam aeternam* then, at the very least, to preserve the rights linked to that power.³ The central question here then is how these heads of state use myths. This question leads to others: which images do the dictators spread in the collective imaginary? What are the consequences of the mythic strategies they use? Which strategies does the author use to speak about these dictators?

Men, beasts, and myths

Reading Kourouma's fictional works allows us to see that those who govern people's destinies develop specific mechanisms by which to embellish their image in the eyes of the population. This kind of marketing policy relies heavily on animals, which hold an important place in the imaginary of African people. *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998) is a novel which paints portraits of various African dictators. As the title suggests, in portraying these presidential figures, the author constantly links them to particular beasts. For example, we can read that President Bossouma sees the hyena as his sacred animal, Tiékoroni prefers the caiman, the King

2 Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 17.

3 The works in question are *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1998) and *Allah n'est pas obligé* (Paris, Edition du Seuil, 2000). They will be referred to respectively as VBS and APO.

of the Djebels likes to be called the jackal man, and finally Koyaga the President of the Gulf uses the falcon as a totem. These power holders go beyond the simple use of animal images; they come very close to the beasts by foregrounding some of their qualities and flaws. This brings us to the question of totemism.

Traditionally, totemism refers to a heterogeneous type of relationship between the individual or group on the one hand, and an animal or plant on the other. This concept implies the worship of the animal or the thing in question. In *Totem et Tabou* Freud defines the totem as ‘Un animal comestible, inoffensif ou dangereux et redouté, plus rarement une plante ou une force naturelle (pluie, eau) qui se trouve dans un rapport particulier avec l’ensemble du groupe. Le totem est, en premier lieu, l’ancêtre du groupe ; en deuxième lieu, son esprit protecteur et son bienfaiteur qui envoie des oracles et, alors même qu’il est dangereux pour d’autres, connaît et épargne ses enfants’ [an animal that is edible, inoffensive, or dangerous and feared, rarer than a plant or natural force (like rain, water), which has a particular relationship with the whole group. In the first instance, the totem is the ancestor of the group; secondly its protective spirit and guardian which sends oracles and, although it is dangerous for others, knows and spares its children].⁴ Yet, the Presidents of the Republic that we have in *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* do not use totems in this traditional sense. Rather, each totem found here serves the image and the interests of the person who has it, and this is how these animals consolidate the power of different Presidents of the Republic. Furthermore, they bring benefits linked to the qualities of their sacred animal, and in this way the populations perceive them to be extraordinary beings. This aura bestowed by the totem reinforces the worship of the president. In making the animal sacred, the characters make it an alter ego; a double that ought to be treated with deference. Tiékoroni, the man with the caiman totem, the master of the Republic of the Ebony, grants more honour to his caiman totems than to individual people. The citizens are relegated to the background and languish

4 Sigmund Freud, *Totem et tabou* (Paris, Payot, 1965), p. 13.

in poverty while the animals are treated with every possible respect: they eat what they like and live in a marble lake (VBS, 187–8).

As we have said, the link between the sacred animal and the individual is so strong that the holder of the totem adopts certain characteristics of the animal. Koyaga's totem is the falcon. It is a bird of prey, a hawk; elsewhere it is used by men for hunting. It is known for its exceptional speed and its stubbornness in never letting go of its prey. Koyaga works in the same way. In his youth, he gains the reputation for the fighter who always leaves scars on his victims (VBS, 26). When he becomes President of the Republic, he will truly act like his totem; he is an exceptional hunter who possesses several hunting trophies and who has rid several regions of dangerous animals. All those who conspire against his regime are hunted down and assassinated with unmatched violence, even if they are part of his family (VBS, 304). Koyaga's brutality and ferocity are even more pronounced given the damned souls he keeps for company. The image of the falcon is matched with the image of the lycans who make up his guard. This is why the battle for power happens in an atmosphere of bloodthirsty and murderous madness.

Nkoutigui Fondio, President of the Republic of the Mountains, has the hare as his sacred animal. In the Republic of the Mountains, the regime's propaganda paints him as the best husband of the Republic. Yet he is a man of abnormal lustfulness. He is so driven by sex that not even the widows of those he orders dead are spared. He establishes a ritual of making love to the wife of each man condemned to death at the very moment he is executed. According to the narrator, this is to adopt the vital energy of the condemned man (VBS, 167). The President of the Republic adopts animal behaviour in exercising his dictatorial and esoteric power. Many sacred texts present a husband and his wife as one and the same being. Spiritually what may happen to one will have consequences for the other. Through this act, then, Nkoutigui, satisfies three different needs. Firstly he physically eliminates a political enemy then, obsessed as he is with sex, he can satisfy his libido. Finally, via the sexual act, he fulfils an essential aim; by a process of transfer, via the intermediary of the wife of the condemned man, he acquires all the powers that had until then stood in the way of his authority. We understand from this point that the figure of the

sacred animal (in this case the rabbit) becomes the epicentre of all the dictator's acts. Thus Nadia Julien's comments about the hare or the rabbit prove correct. Symbolically, these two animals are directly linked to the woman, and to libido. This is why the author underlines the following: 'Leur incroyable faculté de procréation fait du lièvre et du lapin des symboles de la fécondité et de la puissance fécondante de la lune, qui régit [...] le cycle menstruel de la femme. [...] Mais sexualité et incontinence font également partie de l'interprétation symbolique de ces animaux à sang chaud.' [Their incredible capacity for procreation makes the hare and the rabbit symbols of fertility and of the productive power of the moon, which controls [...] the menstrual cycle of the woman. [...] But sexuality and incontinence are also part of the symbolic interpretation of these hot blooded animals.]⁵

The President of the Republic of the Great River is strongly attached to the leopard. Most of the objects he uses are linked to this animal. He always has something on him made of leopard skin: hats, shoes, and caps, for instance. Elsewhere the skin of this animal is one of the signs of his power (VBS, 243). But the links do not stop there. The character's behaviour itself reflects the characteristics of the totem animal. Most of the time, he shows violence and cruelty towards individuals. Even his wife is the object of a brutal attack while she is pregnant. He breaks her arm and kicks the foetus out of her body, leading to her death (VBS, 249–50). In this way the dictators accompany their exercise of power with images of the animals that grant them particular powers. The heads of state also convey a certain amount of information about their lives which tends to consolidate further the supposedly mysterious side of their power.

Most of the dictators have unusual childhoods which set them apart from ordinary humans. The President of the Republic of the Great River, the leopard man, has predictions made about him during his initiation. All the holders of occult knowledge see him as an exceptional being who will leave his mark on the history of his country: 'Tous les sorciers ngandis prédirent que le jeune initié serait le plus grand de leur race. Ils lui attribuèrent de nombreux talismans et fétiches et lui apprirent les paroles

5 Nadia Julien, *Grand dictionnaire des symboles et des mythes*. Allier (Belgique), Marabout, 1997. pp. 192–3

secrètes de beaucoup de prières de protection contre les maladies’ [All the ngandi wizards predicted that the young initiated man would be the greatest of their race. They gave him several talismans and fetishes and taught him secret words, many prayers to protect him against diseases] (VBS, 233). Koyaga, the dictator of the Republic of the Gulf, is ‘de la race des hommes qui ouvrent, des hommes qui se font suivre, des maîtres, de ceux qui doivent savoir s’arrêter à temps, de ceux qui ne doivent pas rester en deçà ou aller au-delà’ [from the race of men who lead, who are followed, masters, those who must know how to stop time, those who must not remain behind or go beyond] (VBS, 64). Koyaga’s birth is the subject of a whole legend. The Paleos, the president’s tribe, have two kinds of marriage: marriage by engagement, and marriage which is the result of an abduction. The latter is prized by proud warriors and ends in a ritual rape. The fight between the two champions of the initial battle (Tchao, Koyaga’s father, and Nadjouma), takes place somewhere that is transformed: ‘Ce lieu depuis ce jour est devenu une clairière. Jamais, jusqu’au dernier jour du monde, aucune herbe ne repoussera dans le cercle où fut perpétré le viol par lequel vous, Koyaga avez été engendré’ [On that day, this place became a clearing. Forever after, until the last day on earth, no grass would grow on the circle where that rape was perpetrated, the rape which led to your birth, Koyaga] (VBS, 42). Koyaga is carried for twelve months by his mother who is then in labour for two successive days (VBS, 21). The birth of Koyaga will forever mark Nadjouma; this is a baby like no other and this is why the mother experiences atrocious pain and trauma during labour (VBS, 42–3). The prophets even predict certain death for the young mother if she tries to have a second child (VBS, 43). It must be noted that at Koyaga’s birth, Nadjouma becomes frigid and even feels afraid in front of men. According to the marabout Bokano, the spirits decided that Koyaga would be his first and only son. By this beginning and ending of the maternity of the mother, Koyaga symbolically and in a real way becomes the alpha and omega, the one by whom everything begins and ends. This round cycle which definitively closes her maternity is extended and reinforced by the abnormal events which punctuate his childhood (VBS, 22).

In this way the dictators convey to the populations images of men who are invincible and invulnerable. They repeatedly claim that bullets

cannot harm them. Some of these power holders are part of the hunters association of West Africa. The initiation rites for entry into this secret society are shrouded in mystery, but we can learn from General Tieffi, one of rebel Foday Sankoh's right hand men, that at the end of the initiation ceremony they consume human flesh. According to him, 'Ça rend le cœur dur et dur et ça protège contre les balles. La meilleure protection contre les balles sifflantes, c'est peut-être un peu de chair humaine' [it strengthens the heart, and it protects against bullets. The best protection against hard bullets, is perhaps a bit of human flesh] (APO, 188). The same cannibalistic practices are found among Charles Taylor's troupes, who appear in *Allah n'est pas obligé*. In the civil and possibly ethnic war which destroyed Sierra Leone in the 1990s, soldiers were initiated into anthropophagic practices which were supposed to grant them powers of invincibility and invulnerability. Since the systematic consumption of human flesh then became a necessary ritual in the collective imaginary, we can see that this practice stands as a model for all initiation processes.⁶ Because of this, a number of beliefs are held about hunters: that they are capable of going beyond the reality of the felt world and to transform things such that they can conquer the enemy. This is why the President of Sierra Leone Ahmad Tejan Kabbah employs hunters. In light of repeated coups d'état and the splitting of the country into rebel factions, he believes that the association of hunters can turn things around (APO, 189–90).

Men in power surround themselves not only with hunters, but also with marabouts whose role is to protect them. All the dictators in the novels examined here use the services of these individuals to gain power or to retain it.⁷ Magico-religious practices are adopted by characters like Samuel Doe, Prince Johnson, Charles Taylor, Foday Sankoh, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, and Johnny Paul Koroma in *Allah n'est pas obligé*. These marabouts are tasked

6 On this subject, see Bindi Ngouté 'De la chair au pouvoir de destruction aveugle: les repas initiatiques chez Ahmadou Kourouma', in Joseph Ndinda (ed.) *Écriture, jeu et enjeux, mythes et représentations de l'alimentaire dans les littératures africaines* (Yaoundé: Éditions CLE, 2011).

7 On the role of marabouts, see Joseph Ndinda, *Le Politicien, le marabout-féticheur et le griot dans les romans d'Ahmadou Kourouma* (Paris: Harmattan, 2011).

with creating fetishes which will protect soldiers and child-soldiers from bullets; these give them unmatched courage in battle, as we see with the child-soldier *Tête Brûlée* (APO, 129).

In addition, the unique and exceptional status of dictator presidents leads them to believe that those they govern are worthless. Tiékoroni the President of the Republic of Ebony does not refrain from declaring that the people have nothing to analyse: 'Les peuples écoutent ce qu'on leur dit, ce qu'on leur commande. Ils n'ont pas le temps de tourner, de soupeser les actes d'un président. Quel croyant juge-t-il les volontés des divinités avant d'exécuter leurs paroles?' [The people listen to what we tell them, to what we order. They don't have time to consider or weigh up the actions of a president. What believer judges the will of the gods before obeying their words?] (VBS, 197). This question is central to understanding how the system works. The presidents consider themselves gods who owe no account to their faithful ones (the people). They position themselves as transcendental beings with absolute value who must evoke ardent faith in their actions, given that faith needs no proof. Presidents are gods, and the people must consider them as such without trying to understand anything beyond this. In this sense, we realize that the presidents themselves have seriously internalized what they see as their natural authority over common people. Since the boundary between human and divine is crossed, myth becomes similar to the sacred story of any religion which should be lived by faith. This is confirmed by the exceptional childhoods they speak of. This unusual childhood is found in *Koyaga* but also, and primarily, in the President of the Republic of the Great River, who is not born of a woman but comes straight from heaven: 'Dans l'imagerie, le dictateur ne coulait pas de sa mère Momo: il descendait directement du ciel ; il déchirait de laiteux nuages sur fond bleu' [In the imagery, the dictator did not come out of his mother Momo: he came down straight from heaven, parting the milky clouds against a background of blue] (VBS, 249).

We realize that most of the dictators foreground the animal they have made sacred along with stories relating to their respective childhoods. In other cases, they are surrounded by people considered exceptional, such as hunters. In building exceptional stories and personalities, these power holders change facts: thus myths become 'des récits imaginaires et imaginés.

Comme de sortes de d'illusions, "d'erreurs admises", structurées en systèmes dans une communauté donnée, et auxquelles la société tout entière adhère irrationnellement, parce qu'elles constituent des éléments déterminés de la cohésion sociale' [imaginary and imagined stories. Like a kind of illusion, 'accepted mistakes', structured in systems of a given community, and which the whole society irrationally believes, because they are made of elements which create social cohesion].⁸ Thus these heads of state no longer act as beings completely set apart, but as men entirely caught up in the supposedly mystical and mythic aura which surrounds them. Evidently this has consequences on those who are governed and on the whole society.

The decline of conscience

The images and beliefs put forward by the dictators have serious consequences for the population's thinking. Many citizens no longer engage in critical discussions of the regime, since speaking means setting oneself apart, being different to the norm, to what is allowed. Since the population think of them like gods, the dictators easily impose their logic of power. In this way they can present themselves as the best in all areas. Nkoutigui, President of the Republic of the Mountains, along with many others, writes his books and programme manuals for every level of education:

L'homme en blanc était un insomniaque et un versificateur médiocre qui pour se relaxer entre deux dossiers griffonnait des lignes sur des pages de cahiers d'écolier que les services de la présidence qualifiaient de poésies ou pensées, assemblaient et éditaient en livres richement cartonnés. Ces livres étaient les seuls à être lus, étudiés et commentés dans les écoles, instituts et universités de la République des Monts.

[The man in white was an insomniac and a mediocre poet. In order to relax between two files, he scribbled lines on the pages of schoolbooks, which the president's services

8 Pius Ngandu Nkashama, , *Kourouma et le mythe: une lecture de les Soleils des Indépendances* (Paris: Silex, 1985), p. 11.

considered poetry or philosophy, gathered together, and edited into richly bound books. These were the only books read, studied, and discussed in the schools, institutes, and universities of the Republic of the Mountains.] (VBS, 170)

The derisive quality of these texts is indicated in the pejorative words and expressions used by the author: insomniac, scribbled, mediocre poet, qualified as poetry or philosophy. But these thoughts coming from a supposedly exceptional being are also considered exceptional in the collective imaginary. The introduction of the president's books into school programmes leads to a conditioning and shaping of minds from childhood. Generations who are conditioned in this way will only replicate and affirm the 'sacred' words and acts of the ruler. Because of the mythical images, every student becomes a kind of creature of the god-president who will sing his praises the whole of their life. No longer able to demonstrate creativity, the citizens function with a herd mentality. Thus the submission and passivity of the citizens is obtained via the indoctrination of a political ideology which has morphed into a religion. After that it becomes impossible for citizens to analyse their socio-political situation. This practice is described by Pierre Ansart in his work *Idéologies, conflits et pouvoir*: 'Dans le cas d'une idéologie de maintenance, l'occultation exercerait un effet en quelque sorte hypnotique détournant les agents d'une analyse critique de leur propre situation: à la façon d'une religion, l'idéologie construit un univers imaginaire qui détourne et assoupit les consciences dans la passivité' [In the case of an ideology of maintenance, hypocrisy has a somewhat hypnotizing affect turning subjects away from a critical analysis of their own situation; like a religion, the ideology constructs an imaginary universe that distracts and numbs consciences into passivity].⁹

We can see that this mythical imaginary allows dictators to establish archetypes that are not innate, as Carl Gustav Jung suggests, but acquired, and 'ceux-ci apparaissent en quelque sorte comme des représentations inconscientes des instincts eux-mêmes; ce sont des modes de comportement instinctifs' [that which appears as an unconscious representation of

9 Pierre Ansart, *Idéologies, conflits et pouvoir* (Paris, PUF, 1977), p. 233.

instincts themselves, these are instinctive forms of behaviour].¹⁰ This behaviour clearly imitates the model of the Prince whose behaviour is absolutely exemplary. At the moment when the people's attitudes become instinctive, we can easily understand the welcome enjoyed by Koyaga when he is visiting the inland region: 'Des groupes de femmes criaillant, chantonnant vous entourent, se saisissent de vous. D'autres vous essuient, vous éventent avec leurs fatras, étalent leurs pagnes sous vos pas. Elles ne veulent pas que vos pieds frôlent le sol. Elles vous soulèvent, vous déchaussent, lavent vos pieds et s'abreuvent de l'eau avec laquelle vos arptions ont été rincés' [groups of moaning, humming women surround you, grab you. Others wipe you down, fan you with their clutter, spread out their skirts beneath your feet. They don't want your feet to touch the earth. They lift you up, take off your shoes, wash your feet, then drink the water used to rinse your toes] (VBS, 178). It is clear that this is the result of the mythical images that push these women to acts of worship no less than those received by Jesus Christ on entering into Jerusalem.¹¹ So the dictator is a sacred being, a god who gives all his power to the myth, as Mircea Eliade explains: 'Les personnages des mythes sont des Êtres Surnaturels. Ils sont connus surtout par ce qu'ils ont fait dans le temps prestigieux des « commencements ». Les mythes révèlent donc leur activité créatrice et dévoilent la sacralité (ou simplement la « surnaturalité ») de leurs œuvres' [Characters in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known above all for the 'beginnings' they have brought about. Myths reveal their creative activity and disclose the sacred (or simply 'supernatural') nature of their works.]¹² This supposedly 'supernatural' quality that comes through tales of exceptional hunting, of having magical powers and so forth, has a negative influence on people's consciences. This illustrates just how the myths (which are falsified, perverted and spread by dictators in newly independent societies) have a particular effect on the people. The story of the characters' origins becomes sacred according to the will of individuals who make it up, rather than through facts of nature.

10 EDMA, *La Psychanalyse* (Paris, Charles Henri Favrod, 1975), p. 56.

11 In the Bible in Luke 7: 37–8, John 12: 3/12–14.

12 Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*, p. 17.

In *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, after thirty years in power, Koyaga's acts are described by the griot Bingo and the respondent Tiécoura, in a ritual of purification and recuperation of power. Tiécoura's is the voice of bitter criticism, but in addition he speaks lucidly, clinically analysing the politics Koyaga plays out in the Republic of the Gulf:

La politique est une illusion pour le peuple, les administrés. Ils y mettent ce dont ils rêvent. On ne satisfait les rêves que par le mensonge, la duperie. La politique ne réussit que par la duplicité.

Vous répondez aux habitants, sous des applaudissements, par des promesses mensongères de président fondateur de parti unique. Vous justifiez le coup d'État, l'assassinat du président démocratiquement élu. L'armée est intervenue, vous avez pris le pouvoir pour sauver le pays de la catastrophe qui le menaçait, pour l'arracher aux mains des racistes, des voleurs, des népotismes.

Les mêmes discours, toujours les mêmes balivernes ... Vous terminez votre oraison par d'autres fausses promesses ; celle de restituer par des élections libres le pouvoir au peuple à qui il appartient.

[Politics is an illusion for the people, the governed. They make of it whatever they dream of. Dreams only come true through lies and cheating. Politics only succeeds via cheating.

You reply to the citizens, amidst applause, with false promises from the founding president of the single party. You justify the coup d'état, the assassination of the president who was democratically elected. The army intervened, you took control to save the country from the catastrophe that was threatening it, to tear it from the hands of the racists, thieves and nepotism.

The same speeches, always the same nonsense ... You finish your oration with other false promises; saying you'll return power to the people it belongs to with fair elections.] (VBS, 278)

Tiécoura also knows how to ridicule, and how to show that the people are not fooled. When the tenth coup fails, he says the following, and by doing so disproves the official version of events: 'Personne n'a cru à la thèse du suicide, personne n'a cru à la version officielle. La version qui a prétendu que les désespérés, pris de remords, dans une rage sanguinaire se sont d'abord amputés de la masculinité avant de mettre fin à leur vie par la pendaison' [Nobody believed the suicide theory, nobody believed the official version. The version that claimed that the desperate people, full of remorse, first cut off their own manhood in a bloodthirsty rage, and then

hanged themselves] (VBS, 270). Bingo the griot is the voice of balance and reason. He criticizes but at the same time praises Koyaga's actions. Maclélio justifies and explains. Speaking about the aforementioned coup d'état he calls out the bravery of the plotters and the happiness they'll have in the afterlife: 'Que les vivants aient ou non cru importe peu. Les morts étaient morts et déjà heureux dans le ciel, très heureux près de Dieu. Le Coran n'annonce-t-il pas, ne répète-t-il pas que les braves qui meurent les armes à la main en défendant leur conviction périssent dans la Djihad et vont directement au paradis?' [Whether the living believed or not, matters little. The dead were already dead and happy in heaven, very happy close to God. Does the Koran not promise repeatedly that the brave ones who die fighting to defend their belief will die in Jihad and go directly to paradise?] (VBS, 270).

In the rest of the text, Bingo the griot is the one who really has the most powerful words. Although as we pointed out above, his is the voice of balance and reason, Bingo is 'parfaitement capable de manipuler d'une façon très raffinée la parole [...] en feignant la candeur la plus totale, et en donnant l'impression d'approuver les horreurs ou les hontes qu'il décrit' [perfectly able to manipulate speech in a sophisticated way [...] by acting completely innocent, and appearing to approve the horrors and shame he describes] (Nissim, 2001, 62). The following extract illustrates this: 'Autour de Koyaga, ivres également du fumet du sang, frétilait une meute de lycaons. Lycaon signifie chien sauvage. Ils étaient tous aussi assassins, criminels que leur chef' [Around Koyaga, drunk on the smell of blood, was a fidgeting pack of lycaons. They were all as murderous and criminal as their master] (VBS, 119).

In short, these voices reveal that the speeches disseminated by the dictator do not always win unanimous support. Several points of view are given, beyond that of the dictator, since a number of characters narrate the text. In effect, the stories that the different presidents want to present as exemplary models are the product of rational strategies which allow them to establish their power in the collective imaginary.

Presidents of the Republic and their mythical sheen

The permanent and sacred nature of the dictators in power is the result of an expert orchestration of the regime. Most of the presidents surround themselves with individuals responsible for caring for and transforming their image. Throughout *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, two people are almost always ruling the nation: the President of the Republic and his right hand man, who is generally in charge of propaganda. This is true for Koyaga and Maclédio, the leopard man and Sakombi Inongo. To impose on the population the image of a great ruler, those in charge of propaganda systematically create a personality cult for the president by using ploys to make the population believe he is simultaneously omniscient and omnipresent. In every town, on every street, wherever an attack happens, the different Supreme Guides erect statues and each civil servant must demonstrate their love for the ruler. This practice is widespread in Koyaga's country (VBS, 306). Undeniably, with this strategy, the power holder systematically invades the life of his citizens as well as each place, since even the furthest flung corners of the republic carry a trace of the dictator. This omnipresence is coupled with a certain omniscience. Those making decisions claim to be prophets, and clearly that must come with perfect knowledge about everything. Speeches to prove this begin with the president himself, who considers himself first in all domains. This is obviously well received by the populations who are gripped by the monologic speeches as in the tale about Nkoutigui Fondio: 'Dans sa république socialiste, Nkoutigui était appelé le premier footballeur, le premier médecin, le meilleur agriculteur, le meilleur mari, le plus pieux et le plus grand musulman, etc. Il aimait parmi toutes les adulations, celles qui le qualifiaient de plus talentueux écrivain, de plus grand poète de son pays' [In his socialist republic, Nkoutigui was called the top footballer, the top doctor, the best farmer, the best husband, the greatest and most pious Muslim, etc. Among all these adulations, he liked those which labelled him the most talented writer, the greatest poet of the land] (VBS, 170). Knowing that he has a plethora of mistresses and is one of the most run-of-the-mill writers of the Republic, the danger in

this eulogizing discourse is notable. Yet the adoration of the ruler is not limited to the portraits and statues which are seen everywhere.

Koyaga's experience shows us that even the national anthem is for the glory of the president and his party (VBS, 285). Where national anthems are supposed to be songs which unite the people and express all their aspirations, here one sole individual is glorified. The glorification of the president and the party are in keeping with the pure and simple adhesion to the Guide's ideas. This acknowledgement of imposed ideas is the result of the powers of persuasion of the systems of propaganda. Indeed, every president sets up a system for spreading the party ideology. This is why, in these regimes, there are always ministers whose job it is to hammer home the president's speeches and the images which accentuate his value. Sakombi Inongo, the Orientation Minister for the President of the Republic of the Great River, gives all sorts of soothing names to the president who has the leopard totem. Terms like 'le Président-soleil, le Génie du Grand Fleuve, le Stratège, le Sauveur, le Père de la nation, l'Unificateur, le Pacificateur' [President-sun, the Genie of the Great River, the Strategist, the Saviour, the Father of the nation, the Unifier, the Peacemaker] come up regularly in his speeches (VBS, 243).

In order to spread their messages better, those in charge of ideological propaganda use a strategy to make people believe that they adhere to the regime's ideas out of pure conviction; for them, it's spontaneity rather than manipulation through propaganda which leads the people to support the single party. But this is an illusion. The producers of these messages have no qualms showing the citizens that they have ownership of truth; whether by force or subtler methods. Such manoeuvres are helpful for managing the emotions of crowds which are often hard to navigate. Hence why Serge Hutin finds propaganda 'sera tantôt subtile, voire insidieuse, tantôt délibérément déchaînée, envahissante. Les propagandes totalitaires savent fort bien, quand elles en sont à ce stade, canaliser les aspirations messianiques qui, chez d'innombrables êtres frustrés, ne demandent qu'à s'épanouir. D'où l'omniprésence des portraits de l'«Homme-Providence», autour duquel s'organisera la convergence des élans messianiques des masses déboussolées' [as subtle as it is insidious, deliberately unleashed, and invasive. Totalitarian propaganda manages, at a certain moment, to channel the

messianic aspirations which only want to flourish in the lives of countless frustrated souls. Hence the ubiquitous presence of portraits of the ‘Saviour Man,’ around whom the messianic desires of the disoriented crowds come together].¹³ At the same time, an information network is put in place to ensure effective adherence to the ruler’s ideas, and to ensure that images dear to the dictator are reproduced faithfully. These networks incorporate the police, with military and presidential intelligence services. On the other side, ordinary citizens can also provide information and, in most cases, be rewarded (VBS, 333). This is how under Koyaga’s reign, everybody is known. The slightest gestures, attitudes and words are known. Information gleaned by each different service is faithfully transmitted in person to the president who acts in turn with intimidation or pure and simple repression (VBS, 303).

This is a situation experienced by many African countries in the aftermath of independence. Denunciation and propaganda become trustworthy mediums for heads of state to look after their image. Whether through terror or spontaneous support for the system, one thing is clear: the ruler is magnified, idolized, made sublime and even sacred. This is also a way for the group to reassure itself and in spite of everything to find in their ruler this Saviour figure. Pierre Ansart underlines this in *Idéologie, Conflits et Pouvoir*: ‘Dans le discours d’amour à l’adresse du héros, dans le culte spontané de sa personnalité, le groupe confirme sa gloire et l’intensité de ses relations internes: il invente une nouvelle forme de sacré à travers laquelle il se réassure. Il invente les héros, les saints qui illustrent sa propre gloire’ [In the language of love in the hero’s address, in the spontaneous worship of his personality, the group confirms his glory and the intensity of its internal relationships: it invents a new sacred form through which it reassures itself. It invents heroes and saints which demonstrate its own glory].¹⁴ By establishing such a cult of personality, the president denies individuality and instead makes himself the epicentre of a whole people’s aspirations. He becomes the leader in every area. This denial of distinctive characteristics leads directly to the decline of consciences. Citizens are no longer able to

13 Serge Hutin, *Les techniques de l’envoûtement* (Paris, Belfond, 1973), pp. 173–4.

14 Pierre Ansart, *Idéologies, conflits et pouvoir* (Paris, PUF, 1977), p. 140.

reflect on their situation, and become incapable of contesting the existing order. This absence of a critical mind visible in the novels can also be noted in several African countries following independence; many of Kourouma's characters have close links with the historical reality of Africa.

Beyond the myth, real referents

The exceptional aspects seen in most of the characters in these novels by Kourouma have links with real facts. Reading the experience of Koyaga, we can find similarities with Gnassingbé Eyadéma the former President of Togo. In the novel, the character is born in Ramaka. Eyadéma is born in Lama Kara, a small village in the north of the country. Ramaka could be an anagram of Lama Kara. Koyaga's love of hunting and robbing the people to build up a wildlife reserve in *En Attendant le Vote des Bêtes Sauvages* (VBS, 317) are things which actually happened in Togo. Koyaga escapes an attempted assassination when a soldier shoots at him from point-blank range and misses (VBS, 285). Later there are two plane accidents which he miraculously survives. These two events serve to reinforce Koyaga's mythical side but also point to Eyadéma in Togo. In 1967 he miraculously escaped the point-blank shot of a soldier who missed him. He was also involved in two plane accidents near Sarakawa in the north of Togo, one in 1973 and the other in January 1974. The second one turned Sarakawa into a place of pilgrimage. Thus Koyaga's trajectory was almost identical to that of Gnassingbé Eyadéma. In both cases, a myth of invincibility and invulnerability was built which made the people believe that the president was an exceptional human. Each failed rebel attempt reinforced the myth formed around the dictator, in particular the mystical aura which surrounded him. Following the failed attack of 2003, François Soudan wrote of Eyadéma in *Jeune Afrique l'Intelligent*, 'Aux yeux de nombre de Togolais, une sorte de halo méta-religieux entoure le personnage, comme si seule la maladie pouvait un jour le terrasser.' [in the eyes of many Togolese people, a meta-religious halo surrounds the figure, as if only illness could one day bring

him down] (Soudan, 2003, 24). The well-known journalist was right, and Eyadéma was struck down by illness, rather than the multiple coups d'état against him during his presidency.

In *En Attendant le Vote des Bêtes Sauvages*, the narrator draws particular attention to the assassination of Fricassa Santos, the President of the Republic of the Gulf. This murder has an air of great mystery, since the fight that precedes Koyaga's victory is the one between the two talented magic students (VBS, 100). This ambiguous link to Fricassa Santos's murder provides Koyaga with the legitimization and sense of myth that he needs, since he won power through fighting. His action comes in the wake of the sorting and rebuilding of a fair society. Koyaga presents himself as the Saviour figure come to restore a former peace which was disrupted by what he sees as a system of profiteers, injustice, and crimes. It is the exact same context that sees Eyadéma assassinate Sylvanus Olympio on 13 January 1963. That conquest distorts and transforms a horrible criminal act, turning Eyadéma into a mythical character:

Le mythe proprement dit déforme le passé ; celui qui fonde le pouvoir du général Eyadéma altère le présent en le rapprochant du passé mythologique. En mythifiant ce passé tout proche, le général Eyadéma se donne le moyen d'épurer l'acte criminel qui était à l'origine de son pouvoir de tout aspect répréhensible en le présentant au peuple comme salvateur. La légitimité du pouvoir du général Eyadéma opère dans ce champ déformé et fondamentalement mythifié.

[Myth, strictly speaking, distorts the past; the foundation of general Eyadéma's power adapts the present in drawing it closer to a mythological past. By mythifying the recent past, general Eyadéma enables himself to cleanse the criminal act, which insured his power, from any objectionable element, presenting it instead as the people's salvation. The legitimacy of general Eyadéma's power works in this distorted and fundamentally mythical sense.]¹⁵

As with Koyaga, the same is true of other character pairings: Tiékoroni/Houphouët Boigny, Bossouma/Bokassa, Nkoutigui Fondio/Sekou Touré, the leopard man/Mobutu Sese Seko, the jackal man/Hassan II. Kourouma uses names to mask well-known figures. In an interview, the author admits

15 Comi Toulabor, *Le Togo sous Eyadéma* (Paris: Karthala, 1986), p. 16.

that 'Eyadéma, le dictateur du Togo, a été un des modèles qui m'ont servi pour décrire Koyaga, le dictateur du roman' [Eyadéma, Togo's dictator, was one of the bases for my description of Koyaga, the dictator in the novel].¹⁶ Drawing inspiration from real people, Kourouma also ridicules the different presidents included in his novels. This can be seen in the names he gives his characters. When speaking about Bossouma in *En Attendant le vote des Bêtes Sauvages*, the narrator always highlights the smell of excrement that accompanies the character. Looking at character names reveals the correlations between Bossouma in the text and Bokassa in real life. In the novel, the narrator explains the meaning of Bossouma: this name means 'puanteur de pet' [fart stench] in Malinké (VBS, 2008). But, according to the *Inventaire des particularités lexicales du français en Afrique noire*, Bokassa means the same thing. With these transitive links, Bossouma and Bokassa are synonyms. By playing with meanings, Kourouma draws a subtle but direct link between the fictional character and the real life person. The author explains his choice to ridicule his characters in an interview with Jean-Fernand Bédia. He speaks about Tièkoroni (Houphouët-Boigny):

Tièkoroni, ça veut dire, c'est petit [...]. C'est le diminutif de Tièkoroba.[...] Quand on dit Tièkoroni, c'est dans le but de réduire l'importance de la personne. Il y a une ironie terrible. Tièkoroni, ça signifie deux choses: d'abord, il est vieux, mais surtout quelqu'un qui est petit en taille. En outre, il est combinard. Il n'est pas franc, il n'est pas clair. C'est tout le contraire de Tièkoroba qui incarnerait la vérité, la sagesse.

[Tièkoroni means little [...]. It's the diminutive form of Tièkoroba [...]. When you say Tièkoroni, it's in order to reduce a person's importance. There's a terrible irony. Tièkoroni means two things: firstly, he is old, but mostly it describes somebody who is small. But he's also a schemer. He is not candid, nor clear. He's the total opposite of Tièkoroba who embodied truth and wisdom.]¹⁷

The author intentionally gives the name as a summary of the character (in the novel, Tièkoroni is a short, old man, a liar and a dictator). But according

16 Armel, Arliette, 'Ahmadou Kourouma: «Je suis toujours un opposant»', *Magazine Littéraire* n° 390, pp. 98–102, 2000 (99).

17 Jean-Fernand Bédia, 'Janjon pour Ahmadou Kourouma', *Africultures* (65), October 2005 <<http://www.africultures.com/> accessed 25 May 2018.

to the author, the real life referent shares the same characteristics. Knowing that Houphouët-Boigny, President of the Ivory Coast, was presented as a monument of wisdom, we understand Kourouma's irony in deconstructing the myth and mystery around his character.

In *Allah n'est pas obligé*, Kourouma uses the names of real people. Reading the book, we recognize the well-known names of Charles Taylor, Samuel Doe, Prince Johnson, Foday Sankoh, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and Johnny Paul Koroma. In the armed conflicts of Sierra Leone or Liberia, they always emphasized their stature as strong men with exceptional powers. So as well as characters who stand before the people as redeemer figures come to re-establish a disrupted order, Kourouma depicts the real actors of Africa's history.

Kourouma makes these choices to shed new light on the dealings of certain historical figures who use fantasy to shape the people's thinking. The author himself does not believe in all these imaginary manoeuvres:

Je ne crois pas au fétichisme. Pour une raison très simple: si ce qu'avancait la magie était vrai, notre histoire ne serait pas aussi tragique ! [...] Si les Africains avaient réellement le pouvoir que leur promet la magie, ils n'auraient pas accepté l'esclavage, ni la colonisation. La tradition explique que si la magie ne réussit pas toujours, c'est à cause d'une faute commise dans le rituel. Le malheur viendrait d'une erreur dans la méthode utilisée dans la pratique fétichiste. Mais je n'y crois pas.

[I don't believe in fetishism. For one simple reason: if magic could really make a difference, then our history wouldn't be so tragic! [...] If African people really had the power that magic claims to offer, they wouldn't have accepted either slavery or colonization. Tradition explains that if magic doesn't always work, it's because of a mistake made in the ritual. Misfortune is supposedly because of a mistake in the method of fetishist practice. But I don't believe it.]¹⁸

Thus we understand that myths, fetishes, and other totems present in the postcolonial societies of Kourouma's novels are to be understood as imaginary, rather than having any hold on the writer's reality.

18 Armel, *Ahmadou Kourouma*, p. 100.

Conclusion

Close reading of Kourouma's novels allows us to see several characters using animals as totems to protect them from adversity. As well as this protection, these figures adopt all the characteristics of the animals. Displaying those characteristics, as well as recounting their unusual childhoods and expertise in hunting, make them stand out as exceptional beings. Yet as we have seen, the totems and myths are distorted for personal gain in these fractured, post-independence societies. Systems of propaganda validate the mythical images of leaders who present themselves as Messiah, come to save the people from injustice, corruption, and every kind of evil. Hammering these distorted images home has immeasurable consequences for the psyche of those citizens who believe the lies. But as this analysis has shown, certain characters retain enough lucidity to reveal the huge flaws in these dictatorial regimes. Through name choices, Ahmadou Kourouma has his narrators ridicule these characters, in turn undoing the myths and mystery that surrounds them. Beyond the fictional characters, we have seen links with many actors from African history. The parallels I have drawn reveal just how close the fictional events are to the real ones. In this way, the novel becomes a space to invert those falsely mythical images that many African dictators have disseminated and continue to show off throughout their reigns.

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